

FUSD President's Report on 2020, Mary Sullivan

At the beginning of 2020, Mary Sullivan was entering the second half of her first year of presidency on a board that normally has an annual process of officer succession. The board was working through priorities set from its annual board retreat the summer before. "For the first time in six or seven years, it felt like we were facing an ultra-normal year following the completed renovation, the capital campaign, the long range plan, and visioning/mission periods that had occupied the congregation and presidents before me. We were on track to gain membership after some loss due to our nine months hiatus from the building during renovation. We were also recovering from a projected budget deficit by the end of 2019-20 and had a general optimism heading into the new budget year. It felt like we were on a nice glide path and could attend to refitting the pieces and stabilizing the organization. I had begun to feel more comfortable and confident in my role. So, when I was asked to serve a second term as president, I said yes."

When COVID hit in March 2020, everything shut down. Priorities changed dramatically and instantly. Some were shelved indefinitely, others more aggressively pursued. Mary experienced a flood of competing feelings in Spring 2020. Uncertain that she would have said yes to the extended presidency had she known what lay ahead; however, glad not to be transitioning leadership to someone else during such tumult.

Any leadership position in the church comes with the expected benefit of opportunities to know more deeply and socialize with a broader swath of congregants, committees, and groups. That benefit was stripped to the bone during COVID. "There were lots of Zoom meetings and phone calls, but that is not the same. Many groups, especially our social action groups, were in limbo. Individuals and families were in all kinds of flux and uncertainty. Reaching out started to feel endless and not near enough."

Demands on staff and other groups surged, as they worked overtime to keep all our congregants in connection. Early on, the Caring Committee organized an outreach to touch every single person in the congregation. Staff had distinct job descriptions ahead of the pandemic, but lines blurred as they scrambled to learn how to present professional, engaging, and personal Sunday services online and develop more virtual classes and experiences.

Looking forward, live streaming of Sunday services, as opposed to the current webinar format, has grown into a viable offering. Live streaming uses cameras and mics during the actual in-person service and is streamed live to those who are unable to attend. It is the closest thing to being on-site. "I don't know that we would be looking at live streaming yet, if not for this year of isolation. We were propelled beyond the question of *Wouldn't this be nice?* and into no-choice territory. This year has gotten people used to the possibility of participating in the community from home. It is more inclusive of parents of new babies or young children, people with disabilities, shut-ins, sick people, people who have moved away, and anybody during snowstorms or festival traffic. All can now participate. We can't go back to not serving those

people. Expectations shifted during this pandemic. And we must keep current with what people need.”

Normal cycles of church processes were disrupted during the pandemic: the Board, Finance Council, and the annual Stewardship campaign normally build on predictions, projections, and interrelated timelines; all those were upended in 2020. Living through a once-in-100-year pandemic, some members lost jobs, or their children lost jobs and moved back in with their parents. Parents worked from home, trying to balance work, childcare, schooling and shifting priorities. Some people lost businesses or took cuts to their incomes: family expenses and household budgets shifted. The church leadership had little idea who would be able to fulfill current pledges, who would or would not return to the congregation. There was a need to plan and conduct the annual Stewardship campaign amid great concern that we not press or further injure our congregants. There was great uncertainty about how the COVID-related closure would affect us as a congregation.

In this keen uncertainty, the board set two main priorities:

- Keep our congregants connected.
- Maintain and retain our staff without cutting positions or hours. Keep people whole.

At least two all-congregant contacts by volunteers took place over the year. Sunday services with chats and coffee hours drew local and distant participants. Small groups like core circles met regularly through Zoom and informal groups of congregants checked in on each other.

The only staff who moved on were ones who decided to do so for larger reasons in their lives – none were let go. When the federal Payroll Protection Program came about, the church was able to take advantage of that to ease the financial operating pressures.

A silver lining that emerged from the year of virtual meetings was that we have generally developed ability and increased comfort in using virtual tools. Where they are appropriate, Mary expects they will continue. “For short meetings with few participants, for people who aren’t comfortable driving and parking at night, for those traveling long distances, etc. virtual meetings are wonderful. Sometimes it was nice to participate from my bedroom online. Even so, it is critically important for in-person meetings to resume. The facial cues, body language, bonding, and community building that comes from in-person contact are not reproducible with only remote contact.”

The congregation had been working on racial justice for years before George Floyd was murdered on Memorial Day 2020. A Task Force had spent nine months developing a new covenant that included deepening our understanding of White Supremacy Culture. The new covenant received a 97% approval vote at a Special Congregational Meeting held late in the summer 2020. The community has embarked on a concerted effort to understand how White Supremacy Culture leaches into all of our daily lives.

This year has provided a real opportunity for staff and leadership to break out of their thinking about how things have always been done and opened the floodgates for us to look at how we want to go forward. What is important about First Unitarian? How do we want our community to see us coming out of this? We are engaged in a complete audit of our online presence: Website, Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms. The audit centers on two central questions: Does our online presence truly represent who we are at first glance? Do our online offerings also serve our congregants with what is important to them? A consultant has finished the audit phase and will generate recommendations and an implementation plan. Mary is gratified at having pushed this initiative through during the inertia of the COVID year.

“Our best chance to generate the continuing interest, attention, and connection that are key to our future is to have vehicles for projecting what prospective members and younger generations need. The impact of COVID was to force us all to look inside our congregation, lives, and relationships to ask *Is it working?* This year was an opportunity to blow things up and rework new solutions where old ones may have fallen short, to identify what was valuable and shore those up.”

What is the new environment going to look like? How do we choreograph safe emergence from our isolation? When? How are our offerings going to change? Those questions are the subject of much work and focus; answers are being crafted as this interview is being written.

Mary considers her strengths to lie in “getting things done” and the demands of this pandemic year were a good fit with those attributes. She feels that Joe Verrengia, the person standing to succeed her as president, brings visionary and strategic strengths, and a strong new board will take office on July 1, 2021. Theirs may not be a glide path, for sure, but Mary sees reason to be optimistic about how the congregation is poised for recovery and renewal.