

Annual Report 2023
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Monica
Rev. Jeremiah Lal Shahbaz Kalendae
June 18, 2023

Thank you for making time on this beautiful day to commit to the work of Beloved Community and the democratic processes and decorum which support it. This is an opportunity for us to gather in the spirit of gratitude for this community, its many volunteers, its professional staff, and its elected leaders. Together, we have faced an unprecedented degree of change that upended life as we knew it and invited us to adapt, innovate, and transform like never before.

Developmental ministry is intended to be a long term but not permanent period of intentional ministry that can help a community achieve developmental goals and lead cultural change to strengthen and enhance the capacities of the community. It involves all of the work of settled ministry in addition to these extra dimensions of working on making developmental progress.

When I arrived, and in each subsequent year, I've lifted up the guiding values of sustainability, spaciousness, resiliency, and regenerativity. We have to work in ways that are sustainable and promote a culture of deep appreciation and healthy boundaries to avoid overworking and burnout. Sustainability isn't only any ecological value, it is also a value that can guide our lives and how we go about doing church together.

We have to cultivate spaciousness—and though this took on whole new meanings in our time of plague—it is really about the spaciousness of being within ourselves and offering that same generous openness to others. Spaciousness invites to step outside of some of the cultural norms present in white supremacy culture like either/or polarized thinking, a pervading culture of urgency, and a culture of perfectionism. We've been exploring how intentionally cultivating spaciousness can bring us calm and centeredness within while it also encourages both/and thinking, holding multiple realities, a culture of careful deliberation and discernment, and a culture of learning and growth.

Resiliency is our ability to face adversity—and we've had no shortage of that—and not be broken or entirely diminished by it. It is our capacity to be flexible and adaptable and to return to regather and return to our wholeness after challenges or difficulties.

Regenerativity is related to sustainability, spaciousness, and resiliency, and it includes ministering in ways that are regenerative. Our work should lead us to renewal, regrowth, and restoration if we're doing it in sustainable ways with a generous allowance of spaciousness. If we miss the mark, we can experience the opposite as a community. In this year of rebirth and rebuilding following the trauma of plague, we've seen how powerfully regenerative this community can be!

In my first year of developmental ministry with you, we had six months together before the pandemic struck and we had to reimagine, retool, and implement how we do church practically overnight. Our entire church moved online while we were isolated in our homes and we figured out how to minister in this new traumatic and disorienting

reality from the ground up. Our pastoral care systems and small group ministries connected us like never before. We witnessed the murder of George Floyd, and the veil of white supremacy was pulled back and we wrestled as a society with how to create justice and equality for all of its members and specifically the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color most targeted by white supremacy. We also had to continually respond to a hostile, bigoted, and anti-science cultural reality being promoted by some of the media and various religious and political leaders.

In our second year of developmental ministry, we were in total lockdown and our country was in the midst of a presidential election. We further developed our online worship capacities, creating videos in our homes and stitching things together to create online services that became a resource for UU congregations and others across the country. To this day, people I talk with in our wider movement tell me they feel like they know our community from the vast amount of online ministry content we created. In March 2021, our staff leaders marched on behalf of the community to Stop Asian Hate as the racist vitriol and attacks continued in our larger society. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were elected in the Fall of 2021 and an insurrection followed by a violent mob attempting to overthrow our national democracy.

In our third year of developmental ministry—that's the last church year—we began to transition from services that were created in our homes and offered entirely online to hybrid services which required a retooling of our sanctuary technology. New audio visual systems were created, consultants were hired, grants were received and we upgraded our capacities to be able to livestream from our sanctuaries. First, for many months, just our worship leaders—worship associates, musicians and tech crew—gathered in the sanctuary with the windows open, our masks on, and appropriately socially distanced. Then last spring, small pockets of a person here, a couple there began to show up in these pews. It was like this for months as we managed yet another major transition.

This fourth year of our developmental ministry, was our first year emerging from the pandemic. At the onset of this church year we declared that it would be a year of rebirth and rebuilding. We'd have to relearn how to operate in person and with the many changes that the pandemic had brought. We'd have to meet new challenges caused by the pandemic and navigate a fourth major transition. When I reflect upon all that's been accomplished in these four years, sustainability, spaciousness, resiliency, and regenerativity are the qualities of our togetherness that helped us to maintain stability through incredibly unstable and tumultuous times. Developmental ministry is a period of intentional ministry that aspires to provide as much stability for a congregation as possible to help it heal and grow following prolonged conflict and a breakdown in congregational systems and the bonds of community. Just as a physical wound takes time to heal, wounds in community take time, patience, and care to experience a full recovery and a return to wholeness.

