

**Interim Appraisal Report**  
Unitarian Coastal Fellowship  
Morehead City, NC  
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Began: September 2021

Though this is technically halfway through the second year of my interim ministry here with the Unitarian Coastal Fellowship, this feels very much like that first six-month evaluation. The first year of my ministry here was almost entirely on Zoom, with no physical building and very little in the way of programming. Now it is finally possible to evaluate the congregation as it would be functioning under “normal” circumstances—not that the past year has really been normal for anyone! The past six months have seen the congregation finally living into those hopes and dreams that were stymied by their previous facility and developing the needed processes and procedures for the new campus. Maintaining a campus twice the size of the previous one as well as putting on all the programming they couldn’t in the past has been challenging for a small congregation with an already stretched volunteer force.

### **Goals of the Interim**

The Unitarian Coastal Fellowship’s stated goals in their Congregational Record were, if memory serves, to:

- Move into their new building
- Grow
- Expand their RE program

The only one of these goals that’s actually attainable during an interim period is the first one: moving into the new building. The other two we can take steps toward, but they will not be accomplished during the interim.

In addition to working on the five developmental goals of the interim, there has been some work done to analyze the system and determine what, if anything, needs to be changed before the new minister arrives. Most of the work that has needed to be done has been administrative: transitioning to a payroll service; introducing staff supervision and evaluations; transitioning to Google for Nonprofits in order to take advantage of a variety of tools; in general, taking administration from something that was largely informal and done by volunteers to something more professional.

Now, the work that remains:

- Clarify decision-making processes (governance) so that the different parts of the system understand who “owns” which decisions
- Preparing the congregation for the culture shift that needs to occur in order to grow the congregation and the RE program
- Helping the congregation financially stabilize so that they can have the professional staff they need in order to grow the congregation and support a growing RE program
- If the two goals above are not possible, preparing the congregation for that reality

There is some of the usual resistance to change (generally expressed in a sort of wistfulness about the way joys & concerns used to be, or when the congregation felt “small and cozy”), but the strong leadership and high spiritual and emotional maturity means there is at least a high intellectual understanding of the need for change, especially if they are to grow and attract more younger people.

## **The Role of the Minister**

Twenty years ago, a survey found that administration and fundraising were the least important ministerial functions to this congregation. Most important were preaching and spiritual care. This has borne out today in a congregation that actively discourages the minister from taking too active a role in financial matters (the minister is not allowed to know who donates

how much) and that views the minister as being the foremost spiritual authority.

The minister has **a lot** of authority here! The congregation respects that the minister has specialized training and knowledge, and this translates to a great deal of authority. That is not the same as power; though the minister does not lack power here, a great deal of power also rests in the committee chairs and “supervolunteers” who oversee certain areas of the church. They are respected as people who have put in a great deal of time, energy, and in some cases their own money, and the congregation’s deep relationality means that people are also reluctant to upset each other by confronting one another directly. There is also a question here as to how well the congregation understands the idea of “shared ministry,” where the minister is not a heroic leader figure but rather someone who empowers the congregation—and its individuals—as ministers in their own right, in their own way.

This strong belief in ministerial authority has made it relatively easy for me to do my work here, and the congregation itself is wonderfully flexible and adaptive.

An interesting note: though the congregation is structured like a program-sized church, with a policy-based Board, a Leadership Council, and “cells” of committees, they’re also very pastor-centered. Many membership duties rest almost entirely on the minister, from creating the new member classes to assigning members to “Thoughtful Gatherings” small group ministries. The lay pastoral care team was at loose ends because pastoral needs were almost always communicated directly with the minister. The annual “census” of the congregation relied heavily on the minister, who “knew everyone.” Even now, when someone misses church more than a few times, it is the minister (myself) who notices and reaches out to check on that person. New visitors/members reach out directly to the minister to ask about calendar events or pastoral care because they assume the minister “knows everything”--and it’s not always clear to an outsider who *is* the person who is in charge of a particular event.

In relation to the rest of the staff, the staff were largely left to be self-directed. This made sense when staff members were usually “supervolunteer” members of the congregation who often donated their salaries right back to the congregation, but with newer staff members who actually think of themselves as staff, it has resulted in resentment and burnout.

The rest of this report will address the five developmental tasks of interim ministry.

## **A Short and (Largely) Happy History**

The story that the congregation knows is this:

In 1980, a man named Riley Stone put an ad in the local newspaper looking for other Unitarians in town. This group of Unitarians first met at his condo, then at the Webb Library, then at the Galley Stack restaurant (owned by now-Board President Susan Fetzer’s family), then at “the little white church” at 1300 Evans Street, and now at the new campus at 2900 Bridges Street. The Unitarian Coastal Fellowship has always been on an “onward and upward” trajectory, aspiring to bigger and better things, and become a visible presence in the community. We call ourselves “the UCF family” and pride ourselves on being a cozy, friendly congregation.

