

## An Annual Piece of Mike's Mind... by Rev. Mike Morran

We've made history this past year. For the first time since First Unitarian Denver has had a building, over a year has passed without a single public gathering in our space. I suppose this is also true for many other organizations, but I'm fond of this one.

That doesn't mean we haven't been busy, we've just done everything from our homes and over various screens. This year, it's important to acknowledge just how hard the pandemic has been on so many of our members and friends. People who live alone have had a particularly hard time with the social isolation of the past year. School-age children and their parents have struggled with online learning. Young people have missed out on formative friendships and events. Families have been unable to see and hug each other. Some of us have been hit hard by disappearing jobs and rising costs. Travel has been restricted and, in some cases, impossible.

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## Our COVID Year by Erin Kenworthy, DRE

When we began our church year in the fall of 2020, we had already adjusted to online worship. Religious Exploration staff experimented with programmatic offerings, and overall, it was a relatively quiet year.

Our youth program continued to meet online. Both the Middle School and High School groups met regularly with their volunteer facilitators. Our youth coordinator, Lena McCain performed an outstanding feat, keeping these two groups engaged and bonded, through book clubs, care packages, and meaningful dialogue during online meetings. In an extraordinary circumstance, our youth program maintained participation. We recently gathered a small number of youth families to perform our Bridging ritual for High School Seniors. This year, we bridged two youth who added their names to our wooden bridge that hangs in our youth room. Aaron Bassnett and Jake Curnett are leaders in our local youth community, and we welcomed them into young adulthood with open arms and an invitation to remain connected to our larger UU community.

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The election of 2020 and the subsequent behavior of the former president and his followers continues to be stressful and bewildering. Refugees, wildfires, floods, cities burning as people protested police brutality, more Black and brown citizens shot by police, homeless encampments all over central Denver, of course the virus itself with the accompanying worry for ourselves and those we love, on and on...

And all of us having to cope and process these events (and more) in isolation. There is much to grieve as a community. It's no wonder we continue to have 150ish households continue to zoom into Sunday services every week. I know it's been a life-saving anchor for me personally.

At least five people associated with First Unitarian have endured positive Covid-19 diagnosis, and thankfully they have all recovered. Not so fortunate were Betty Shuttleworth-Allen and Eric Porter, both of whom passed away this year. May their memories be a blessing.

No report or observance of the past year could fail to mention the outstanding effort, professionalism, and gifts of our staff. Lia Davis, Erin Kenworthy, Matt Davis, Glenn Barrows, and Brian Stone, have been the energizers, problem solvers, content creators, technology wizards, steady hands, and good-natured team behind our Sunday video productions. Lia in particular has spent countless hours working with singers, musicians, and technology, learning new tools and software to create the audio-visual wonders we see every week. We are blessed by their love for this church and the talents the staff bring to us.

Speaking of staff, we've had some changes in the past year. Patrick Phillips, our building superintendent resigned last fall. Erica Trisler as our Events Coordinator had no events to coordinate during the pandemic. Karen Derrick-Davis took a full-time position elsewhere. And Brenda Bruno, our former Data Clerk, moved into full retirement. We wish them well!

And, we welcomed Rhonda Williamson as our new Stewardship Coordinator. Rhonda has been a welcome addition to the team, and was the primary architect/worker-bee behind the recently completed 2021 Stewardship Campaign.

There have also been some changes on the Board of Trustees. Angeles Ortega and Barry Osborne both had to resign from the board for personal reasons. Christopher Belanger and Robin Rissman have graciously taken their place.

Speaking of the Board, an incalculable debt of thanks is owed to Mary Sullivan, Board President for the past two years. Over the past three years, Mary has transformed from nervous and excited to seasoned leader. She is thorough, inclusive, loving, and dedicated to the church far, far beyond any reasonable expectation of a volunteer. Always prepared, thinking ahead, asking questions, keeping people informed, and appreciative of others, their opinions and their efforts. I really just can't say enough about what a pleasure it has been to work with Mary. Mary Sullivan gets stuff done!

