



Unitarian Church in Charleston

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# 2021 Annual Report

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# Minister's Letter

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Dear Members and Friends:

This has been an extraordinary year in the life of the Unitarian Church in Charleston. Of course, we have not been alone in the disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic brought. We do stand out though in our adaptability and resilience as a community, I think. Now, while we still mourn those we have lost, care for those who are sick, and take precautions to limit the spread of the virus, it feels that we have turned a corner. As I write today, our lives are beginning to open up and our community is returning to center. I will remember this as a year when church and community counted most and powerfully countered the fear and isolation that was the looming alternative. Thank you to each of you who was a part of that magic. What good folks you all are! I am grateful for this transition ministry we've shared.

This year was filled with meaningful work, accomplishment, and transformation. As you read through the annual report, you will no doubt see a remarkable accounting of accomplishments that took place despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic. I feel so proud of all the teams working to ensure that social justice, pastoral care, faith formation, worship, and all of our other ministries continue to touch lives, draw people more closely together, and orient toward things that matter. I would like to highlight though not those sorts of outcome-oriented accomplishments but our many accomplishments of method. I am amazed at how far we have come in the way we do things such that we're able to manifest our ministries more powerfully.

Let me first name a few examples of the kinds of practices I'm talking about. Some are obvious because they relate to technology. People of every generation learned how to Zoom like pros (turning the mute button on and off at mostly the right time!) We learned how other technologies from Sign-up Genius to Gmail to Google Drive to Instagram to Facebook could be platforms upon which we grow more connected with each other.

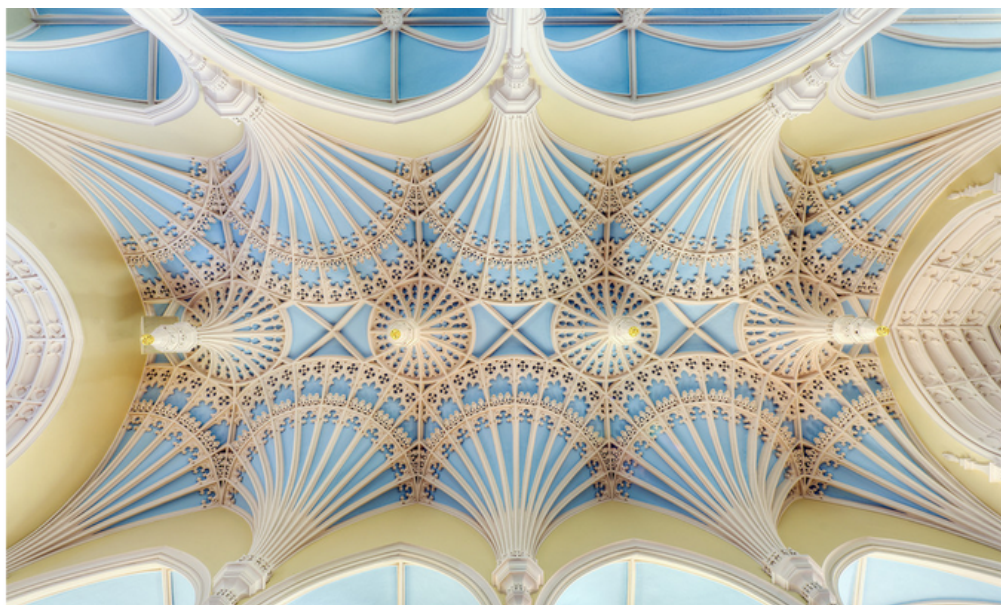
The connections that we were able to make with each other, I believe, were sustaining through this year, and also strengthened the human infrastructure of the church in a way that will resonate positively for years to come.

Others are more human practices at which we have become increasingly adept. They begin with more than ever making the extra effort to reach out to new folks who show up, and making sure that they feel seen and can find an entry point or two into the life of this church. They include the way that we speak to one another directly and gently when we have something important to communicate. The way that we raise our hands and ask for help when we need it, in the confidence that we will be received with kindness. They include taking up leadership roles where there is a vacuum or where we feel called. They included working together in the dance of shared ministry--making space for congregants, staff, and ministers to all play a cooperative part. We are also ever more agile in the way that we readily circle up and vulnerably share the stories of our minds, bodies, and spirits.

I invite you to consider what new and deepened practices have been at the forefront for you this year. I invite you to share those with one another. When we name good practices, we do the helpful work of perpetuating them.