Some lesser known stories in the congregation:

- We are the Unitarian Coastal Fellowship, and not the Unitarian Universalist Coastal Fellowship, because some of the original charter members felt very strongly that they were Unitarians, not Unitarian Universalists. (These were people who were Unitarians previously, pre-merger.)
- One of the Fellowship’s previous contract ministers, in the 90s, felt so strongly that the name of the congregation ought to be changed to the Unitarian Universalist Coastal Fellowship, that she reportedly

sowed dissension amongst members of the congregation. Her contract was not renewed.

- Speaking of which, the Fellowship has not always been of one mind about things! The Fellowship was not of one mind about calling a full time minister (“We don’t want to lose the variety in our services!” and “Can we afford it?”); the Fellowship was also not of one mind about selling the 1300 Evans Street property and moving to a new, larger facility. However, they have a good history of talking things through and reaching a consensus before moving forward.

Though there has been conflict in the past, there is little institutional memory of it now. There is also little institutional memory of a previous interim minister who was here before Rev. Sally B. White was called. Most of the leadership now—save for one or two long-time members—are people who arrived during Rev. Sally’s tenure, and so have no direct memory of anything that happened before.

### **Who Are We Today?**

**The facts** describe a congregation somewhere between family and pastoral size, with fewer than 100 members and an average Sunday morning attendance of 50. The congregation is small enough that everyone can have (and many expect) a relationship with the minister, and the members all know each other. The congregation is reliant on the minister for spiritual development, pastoral care, membership needs, and cohesion.

**The aspiration** is that of a program-sized congregation. Both the physical infrastructure and the governance infrastructure are designed to grow into: meeting rooms for multiple committees; classrooms wait for children to fill them. There’s talk of hosting coat drives, film series, blood drives, concerts, and dances. This congregation wants to be known throughout the county; as their current vision states, they want to be a **visible presence** in the community.

The congregation as it is may find itself frustrated trying to live up to its aspirations. A program-sized congregation, with more than twice as many members, would likely be better-resourced and have more staff to support all this programming. There would be a sexton to help with setting up and breaking down before and after events and a church administrator to help with calendaring and communication. Currently, the minister is the only full-time staff member, and the congregation is reluctant to ask the minister to do too much. Is the congregation doing too much? Should the minister be doing more?

In relation to the surrounding community, I'm not sure the Unitarian Coastal Fellowship is truly aware of the place it can occupy in the local ecosystem. This is a **weird** place for a Unitarian Universalist church: the county is largely rural, there's no university, and the surrounding area is overwhelmingly conservative, to the point where the county line has a sign reading "THE REPUBLICAN PARTY WELCOMES YOU." It's not unusual to see Confederate flags here, or cars with bumper stickers that proclaim DON'T BLAME ME, I VOTED FOR TRUMP. Many of the current members breathe a sigh of relief as they talk about how they found this "oasis" of a congregation where they can rest easy with "like-minded" people. This is where the tension is, for this community: do they want to lean into their "liberal" identity in the hopes of attracting more "like-minded" people? Or do they want to remain dedicated to pluralism and rationality, welcoming to "all kinds" of people as long as they are dedicated to Unitarian Universalist values of inclusion, diversity, and justice? Are these mutually exclusive? Can we be dedicated to pluralism while also ensuring that the marginalized are centered and protected?

There are many, many people in this county and in the surrounding counties for whom this could be a life-saving community. I have heard stories from locals who:

- Have never met older queer people and would love to "meet some older queer people my parents' age."
- Found out about Unitarian Universalism online and searched for a local church convinced that there was **no way** there could be one

here because they believed the county was too conservative and too Christian to support a UU church

- Visited the church and were pleasantly surprised to see “so many old people...because in my experience, old people are more close-minded.”
- Had never experienced a religion that wasn’t about “building walls...religion should open us up.”
- Had never experienced a church that did not shame them.
- Had never experienced a church that encouraged them to ask questions or gave them the tools to discern their own spirituality, rather than simply being told “the answer.”
- Were moved to tears by the EV charging station outside and the hand towels in the bathrooms because they had never encountered a church that took a stand on environmental issues.

UCF is in the unique position of being one of the few liberal and/or pluralistic spaces in this county that not only will not shame someone—but will celebrate that person for who they are. This faith community assumes that people have the answers to their own spiritual questions and encourages critical thinking—something many people in this county have never experienced from a faith community. This LGBTQ-affirming, environmentally conscious faith community is unique in this county, and UCF should not only be proud of that, but screaming it from the rooftops. *What is holding us back from being loud and proud about who we are?*

An identity exercise (using post-it notes to generate a physical word cloud) revealed that the congregation has a very strong sense of itself as a “safe harbor”: the overwhelming plurality of post-it notes were about UCF being a tolerant, accepting, welcoming, inclusive, etc. In contrast, “justice” did not make it on the board at all except when it was encapsulated in something else (e.g. “dedicated to Beloved Community”). The congregation does not have a good sense of itself as a leader in the community or a courageous force, even though it absolutely should be. This congregation is perhaps too modest for its own good! Or does that modesty serve a function? If the congregation sticks its neck out—becomes more of that courageous,

countercultural leader in the community—does it risk losing that sense of safety?