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Our elementary and early childhood offerings were limited. At the beginning of the year, we offered RE space, led by Matt Davis, on Sunday afternoons over lunch. The lunch meeting was sparsely attended, due in part to youth and families feeling zoomed out in the context of virtual school. Those who did attend appreciated the connections. Matt Davis has provided immense support to our online worship presence this year, and has continued to be supportive of RE adjacent offerings, including our virtual Friday Night Storytime initiative.

We met in the late fall with a small committee to launch a Virtual Storytime for all ages. This programmatic offer began in January and ran through April. Every Friday night at 7pm we met online for a story and some fun. We had outstanding volunteer participation, and several families attended regularly. This offering served to build connections and relationships between generations. It was a model that was highly successful, given the regular participation of both volunteers and family units. We may keep this going in the next church year as part of our multi-platform approach to church community moving forward. Many thanks to those who served on the initial committee to kick off this offering, and all those who volunteered to read. One of my most favorite moments during this year was the moment that our kid participants declared that they wanted a turn to read a story to the adults. We experienced reciprocity in giving and receiving that only manifests when real relationship is present. It was a beautiful thing to witness.

In worship, I spent significant time each week planning and crafting our Time for all ages. We hosted a virtual Christmas pageant online! In the process, I've learned a little bit about video production and editing, opening a whole new skill set out of necessity.

This virtual year allowed me to gain new technological skills in hosting meetings and webinars that I offered to our larger community. I worked as a tech support for a Racial Justice speaker series during the fall on Sunday evenings. We provided our zoom virtual capabilities to the JUUST Living community by hosting their online Drag Show. We also hosted a collaborative Front Range Christmas Eve Service, a project that included most of our front range UU communities. I also held caucus space for White identified religious professionals engaged in the work of Racial Justice along the front range as part of my participation in the UURJ (UU's for Racial Justice workgroup of Ministers, Musicians, Religious Educators, and Administrators.)

We now hold complexities around moving toward reopening, balancing our values with our desire to be together again. We will find our way back into our building together, but it will be the work of building a new normal. What that means for Religious Education is still unfolding. I have ideas. There is an undercurrent of new energy around collaboration amongst local congregations, which is exciting as we build our way forward together. Isolation, either congregationally or individually, is not ideal. This pandemic certainly laid bare the ways that we need one another. I am excited for the possibilities of re-emerging into our in-person work carrying the lessons of this last year. May we always treasure the time we have together in fellowship in new ways in our new normal.

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The rest of our excellent Board of Trustees this year has been Joe Verrengia, Tim Robertson, Melany Deem, Jillian Gleason (and Christopher Belanger, and Robin Rissman).

Huge thanks are due to Peggy Ulrich-Nims for being Board Secretary for the past seven years(!!!) Peggy has shown up for every board meeting to take notes, file motions, record decisions, ask questions when something isn't clear, and generally be her beautiful, loving, helpful self. Thank you Peggy!

Special thanks is due to Karl Jonietz and Laurie Duncan for their dedicated service to First Unitarian as Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer. There have been many changes to the way we do our accounting, pay our bills, process income, track information, and keep things transparent. Karl and Laurie have initiated, rolled with, corrected, nudged, or otherwise kept us on track for the past two years. The finances at First Unitarian Denver have never, and I mean never, been as clear, as accountable, as flexible, or as detailed as they are right now.

The Finance Council, chaired by Helen Berkman has also had a hand in this, providing oversight, advice, resources, and guidance to financial decision making. Other members of Finance Council this year have been Sally Madsen and Carl Mount. The Board President, Vice President, Treasurer, and Assistant Treasurer are also voting members of Finance Council.