There are many promising new opportunities for this church on the horizon. You will welcome your new settled minister, come back to regular in-person worship, make hybrid participation a natural part of doing church, receive new cohorts of members looking for a resurgent sense of community amidst the new normal, extend the justice-making impact on the community through ever-widening circles of partnership, and make new friends all along the way. I am so excited for you and wish you every blessing in this next chapter ahead.

**In faith,  
Rev. David H. Messner  
Interim Minister**



## From the Executive Director

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This year brought great challenges along with wonderful opportunities. The learning curve for tech and new ways of doing church was full speed ahead while the new normal of working from home and not gathering in person allowed us space to start (and complete) some big new endeavors.

With the Ministerial Search Committee working to find our Settled Minister, we agreed that a new website would be a value add. I contacted multiple organizations and studied new trends in the world of website communications and we ended up finding a good match with a company called [launchpad.faith](#). Specifically, I worked with a fellow UU on their team named Fred Holland and he agreed that the ideal website is one that brings new people in. We felt that photos along with smart, informative and concise information was key.

The world is evolving ever-more to being visual and we are quite fortunate that we have a visually beautiful story to tell with our church. You will find that the website is no longer where we house all church documents and internal communications. This is also a sign of the times. We will be working more and more with using shared drives (i.e. Google drive) for communications between committees, staff and the Board and relying on the website to be the gateway for introducing people to our mission and community.

We will also be expanding our Social Media reach. Regina Ruopoli has done a wonderful job of launching our member Facebook page and updating our Instagram page. We have found that the member Facebook page has been tremendously successful as a resource for getting events and ideas out to our community. Member and photographer, Kate Timbers has taken new (and amazing) photos for both the website and Instagram. Look for more those in the coming weeks. Regina has also continued working with our newsletter and weekly calendar of events email that is sent on Tuesdays. She has done a very good job streamlining all of these various platforms for us.

I am also very happy to tell you that we have integrated with a new Church Management System. For years we acclimated to a less than ideal database and felt the time was right for a change. We purchased Breeze CHMS last summer and I worked to create the new system which includes all back-end data (contact, financial, calendar, committee members, etc.) Christine Magnarella Ray was key in the success of ensuring the financial categories and information was integrated as we wanted. Together, we have created a significantly better system and we look forward to growing it more. We have opportunities to include a lot of volunteer tracking that will be very helpful for our committees and activity groups as we return to being together in-person.

*contd.*



## *From the Executive Director contd.*

Previously, I mentioned Christine who was hired as our new Bookkeeper in February of 2020. She has worked as a contract Bookkeeper for a number of years and wanted to return to an office setting and have the benefit of working together with fellow staff members. We laugh that this was about 3 weeks before the world shutdown with COVID-19. Fortunately for us, Christine did not retreat with the pandemic and has really taken charge of our financial systems. We have worked very well together in updating our procedures, accounts, passwords, shift to online banking, opening new money markets to get the most return on our investments, and much more. Christine has been able to convert our system in to QuickBooks, which has resulted in a simply enormous shift in our functioning and reporting.

I continue to work closely with the Vestry Board and Minister which is a particularly rewarding part of my job. We were able to complete updates on the Constitution and reimagine our organizational chart this year. Both of which will continue to streamline our functions and help the church grow and thrive. I am particularly proud of the new organizational chart as it allows for the staff to have continued professional accountability and authority. The hope is that this will allow for our congregants to enjoy leadership with joy and creativity without feeling the weight or burden of having to steer the ship or recreate procedures, messaging, etc. With freed up time, we can create opportunity for action, connection and fun! I also thoroughly enjoyed my work with our Treasurer, Ren Manning. He is a truly committed and dedicated leader and steward of our church.

The new org chart has me working with a number of committees very closely. This year, the most active committees that I worked with were the Auction Committee, Churchyard, Finance, Stewardship and Personnel.

All of these committees have wonderfully talented and committed members. We had great successes this year and I look forward to continuing and expanding these next year.

