

Mounting a comeback

BY ALLYSHA DUNNIGAN

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein — who has been the Unitarian Universalist Church Of Greater Lynn's (UUCGL) minister since 2013 — was on sabbatical and home between travels.

As the news came in about the COVID-19 contagion, cancellations and closures, she called the congregation's board president, who said that staffers knew the minister would not be calling during a sabbatical except in cases of extreme emergency.

"It sounds like a global pandemic might be an extreme emergency," Weinstein said. "We had no idea what a cataclysm awaited the world."

The first thing UUCGL had to do was figure out how to stay connected safely, which involved learning a lot of new technical skills while experiencing a great deal of shared fear, confusion, and dread.

"How would we do this? Our scramble to learn how to gather for worship and meetings on Zoom, produce videos for worship and host online fellowship hour was like repairing a hole in the boat while out on choppy seas," Weinstein said.

While this transition was underway, everyone in the congregation was experiencing their own version of this chaos while forced to quarantine in their homes. One of the great parts about the UUCGL, said many members of the congregation, is the support everyone showed for each other during these unprecedented times.

The Unitarian Universalist religion has prided itself on being a denomination that is open to all people, regardless of gender, race, religion or sexuality.

The UUCGL has always had a tight-knit congregation, one that comes together to support its members and the community, whether it is by hosting and participating in food drives, volunteering at My Brother's Table, supporting housing for families in need, donating money to charities, volunteering for beach clean-ups and community gardens, and much more.

When the pandemic left many anxious and confused, Weinstein said the phones suddenly became very popular again as church members reached out to each other to make sure that everyone had basic necessities and were coping emotionally with the disruption.

"To our relief, almost everyone in the congregation was able to remain employed at least part time, so we were eventually able to turn our collective attention to the needs of others in the wider community who were suffering food insecurity," Weinstein said.

UUCGL also has a long history of working with St. Stephen's Memorial Episcopal Church in Lynn on the issue of food insecurity.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn (UUCGL) has been a part of the Swampscott community for more than 40 years.

The church was formed from the combination of the Unitarian Church of Lynn, the First Universalist Parish of Lynn — which was the largest Universalist congregation in America in the late 1800s — and the Swampscott Universalist Church.

Between 1964 and 1966, these three churches consolidated and on March 22, 1981, the seven-and-a-half acres of wooded land at which the church is currently located

— 101 Forest Avenue. — was dedicated and renamed the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn.

The congregation itself dates back to the First Church of Christ of Lynn, which was organized in 1632, and later dispersed into a number of Universalist and Unitarian organizations.

UUCGL has long been a community resource, reaching beyond its membership to make ministry and social justice programs available to all, providing aid to underserved populations, and supporting organizations in need by making the church and its grounds available for meetings and events.

While the church has served community members and generations of families for years, it was forced to adjust its usual services when the pandemic hit.

After closing down the church for all in-person services and events, the UUCGL transitioned to a fully-remote capacity. While this offered a way for the congregation to stay connected, many still faced struggles outside of

the church.

Church members Clare Campbell and Michael Celona said that St. Stephen's food pantry saw its demand for food triple after the start of the pandemic, so several UUCGL members started volunteering at the pantry to help organize and hand out food.

Members also organized several drive-up food options during the pandemic. Campbell and Celona said these "pop the trunk" drive-ups provided goods for local food pantries and a "fun, safe method of socializing for church members who masked up to retrieve an abundance of offerings from the trunks of friends and neighbors of the church."

While many struggled with food insecurity, others struggled with losing loved ones.

Weinstein's mother died suddenly in South Carolina in the first weeks of the pandemic, so she became one of many grieving people who lost a loved one but was not able to travel to be with family for their memorial service.

"This personal experience gave me a renewed appreciation for how much human communities need rituals that facilitate our sense of the sacred and connect us in spirit across time and distance," Weinstein said. "Not just funerals, but other rites of passage like birthday celebrations, baby blessings, graduations, holidays and holy days and ceremonies to mark transitions. It has been beautiful to see the creative ways people have managed to mark these moments of life's passage."

The church's theme for the year is "Together In Spirit," which Weinstein herself suggested.

At the time, there was no way of knowing how long the congregation would be unable to gather in the sanctuary, to hug each other, to see each other's smiles, to sing together, and to pray together in physical closeness, but from the pastoral perspective, Weinstein said she saw that everyone was suffering in some way.

For example, Weinstein said she saw that people who lived alone experienced terrible isolation and loneliness, and those who were in roommate situations or family settings often felt overwhelmed by the constant togetherness.

UUCGL offered a parent support group and several meditative and small-group listening circles — all online — for spiritual support; additionally, some of the church's cherished traditions, including the October Blessing of the Animals, the New Year's Blessing and Banishing Ritual, and the Flower Communion in May moved outdoors.

"I will never forget the ways that people would call out in joy just seeing each other walking across the parking lot," Weinstein said.



The Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn in Swampscott has been on Forest Avenue since 1981.

PHOTO: SPENSER HASAK

The church's choir director, Kenneth Griffith, organized Zoom choir rehearsals, and used an online app to record hymns and anthems for Sunday services.

Each choir member recorded their own part individually and at home, and then the voices were layered into a complete chorus.

Members of the choir said that, although they learned a lot from this experience, they are looking forward to the day when they can "stand shoulder to shoulder again and rejoice with our voices in person."

Now that the vast majority of the congregation is vaccinated, that day doesn't seem too far away — and the UUCGL is moving forward with a reopening plan.

The church's Reopening Task Force is consulting with many public-health resources and is listening to the congregation, whom Weinstein said expresses a deep yearning to be together.

"We are committed to living by a covenant of love and mutual compassion and will do what it takes to mitigate risk and to continue to include folks remotely," Weinstein said. "Things will not go back to 'normal' any time soon, but the congregations that merged to become the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn have been around for centuries and the church therefore bears witness to human resilience across many generations."

UUCGL Business Administrator Elizabeth Muller recalls March 23, 2020, when she was in the church office and heard Gov. Charlie Baker announce an emergency order requiring nonessential businesses to close

by noon the next day.

Muller said the building may have closed, but the church never did.

"We took a giant leap forward in the realm of online services and offerings. We learned — often painfully — new software, and became adept at flower arranging to escape the ire of the Zoom Room Rater," Muller said. "We were welcomed to online Sunday services by avian mascot Babs the hen, by adorable children lighting candles from their homes, and by guitar solos overlooking a sparkling Lynn pond. I learned, to my embarrassment, during what was to have been an audio-only webinar that ducking and falling to the floor is not a guarantee of escaping being seen, but it is good for comic relief."

To expand the church's possibilities for outdoor and indoor services and events, the church purchased a new sound system and continues to explore better ways for hybrid services and meetings to accommodate those at home.

Muller said that although reopening has been a challenging issue, everyone worldwide is having the same difficulties, discussions and questions.

"It can test one's mettle: the old is not there, the new is not clear, and the one given is that it will have changed. Fortunately, those changes can provide great opportunities to deepen faith and service," Muller said. "The cracks in the armor of our previously well-ordered lives have allowed the light of new opportunities to shine forth. We are ready to come out of the shadows and embrace them all." ●