Speaking of finances, another of our groups that has met consistently during the pandemic is Stewardship Council, which oversees our pledge income including the Stewardship Campaign and the Auction. Nancy Crow and Mike Cranmer have been co-chair, with Richard Erickson, Diane Hainsworth, Noelle Botti, and Steve Smithers. Diane Hainsworth, again(!) deserves great thanks for again(!) organizing the annual auction. Thank you Diane.

The building has been largely empty, but not absent of attention. The Property Management Team has organized repair of the Rose Window, several leaks from the roof, needed maintenance, including painting some of our 1st floor windows, and now a whole new roof, - partly funded by another grant from the State Historical Fund. Kathy Cranmer is chair of Property Management with help from Tim Robertson, Carl Mount, Helen Berkman, Cory Devor, and Mark Skrotzki.

Leadership Development this year was Stu Ferguson and Tammy Carpenter. Thanks to them we have a full set of candidates for next year's elected positions. The Committee on Ministry this year was Janet Kennedy, John Rymers, Mary Hilken, Trina Seefeldt, and Hilarie Portell. They worked hard this year to complete the Appreciative Inquiry process for my annual evaluation, and even in pandemic times, received more feedback than ever.

Faith In Action Council this year has been David Alley, Ellen Cahill, Elizabeth Marchetti, Rev. Nathan Woodliff-Stanley, and Peggy Ulrich-Nims. Much thanks to them for carrying the torch of our social justice projects. Connections Ministry, lovingly coordinated by Noelle Botti has been working quietly in the background this year. Even with only online offerings, Connections Ministry has facilitated eight new members of First Unitarian Denver.

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The Racial Justice Project, with Steve Brainerd and Patrick Whorton and co-chairs has been holding monthly meetings, coordinating with community groups, and preparing a Reparations Project for the church to consider. You'll be hearing more about this in the months to come. Thanks to all to participate in this vital project!

Thanks to all the musicians and choir members who have making music for Sunday services, especially Rachel Hill, Erica Trisler, Alisha Bashaw, Lacey Hochman, Eric Moon, Yoni Fine, Steve Sinclair, Charlotte Braud-Kern, Tim Murphy, Patrick Keating, and Kimberly Urish. Thanks to Greg Wimpey for his assistance and consulting with sound and technical issues.

Once again, I want to celebrate the people who were part of the Covenant Task Force and all the work they did to compile and present the new Congregational Covenant, which you all voted for overwhelmingly last October. Hilarie Portell and Nellie Stagg co-chaired the effort, with Doug Pryce, Yoni Fine, John Rymers, Pat Jonietz, and Joe Verrengia. Both the process and the result were/are exemplary!

Last but not least for the past year, an anonymous donor has made substantial contributions to the long-term endowments of the church. There is now well over a million dollars invested for long-term savings and income, future emergencies, or other as-yet unknowable needs. Thank you to our donor, and to all the people who helped facilitate the transfer of these funds.

As of this moment, with signs of pandemic restrictions lifting and the world in a different place, no one knows what the future will bring, but there are ideas and initiatives cooking at First Unitarian Denver. This year, 2021, is the 150th anniversary of our founding on August 15th, 1871. We will be finding ways to celebrate this amazing milestone in the life of the congregation.

We are currently looking (again) at state and federal Covid guidelines with an eye toward having in-person programming and Sunday services again in the not-too-distant future. We are cautiously hoping for a return to in-person worship around September or October, though that could change at any time.

Even when we do begin in-person Sunday services, we are planning to continue broadcasting what we do online. We have found that we are reaching people we have never reached before, and this is a valuable ministry to the larger world. We are preparing to invest in cameras and technology that will allow this to happen. Along with Sunday services, eventually all our programming, classes, etc. will be offered on multiple platforms. This is the apparent future of churches everywhere.

We have hired a consultant to assess, advise, and implement a more welcoming, more robust online presence with more intentional, tailored messaging. Soon FUSD will be on Instagram and possibly other platforms in addition to our website and FaceBook.

