Unitarian Church of Hinsdale Annual Report 2025-2026 ~ Rev. Dr. Beth Johnson

The 2025-2026 church year continued to be a year of intense political disruption and repression as we witness the assaults on our democracy and war abroad. It's been a lot. And this has been a time of vibrant engagement in our congregation, in our Unitarian Universalist faith, and in the wider community. These times have continued to awaken our moral sensibilities and the commitment to living our values. It has always been thus. In the face of danger for all and especially our marginalized siblings in this time of authoritarianism, people of faith and moral conscience respond to the call of love to live from justice and hope.

During this time, our UCH community is growing, not only in size but in vigor and engagement. The social justice circle teams, whose reports you can read in the annual report in hard copy or on the website, have been working hard in their areas to fulfill their mission. All of our circles are fully engaged in doing the good work of ministry.

These times also call for spiritual grounding and pastoral care. The congregation has faced deaths of three beloved members this year. Harriet Goff, Lorna Neuneker and Gene Parvin. As always, I am moved by the pastoral impulses in the congregation to care for members who are in need and when they pass to support memorial services. Pastoral care is a deeply meaningful part of my ministry. I welcome the opportunities to visit and meet with parishioners. Our small group ministries are a vital part of the spiritual grounding and connection needed.

As seen in the worship team report, worship is vital aspect of nurturing our community. We continue to use the Soul Matters themes, which are used in religious education and small group ministries. This gives the opportunity for shared spiritual exploration. UCH is blessed with a skilled and committed team of worship associates. Last summer's worship theme – "A Rebellious Culture of Care," is echoed in this summer's theme – "A Canopy of Care – "a community of safety and spiritual grounding fostering radical imagination to live into UU values."

The newly formed Strategic Resistance Initiative is developing its work which includes providing political education to understand and meet challenges of the authoritarian regime, providing training to equip the congregation and its members with tools to respond, and informing the congregation of resources within the Unitarian Universalist Association for both of those goals and ways to take action. UU the Vote is being pursued again this year. Our member, Jeff P is very helpful in publicizing UUA/Side With Love/Regional activities. I'm very happy about having this long-desired support.

Administration – Acquiring a new church management system has been much more of a challenge than I anticipated due to not having the personal or staff expertise to implement it myself. We seem to be on the right track now and I hope that it will be in place soon. The UCH staff doing so well. We work together well as a team. Our Bookkeeper, Deb, has implemented Quick Books which is a better system than PowerChurch. Linda, our administrator, keeps things scheduled and our members cared for. Pam, our Director of Programs, continues to be the anchor in our programs always bringing vision and stability. Jamie Pastman, our Music Director, continues to provide inspirational music for our services, and Julia Beckman, our Choir Director motivates and energizes our choir. I am ever grateful for Nancy

Kranz's expert work on News and Notes and other projects. We purchased a new virtual hymnal and look forward to introducing that to the congregation in the coming year.

All in all, we have wonderful staff team!

The reconstituted Communications Circle, chaired by Paula Sejut-Dvorak, is developing plans for internal and external communications, which will include aesthetics, print and virtual communications, publicizing the congregation's activities, etc.

One of my goals for my ministry in general with you is organizational development. The church management system is one aspect of that. The others include: evaluating systems to see how they function; board development; assessing buildings and grounds, and strategic development. I am working with the board on continuity in onboarding new members and updated job descriptions. I am recommending a Property Condition Assessment (PCA) to evaluate the property and create short term and long-term plans for the buildings and grounds.

Strategic development is in process with the amazing Strategic Direction Team who have worked hard this year to listen closely to the congregation and develop a mission statement, which will then be used to guide strategic direction for the congregation. With the guidance of the Rev. David Miller, the team has developed a helpful plan to move the congregation through this process. The mission statement process has been delightful. Meeting with many people and groups in the congregation, hearing what UCH means to you and how you engage has been very meaningful. At this annual meeting you will be voting on what I believe is a powerful and relevant mission statement:

Love Boldly. Grow Deeply. Act Justly. Together.

That last word, "together," was suggested by our wonderful intern, Swamini Saraswati, as the team thought about how to include "community" in the mission statement. Swamini listened carefully and then simply said "together." That was it. The finishing touch born from a wise and loving spirit. Swamini was my first intern in 23 years of ministry and she was such a gift and joy to work with! Swamini brought kindness, joy, wisdom, excellent preaching, and dedication to our church. She will be deeply missed by me and all of us.

This year saw me engage in justice work and I appreciate the enthusiastic support from the congregation. I was at the Broadview abduction center weekly during Midway Blitz, and along with others subjected to tear gas, pepper spray and violence – the violence was at the hands of the Illinois State Police who were there to supposedly "protect our First Amendment rights." As a result of the actions of ISP, I along with other faith leaders met with the governor's office which resulted in some changes in the protest area at Broadview. But to be very clear, anything that I experienced does not compare to what our immigrant siblings were, and still are, subjected to by ICE. I was grateful that I could answer the call to be Minneapolis during the ICE occupation there with hundreds of faith leaders and thousands of people who took to the streets. ICE is not gone from our streets. And it will take continued training, vigilance, and engagement to keep our siblings safe until we abolish ICE.

One of the things that emerged out of anticipating Midway Blitz is the interfaith table named Faith Over Fear. This a broad coalition of faith leaders and groups from throughout Chicagoland who mobilized during Midway Blitz and beyond. We meet weekly on zoom for updates in our communities and to plan our monthly Faithful Friday gatherings.

The work I do in the wider community is tied into what our social justice teams do. To that end, when I was invited by the president of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association to join her on the National Coalition to End Family and Child Detention's faith engagement group called Free Families. I attend as I can to learn and connect their work with local work. I'm grateful for the work of our Immigrant Justice Team and Linda Rio for her guidance and expertise!

I continue to serve on the board UUANI and it is a pleasure. Our new Executive Director Natasha Walker and our new Action Strategy Director, Atena Danner are guiding the organization well. We have identified our action strategy for the year: 1. Collective action against authoritarian abuses of power. 2. Access to safe and informed voting. 3.Legal protections for people targeted by local and federal policing. I am also representing UUANI as a lead organizing with Faith Over Fear, Powered by Faith, and many other organizations and congregations in an August 1st mobilization commemorating the birth of the Chicago Freedom Movement, when Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr came to Chicago. It is called "The Fierce Urgency of Now," and you will be hearing all about it so we can participate as a congregation!

This year my professional development has included:

- 1 hour monthly meetings with the MidAmerica Clergy Gathering
- Spiritual direction - monthly
- Mondays as a day of spiritual renewal when possible

As many of you know, the Walk for Peace has been a great boon to me spiritually and it has for other members of our congregation as we witness the venerable monks walking in all conditions with beloved Aloka, the peace dog. There is a deep desire for peace within individuals, our congregation, our community, our country and our world. I'm incredibly grateful for the support to see the Walk for Peace in North Carolina and Washington DC, and to join them for Vesak (the celebration of Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing) in Fort Worth. I joined hundreds of volunteers who prepared 24,000 candles which were lit for peace. It was a stunningly moving experience to see thousands of people gather and millions online – all longing for peace.

It has been a joy and honor to serve you all this year!

I love you.