

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Plattsburgh
4 Palmer Street
Plattsburgh, NY 12901

June 9, 2024 Annual Congregational Meeting

Quorum: A quorum count was called by board secretary, Kimberley Bertrand. With 15 members on zoom and 21 in the sanctuary, quorum was met.

Welcome: Board Co-Chair, Connie Shemo, thanked everyone for attending.

Board Nominations and Election of Officers:

Mark Preston representing the Leadership Development Committee made the recommendation Nicholas Hunt-Bull be nominated to the Board. He then made a motion nominating Nicholas be elected to the Board, and Arlene Morrissey seconded the motion. A vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously electing Nicholas to the board.

Mark Preston, again representing the Leadership Development Committee nominated the following officers:

Co-Chairs: Connie Shemo and Nicholas Hunt-Bull

Treasurer: Ursula Jones

Secretary: Kimberley Bertrand

Arlene Morrissey made a motion nominating this slate of Officers, Kathy Sajor seconded the motion. A vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously electing this slate of officers to the Board.

Continuing on the Board as Members at Large: Mark Preston, Megan Morrissey and Tana Hanley.

Minister's Report: The board has asked me to share with you highlights from the quarterly report I shared with them at the end of 2023.

As you will have heard, the year ended with exciting news. The Annual Giving campaign raised slightly more than the targeted \$100,000 amount. Huge thanks are due in several directions: to the small team who led the campaign, to the matching gifts donor group, and to the congregation for its generosity. In an era when many congregations are not able to meet their pledge goals, this campaign signals a strong vote of confidence in the future of the congregation.

My focus for much of this past fall: **supporting the congregation as you consider**, at a deep level, **the implications of having committed to uphold the UU 8th Principle**. All of you

have been challenged to think through how to balance emotions, traditions, and justice commitments during our worship space, in ways that sometimes seem contradictory.

The congregation is also feeling **the impact of a culture shift within Unitarian Universalism**, from a more individually focused ethos which invites people to center their own needs and personal or spiritual development, to a vision of a movement that centers racial justice and community healing. I honor that for some of you, this process has led to discomfort you weren't used to associating with your life here. At the same time, I also know that many of you have come to adopt new perspectives as time went on. May we continue to grow and discern together. I believe this is the hard work that shows we are maturing as a faith.

Outside of the engaging activities for preschoolers plus their families Jo El Miano and Kris Lutters have been leading, Sunday services continue to be the primary vehicle for engaging returning members and newcomers. Planning worship and working with the Worship Team continues to be the activity that dominates my schedule. In fact, planning our services takes even more time now that need to find ways to engage both our online and our in-person audiences, and as we try to make our services more engaging for neurodiverse attendees (and for a diverse audience in general.) There are more moving parts, more individual roles to coordinate, and more of a need to have "everyone on board" when we modify our approach.

A highlight for me this fall was the robust participation in the first two sessions of the On Repentance and Repair series, with more workshops to come in the spring. 22 congregants signed up to read the book, and about 15 attended our in-person sessions. We also had two participants from Temple Beth Israel (the rabbi and one congregant), so the activity also served as a first step in the direction of the relationship-building we've been hoping to engage in with the TBI community. Thank you to Nancy Lewin, who I was honored to have as co-facilitator.

I continue to meet one on one with congregants, in hospital, at home, at the fellowship and by phone. I'd like to highlight the contributions of Ann Hobson to our Caring Team. Ann has a very active "ministry of cards" - sending cards on behalf of the fellowship to members who are undergoing difficult times. Thank you, Ann!

One of the things that's preoccupied me this year has been how to connect with those of you who only attend online services, and don't sign up for any of our activities outside of Sundays. I do my best to stay connected with those of you I knew before you moved your participation online, but don't have this opportunity with any of you who have arrived more recently. If you're in this group, please reach out if you would like to talk, meet, or share feedback as to how I might better connect with those of you whose primary connection with the fellowship is virtual.

A handful of us attended two important trainings on behalf of the fellowship this quarter: **Conflict De-escalation in Protest Spaces**, an online training on bystander intervention, and **Threats from Without; Care from Within**, a five hour online training session offered by the UUA. An upcoming goal is to offer bystander intervention training to the congregation.

Sometimes, my part time schedule makes it hard for me to follow up on all the things I've named as priorities, however.