### **Clarifying Boundaries with Staff; Awaiting New Leadership**

As with many small churches, the staff at this congregation were almost always members before I arrived. These member/staff people were “supervolunteers” who usually had multiple roles in the congregation and often donated their paycheck right back to the church. It’s only now that the congregation has staff members who think of themselves and function as staff members rather than “supervolunteers.” It has been work to teach the congregation that, for example, the office assistant does not know who needs printed copies of the newsletter; that information was not passed on to her, and she doesn’t know the congregation well enough to simply *know* who needs that. On the other side of the coin, it has also been work to teach staff members that they can have boundaries; they don’t have to allow themselves to be exploited by the congregation simply because their predecessor—who had a different relationship with the church—was happy to do more.

Meanwhile, the same handful of lay leaders do everything from organizing programming to cleaning the floors. There has already been some leadership turnover since I arrived, as people move on to different phases in their lives or decide that right now, they need a break. So far, none of this leadership turnover has been insurmountable. We have asked some people back into leadership who took a break during the pandemic; I have also encouraged people to try to think beyond the same handful of leaders that always get asked to do something, to invite new people into the fold and mentor them into leadership. Sometimes people are just waiting to be asked! There are also, encouragingly, new members who are eager to integrate themselves into the life of the church.

Some members of leadership have been wondering: how do we mentor or encourage new people into leadership? How do we identify people with potential and make sure they’re given opportunities?



See above, “The Role of the Minister,” for my thoughts and observations on the role of the minister at this congregation.

## **Connecting to Unitarian Universalism**

This church has taken advantage of in the past and continues to take advantage of many regional resources, especially the leadership training opportunities. I’ve encouraged them to take advantage of more, such as a compensation consultant and also scheduling a meeting with a transitions expert from the region when leadership was discerning its options for ministry continuing forward.

As is the case in many Unitarian Universalist churches, for many of the present membership—and some of its leaders—this is the first and only Unitarian Universalist church they have ever been a part of and they are content to have this church be their entire UU world. They are often unaware of happenings at the UUA level. I’ve been informed this is also often the case with UU churches in the South, who often feel disconnected from the UUA and can even view “Boston” with suspicion.

Some changes are afoot to help UCF feel more connected to surrounding UU churches and the larger denomination, to remind them that they are not in the struggle alone and that the denomination exists to help them succeed. Some of these changes have been organic: the Board briefly explored sharing a minister with the New Bern UU Fellowship, and though they ultimately chose not to pursue that, they enjoyed meeting with New Bern’s leadership and are enthusiastic about future collaboration. Let’s hope it follows through. Next, I have been enthusiastic about bringing Our Whole Lives to the region, collaborating with the eastern North Carolina UU clergy cluster to bring an in-person training to the area. As a matter of fact, New Bern UU and the Unitarian Coastal Fellowship are co-hosting the event, and I’m hopeful that it will be energizing and validating for UCF to host 20 UUs and UCC from across the Southeastern region of the United States and feel part of something much, much bigger! I am also

encouraging more pulpit supply from UU ministers in other parts of the state, such as Rev. Lisa Garcia-Sampson of UUJNC, who can open the congregation's eyes to the possibilities of what their congregation can accomplish.

When a new change or program is proposed, people often ask, "How do other UU churches do it?"

## **A Vision for the Future**

I return to the questions that I asked in the **Identity** portion of this appraisal:

Do they want to lean into their "liberal" identity in the hopes of attracting more "like-minded" people? Or do they want to remain dedicated to pluralism and rationality, welcoming to "all kinds" of people as long as they are dedicated to Unitarian Universalist values of inclusion, diversity, and justice? Are these mutually exclusive? Can we be dedicated to pluralism while also ensuring that the marginalized are centered and protected?

I don't expect these questions to be answered during the interim; I don't expect them to be answered ever, because I don't believe they're really answerable. It's a tension that Unitarian Universalists live into all the time, everywhere—but especially here, a small town in the rural South, where everyone knows everyone else, people rely on each other, and the dominant culture is one that's proud of tradition and suspicious of change and outsiders. However, UCF will have to begin answering some of these questions as they decide how they want to show up in the world—especially if they want to grow.

In all likelihood, we will spend the next (last) year of the interim developing a strategic growth plan, a large part of which will be outreach to the community. In order to conduct successful outreach, however, UCF will need to be very, very clear on their purpose, message, and target audience. Who are we trying to reach? What are we trying to tell them?

Why is any of this important? The answers to those questions are what will excite people to join this community—and then UCF will be able to step into its place as a **visible presence in the community**.

## **In the Short Term**

Between now and General Assembly, the Board's main goals are:

- **Achieving financial stability:** running a successful stewardship campaign to see if the congregation is able to back its goal of supporting a full-time minister for the indefinite future
- **Clarifying questions around identity and vision/mission:** while the congregation is eager to discuss what they want to see in a new minister, they must first do the critical work of knowing who they are and where they're going, so that they can truly select the right minister to guide them
- **Putting together a Search Committee:** while the Board has the ability to appoint a Search Committee for contract minister purposes, they may still want the congregation to elect this committee in order to feel invested in the process

The minister, meanwhile, will be guiding the Board through all of the above as well as engaging in fundraising and community outreach alongside regular ministerial duties. It's going to be a busy spring!