What has helped us to navigate these four years of incredible disruption and societal turmoil while simultaneously making progress on our developmental ministry goals has been our following of a strategic plan which has guided what developmental goals we work on when and in what ways. We've had to be flexible and adaptable to adjust to the unexpected. With some goals we need to take more time than expected—

refreshing our bylaws took longer than expected, for example, which delayed our mission and vision work but we balanced our budget a year ahead of schedule. Most have progressed as we had expected. We've become a Fair Share congregation with the UUA and have continued to engage with the work of anti-racism and anti-oppression in multiple ways across the life of the congregation. We're rebuilding our Children's and Youth religious education program after it collapsed under the weight of the pandemic and we're preparing to do some soul searching work around our mission and vision and shared ministry in the next church year. We're also reconstituting our Right Relations Team to ensure we are living into our Covenant of Right Relations and that we have systems of accountability that call people back into the community when they are outside of the Unitarian Universalist values and ethical expectations we've set before ourselves as a congregation.

We've had to operate with a high degree of trust, interdependence, and collaboration across the life of the community to meet challenges and seize opportunities. Whereas there was a great exodus of ministers, professional staff, and others during these difficult years in congregations across the country, we managed to cultivate a resilience and adaptive spirit that provided for both stability *and* progress. We should be grateful that we have such a skillful and gracious community. Our President Eileen McCormack will speak more to the many specific accomplishments of the community in this church year in her Annual Report to follow.

I would like to share a few thoughts about our Annual and Special Meetings of the Congregation themselves as how we conduct ourselves in these meetings is part of our developmental work. One of the reasons I'm engaged as a Developmental Minister is because I have specific experience serving in a variety of congregations from our largest UU congregation to small ones—and serving healthy ones and some with significant conflict and are still learning how to organize themselves effectively, process hurt, and address maladaptive behavior. Such experience gives one some perspective on what's helpful and what's not in congregational systems and cultures.

One thing I've learned, from attending oh so many congregational meetings over my 25 years serving our congregations as a youth leader, lay leader and then as clergy is that the best congregational meetings are boring. Yes, you heard that right, boring. I thought maybe things had changed so just to double check I went ahead and watched a few of these proceedings in some of our leading congregations and sure enough: B-O-R-I-N-G.

The reason they should be boring is because highly adaptive congregations operate with a high degree of trust, interdependence, and transparency, and there is a shared understanding of how accountability and responsibility is delegated in a democratic congregational system. By the time things get to a congregational meeting, they should have gone through careful discernment processes within the organization that strove to act on behalf of the congregation and in its interests. So by the time things are considered in this forum members trust that their elected leaders and the congregation's staff have strove to do their best—to put the time and thought into making the best decisions possible. It doesn't mean there isn't disagreement or questions or concerns but they're usually minimal and offered in a spirit of wonder, curiosity, and goodwill. Now I don't really think we've gotten to the esteemed goal of having a boring

congregational meeting just yet but when your settled minister arrives, I'd like to be able to tell them we've gotten to that place as a congregation.

Lastly, in conclusion, some of us are off to the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations next week and you can still register to attend virtually if you'd like. This is a presidential election year and I hope we will be electing someone who is extraordinarily capable and gifted, a friend and colleague of mine who once served on my Committee on Ministry as a young minister, the Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt. We will also consider changes to the UUA's Article II which includes our UU Purposes and Principles and Sources of our tradition. Representatives from congregations across the country and around the globe will discern how we might articulate our liberal religious values in the time we are now living. We will be virtually attending the General Assembly Sunday Service next week—I'll be waving to you from the Pittsburgh convention center—and then we will be transitioning to summer worship for July and August and we've once again lined up some amazing guest religious leaders and a few leaders of our congregation.

Let us conclude by remembering the names and spirits of those members of our community who have joined the mighty cloud of witnesses in the past year.

Anita Brenner
Helen Brown
Tom Kafka
Anne MacQueen
Susan Marsh
Robert Simon Sr.
Joanna Woods-Marsden

May their memories be a blessing.

I wish everyone a restful, restorative, and delightful summer. Lets celebrate all that's been accomplished and give ourselves the spaciousness to return restored and renewed in the new church year.

Shanti, Shalom, Salam. Amin, Amen, and Blessed Be.