Next year, 2022, will be the twentieth anniversary of our covenant as minister and congregation. It's been a lively, growing, and transformative time, and I hope we will write the next chapter together.

## The Board Beat by Mary Sullivan, President, First Unitarian Board of Trustees

As I end my two years as President of the Board of Trustees of FUSD, it is a time for me to look back at what an amazing experience this has been in our community. This been a year for the history books; and I mean that literally. There is much to be said concerning how COVID 19 has affected FUSD and how our beloved community has responded to it. But first I would like to concentrate on many of the great things that have occurred within our church in the past year. This is a lengthier list than I would normally include, but I want you all to be aware of the tremendous efforts put forth by our staff, committees and limitless volunteers to keep all of us connected and our operations running smoothly through an unprecedented year of challenges. These are just some highlights and I apologize in advance for what I have failed to include.

First, I want to convey my deep gratitude for the support and appreciation you all have shown me during my last two years as President of the Board. As I step off of this position, I must share that this experience has been one of the most humbling, rewarding, challenging and FUN (not always) adventures I've taken on. Thank you for placing your trust and confidence in me.

I must begin with a huge outpouring of gratitude to our **Minister** and **Staff** for their herculean efforts to provide us with uninterrupted, beautiful and heartfelt Sunday services from the minute our building closed. This has been no small feat and they have worked tirelessly to continue to improve and make all aspects of the experience as "real" as it can be in a virtual setting.

Early after the start of our church year, we held a Special Congregational Meeting to vote on a new **Congregational Covenant** (CC). The CC Task Force spent the summer preparing the congregation for the vote by placing several entries in First Announce, Ploughshare articles on the topic by several contributors, and an entire dedicated service with at least two other services on related topics. The result was an approval to adopt the new Congregational Covenant with a 97% majority!

The Board of Trustees holds an **Annual Retreat** each summer with the purpose of building camaraderie and setting priorities for the year. The three priorities set for 2020/21 were 1) Support the new Congregational Covenant by developing a deeper understanding of White Supremacy Culture (WSC) in Board members 2) Keep congregants connected during Covid restrictions through enhanced online offerings 3) Reach out to new people and visitors to Sunday services.

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The Board has been active supporting initiatives and programs towards these priorities.

- **WSC Presentations** at Board meetings
- **Board support of RJP** efforts to shed light and help dismantle WSC
- **Friday Night Bedtime Stories:** children's stories read online weekly by congregants and staff to FUSD families during the long, cold winter
- **IT Resource Group:** Several volunteers were recruited from the congregation to assist congregants on; Zoom, Google Drive, FUSD Facebook and FUSD YouTube. This list can be found on the FUSD website.
- **Visitor Slide:** a new visual slide was developed for Sunday services welcoming visitors and directing them to a link with a visitor information card for follow up contact.
- **Online Presence Audit:** an audit by a UU Communications Consultant of FUSD's website and social media platforms to determine if we can improve how we inform our congregants and invite seekers, while providing connection, promotion and education.
- **Appreciative Inquiry:** The Committee on Ministry completes an Appreciative Inquiry every year as a means to evaluate our Minister on areas of strength and opportunities for growth. This year, the Board added a second part to this questionnaire with inquiries designed to analyze congregants' preferred means of connection and pathways for them to feel more engaged. This information was funneled to the appropriate committees and staff to help direct their efforts.
- **The Caring Committee** jumped into action constructing a contact list of EVERY member of FUSD, collecting a large group of volunteers and devising a contact campaign through phone calls, emails, written notes, etc. to ensure that every congregant was contacted while we've been out of the church.

A hallmark of First Unitarian is our commitment to social justice issues. We can be proud of the work carried on by our **Faith in Action** committees even in a year of isolation.

The **Little Free Libraries** project is dedicated to providing children's books in underserved neighborhoods, resulting in three structures filled to the brim installed in three congregant's front yards.