Twice a year I also attend Chapter Retreats with ministerial and religious education colleagues, now held in the Finger Lakes region. Based in Plattsburgh, I have to travel further to all of our retreat locations than any of the other ministers in my chapter, which has consequences both for my time and my professional expense budget. I will stay on as acting chapter president until spring 2024, and I continue to mentor two ministers in Preliminary Fellowship.

Keeping up with staffing changes is the other activity that occupies the bulk of my time, though huge thanks are due to Dorothy Latta, who does a lot of behind the scenes work in the area of HR. After posting for and hiring a Sunday educator who seemed very promising, the person we hired left after only a handful of shifts. We then reposted, and ended up accepting Kris Lutters' generous offer to fill this position through to June 2024. Thank you, Kris and Dorothy!

We've also invested a huge amount of time and energy posting and interviewing for an OWL Facilitator, in order to be able to serve the engaged cohort of youth who are motivated to participate in this program. After our job post attracted numerous applications, we offered interviews to four promising candidates. Sadly, one by one all four candidates withdrew their applications, each explaining that for different reasons they felt unable to make the unusual commitment (only 5 weekly hours, spread out over a year, with an interruption in the summer).

So here's what we're planning for now: in February, I will attend the facilitator training, using supplementary hours paid for out of the OWL budget. Then, beginning late March and continuing into the spring, Kelly Predojevic and I will try to offer an abridged form of OWL. Stay tuned for a new name, since this will not be the OWL program, but an "OWL-inspired" program.

Unbelievably, this May will mark the end of my sixth year as your minister. Every year has been different, and every year has felt like a privilege. I'm honored to work with a terrific staff team, to partner with all of you, and I look forward to continued fruitful collaboration in the years to come!

Also, Rev. Nicoline mentioned that with declining participation and volunteer decline has made the Worship Team after two months of deliberation to decide that in August of 2024 there will be no worship services. She also said that she will be taking a Sabbatical in early 2025.

Board Highlights: Board Co-Chair Connie Shemo: We set a goal of generosity at an increase of 13% and we met it. She also said we worked well together. However, the challenge we face is in this new normal following the pandemic, is how to increase volunteerism and safety issues. She thanked the worship committee for handling the joy and sorrow issue.

The Refugee Project: Ursula Jones reported that: Much has happened since the Fellowship approved at the Congregational Meeting on 4/14/24 a Refugee Committee to pursue a sponsorship application through the Welcome Corps, a program of the U.S. Department of State. The Committee subsequently adopted the name Plattsburgh Refugee Organization with the acronym PRO. Our original team of 7 (Ursula Jones, Kris Lutters, Arlene Morrissey, Megan Morrissey-Kelley, Connie Shemo, Shera Marston, and Erin Cass) have added Rita-Ann FitzGerald and Elaine Ostry to their number. As a team we decided to apply for a family of 4 with children with no preferences as regards to country of origin or language spoken. We have raised \$3,000 in donations and applied for a grant from The Sponsor Fund who advertised amounts bringing sponsorship applicants up to the 60% of the total amount required to apply. In our case, since we are applying to sponsor a family of 4, the 60% amount was \$5,820. Since we had raised \$3,000, the amount we were applying for was \$2,820. The approval came this past Tuesday one week after applying in the amount of \$4,850 which is \$2,030 over what was needed! We are very grateful for this timely and generous response. No explanation was given for the larger amount; perhaps our application came in when they needed to distribute funds quickly, or because we were sponsoring a family of 4, or because we have no preference for country of origin. We don't know.

We have been meeting regularly to meet other requirements of the application process including completing an Essential Training Course with group discussions, learning about the responsibilities of sponsorship, making a commitment to fulfill those obligations and individually obtaining background checks. This past Thursday we submitted our application to become a sponsor. When you don't know the person or family you are sponsoring, the process is called "matching".

What happens next? Welcome Corps will research our background checks and review our application. If there are no hold ups in the process, we could hear whether we are approved in 3 to 4 weeks. Once approved we will receive a survey to complete that details more about this environment and resources available here and will help with matching. Next, we will be "matched" with a "newcomer" family which could take a couple of weeks or months. The timelines are hard to predict and are not within our control. It may take less time because we have not expressed preferences and because there are many refugees who have waited up to a year to be matched. Where might the country of origin be of our matched family? Recently the Welcome Corps has placed refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Burma.

So, while we go through these steps and wait for the notification of being matched, we are making plans and preparations. High on our list is networking with our friends and Fellowship members in our search for safe and affordable housing as well as employment opportunities. And we are looking for donations to furnish an apartment with furniture, kitchen items and linens. Once we have been matched and have information about the family composition and ages, we will be specific about certain needed items and will communicate

these via the e-news. Fundraising continues by applying for grants as they become available and establishing a GoFundMe page on Facebook once we have been matched. Fellowship members will be alerted about the GoFundMe posting and encouraged to visit the page and share it with friends to get the widest response possible. Sharing the Facebook page will also be a PR opportunity to let the community know more about the Fellowship and the social justice activities we are engaged in.

In terms of a timeline, it is hard to predict when each of these steps will be completed and when our newcomers will actually arrive at an airport, but we could be welcoming them in 1.5 to 4 months. If you have information about possible housing, employment, or furnishings or would like to be more involved contact me or Connie Shemo. Contact information will be posted in the e-news.

Building and Grounds Report: Ursula Jones also reported: Beginning with the building and property at 4 Palmer St, we are assuming that we will continue to use this building for at least the next year. With that in mind, we are pursuing paving a handicap parking area where our current driveway is. The first step is applying for a permit from the City Building Inspector which is in process. Once obtained we can ask for an estimate from Northern Paving and given the amount is within our budget, we will contract for the same.

We have also planned to repair and paint the handicap ramp this summer and will be looking for volunteers to offer time to defray the cost. If you can help with this project, please contact Hap Wheeler, Kris Lutters, or myself.

Lastly we are hiring an electrician to update and/or install outlets on the balcony to improve internet connectivity, and in the sanctuary to add outlets to make the air purification system flexible in its placement, and replace a relay in the heating system.

Concerning our lot at Montana and Kansas Aves on the new base in Plattsburgh, CDC Realtors continues to market the property. One business expressed interest but considered the lot too small for their purposes. We received a variance request for the property on the corner of New York Rd and Kansas to build 28 multifamily units; our realtor advised that this construction would probably have a positive effect on interest in our property with no negative effect. We did not object to the variance and the project is being built currently. Our contract with CDC Realtors is coming due next month when we will have the option to sign again for another year and to reconsider the asking price of \$155,000

Social Justice: Jo El Miano, chair of Side With Love at the UUFFP, stressed the importance of the Black Lives Matter group. She described how we voted to support and uphold the 8th Principle. This was being encouraged through the common read, On Repentance and Repair that many BLM members participated in. We have also been forming a deep collaboration and partnership with SUNY Plattsburgh through the DEI office. We recently collaborated with the SUNY Interfaith Alliance to host an interfaith movie series where the movie "One Life" was shown.

Black Solidarity Day will be celebrated on November 4th, 2024 as well as celebrating our indigenous ancestors in November 2024. Other events were:

- SUNY Plattsburgh DEI and Black History Month, February 2024.
- Co-sponsor of National Day of Racial Healing 2024 events on the SUNY Plattsburgh Campus.
- Member of the SUNY Plattsburgh Interfaith Alliance Council.
- Participation in and training with Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation circles.

Other areas that they are active in are Our Democracy/UU the Vote where they are teaming up with TeamUnity NC to encourage black voters to go to the polls. They have been partnering with Plattsburgh Cares to compile and donate food bags to the motels used for emergency housing for both citizens and noncitizens stranded in our country. There is more information on the UUFP website under the "Connect" tab.

Ad Hoc Building Committee: This report was given by Dorothy Latta. She emphasized this group was formed to evaluate options and not to make any decisions. The options are to stay at Palmer Street, construct a new building, share space with another partner faith community or other organization, purchase existing building solely or with a partner organization or to rent or lease space. Most options are cost prohibitive for the congregation such as buying, constructing or even leasing a space. Sharing a space with Temple Beth Israel was discussed early on. However, our two faith communities have different models and it is really cost prohibitive at this time. The best option is to remain at Palmer Street which will have the least financial impact for the congregation. However, by staying where we are currently, the minimum required work needed to be done is pave the driveway with an apron to provide wheelchair accessibility, ramp modifications and installation/modification to the current ventilation system. Other things that may also be considered are expanding the building footprint and providing basement accessibility.