A **POC Owned Restaurant** list was compiled and made available to FUSD congregants through a regular listing in First Announce. The **HR-40 Reparations Proposal** received FUSD as a signatory. RJP sponsored a **Community Read** of "So You Want to Talk About Race." FUSD joined Front Range UU churches in supporting Rev. Jen Simon as **Community Minister** to the Mountain Top BIPOC UU Community.

Jen was also received the rite of **Ordination** as a full UU Minister in our sanctuary this spring.

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As this report is being written, RJP is working on a **Reparations** proposal that you will be hearing much more about.

We have continued our commitment to provide **Sanctuary** to Jeanette Vizguerra under our roof, providing a working covenant and communications plan.

Working closely together, the **Stewardship Council** and our new Coordinator, **Rhonda Williamson**, launched an all virtual Ambassador training followed by the very successful virtual Pledge Campaign “Love and Good Trouble for 150 Years (We Are Just Getting Started). Our congregation has once again demonstrated their deep well of generosity in time, talent and treasure!

Our beloved **Auction** was held completely online this year. This took a tremendous amount of work by the Auction committee to retrofit an in-person event into a completely online adventure. They did a great job and the successful results showed it! We are currently in the midst of our second all virtual auction “Are We There Yet?”. It is already showing very high participation and we expect exemplary results.

**Finance Council**, along with our esteemed Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer were busier than usual this past year due in large part to new demands and uncertainties brought on by the Pandemic. We were successful not only in securing funds through the CARES Act Paycheck Protection Program, but also in converting the loan into a “no payback” grant. Our Treasurer was also successful in securing additional annual revenue from the Roger’s Trust.

Best of all, we were able secure Board approval for long overdue and much deserved salary increases and bonuses for our Minister and Staff.

Our beautiful building has not sat idle during the past year, even though we were not in it. The **Property Management Committee** worked on the following projects: repair and staining of both front doors; new screens on windows in the Community Room; restorative work on the stained-glass Rose Window in the chapel; and last, but not least, a new roof and gutters (currently in construction). We will truly have a lovely building to return to.

**COVID** protocols were put in place for persons entering our building while the church is officially closed. These include signage on the front door about wearing masks, signage throughout the first floor about bathroom usage and closed areas to all but authorized personnel, a liability waiver document and sign in sheet for contact tracing.

Mike Morran, Staff and Board members, have been working on a comprehensive plan for **Reopening** operations at FUSD. Congregants safety remains our first priority. This plan has been circulated widely in First Announce and Mike has referenced it in Sunday services.

Please allow me to thank you for allowing me to serve this community over the past 2 years. It has truly been one of the most rewarding and humbling experiences of my life. I could not have been surrounded by a more loving, supportive, generous and morally grounded mix of individuals. Thank you all again for riding a rollercoaster of a year with me and have a GREAT 2021/2022!

# Whole Souul Living

Liberation is our Whole Souul Living Theme for June. Broadly speaking, Liberation can be political, physical, emotional, spiritual, or all of the above. Typically, liberation assumes a current or previous condition of being bounded or restricted, and things get interesting when we consider that it is possible to be unaware of our own bondage. Consider this quote from Laura van Dernoot Lipsky: “We will find the key to our liberation only when we accept that what we once did to survive is now destroying us.”

Some questions for individual and communal reflection:

- From what habits, ways of thinking, or emotional ruts would you like be liberated?
- How do you tell the difference between limitations that are real vs. those that we impose on ourselves?
- Reflect on the relationship between spiritual/emotional liberation and political liberation. Can one exist without the other?
- Herbert Spencer famously wrote: “No one can be perfectly free until all are free.” What does this mean to you? Does it imply liberation or sacrifice?
- Liberation Theology is an attempt to re-frame the teachings of Jesus from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, which changes EVERYTHING. Could this change your perspective on Christianity?



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