I work closely with Danielle Lopez and we enjoy bouncing ideas off of one another, and as my fellow full time staff mate I am grateful for her dedication, contributions and creativity. I am in constant awe of Susan Conant's talent and energy and am so very pleased to work with both Regina and Christine. They have such unique talents and gifts. We are truly a strong staff team. I am looking forward to hiring a newly envisioned Sexton position. I have actually split the position in to two. One will be a position hired to be there Fridays and Saturdays to help with the set-up of furniture, help with the Docents, perform general maintenance tasks (change air filters, light bulbs, etc.) and be onsite for additional duties on those days. We will then be hiring a Sunday Hospitality Manager. This person will assist with general set-up and tear-down and oversee coffee hour. Susan Findlay will also continue to work as our wedding and funeral coordinator. Sue is a pleasure to work with and by all accounts to those that walk through our doors during great moments of joy and sorrow.

I am grateful for Rev. Dave's leadership over the past two years. He has brought new ideas and teachings that have been beneficial to us all. He also brought an energy and dedication that left failure simply off the table when COVID-19 hit. I am particularly thankful for that.

A special thanks to our Ministerial Search Committee.

They are an impressive team that worked diligently to find us a wonderful match for our next Settled Minister. I am very much looking forward to working with Rev. Rebecca and seeing how our next chapter will unfold.

**Sandra Selvitelli**  
Executive Director





## From the Director of Community and Faith Development

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This year my role changed from Director of Religious Education to Director of Community and Faith Development. It's a mouthful and I want to make sure everyone understands the context of my new role. Let's begin with the first part, Director of Community. I genuinely believe in the power of a strong, vibrant church community. But I also know that it takes work to make sure a community can flourish. Therefore, while the growth of membership is important, I believe we must also pay close attention to the health of the existing community. This leads to the next part of my title, Director of Faith Formation. Our faith is unique in that we truly value lifespan faith development.

Let me highlight three important and exciting successes in relation to the ministry of community and faith development.

### **Adult Faith Formation**

My work as the Director of Community and Faith Development is to curate programs and spaces to encourage personal and spiritual growth. The value of community and faith formation is thread through each of our Unitarian Universalist Principles. By tending to a healthy and vibrant community, we are better able to live our faith in everyday, welcoming ways. We open ourselves to new and creative ideas and ways of thinking that may not come naturally.

We provide spaces to ask questions and learn together. We lift up the power of worshiping as a community. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles are guides for how we live our life.

I am thrilled with how many programs we were able to offer this church year. Each month was filled with different offerings to meet the diverse needs and interests of our church community. The Religious Naturalism Group offered both virtual meetings and safe outdoor gatherings that explored parts of our beautiful city. Reverend Dave's weekly Bible study and Buddhism study offered a space to explore rich religious texts in an inclusive and welcoming way. The group even had attendees from different regions! Gary Smith continued to lead a weekly virtual Meditation group that offered an intentional space for quiet reflection. Simon Lewis worked with community members to plan weekly Forum sessions that covered everything from Bob Dylan to Gadson Creek to the 8th Principle. The Connecting Circles and Men's Group continued to meet and a few new ones formed to foster spiritual needs in small groups. The book groups also continued to meet and embrace new members.

Together, our church members and leaders helped our Adult Faith Formation portfolio grow and expand to meet the needs of our community during a time of uncertainty.

*contd.*



## *From the Director of Community and Faith Development contd.*

### **Living Our Faith in the Community**

As society was slowly coming out of quarantine, we looked for ways for our members to safely be together while also living our faith in the local community. A few wonderful projects happened as we took chances and tried things out together. The youth group met with church member Paul Garbarini to learn about the true history of one of our local plantations, McLeod Plantation. The Religious Naturalism group led events such as boat tours of the marsh, bird watching walks, and explorations of local parks. These activities were open to all and several new members attended as a way to meet long time members of the church. The church collaborated with a local city program, Keep Charleston Beautiful, to host a marsh clean up. The city program provided clean up materials and we simply showed up and got to work. This was an all ages activity and attracted families and community members. Our Social Justice committee, Reverend Dave, and myself worked together to add a Blessing Box to our church grounds. This is a permanent fixture and will be a wonderful way to give back to the community around the church. I am excited to continue to find new ways to be an active part of our local community.

### **Meeting the Needs of Families**

A valuable lesson we learned this past year was to give grace and space to the families as they navigated the world of virtual learning, social distancing, and long days at home.

As a church we continued to provide a time in worship for the whole family by continuing to feature a consistent Time for All Ages. As the leader of faith formation I experimented with other ways to meet the needs of families including mailing at home activity packets and sending cards. I also send consistent emails with updates and reminders. The biggest message I wanted to send was to let the families and youth know that we care for them and we will always be here when they need us as a community.

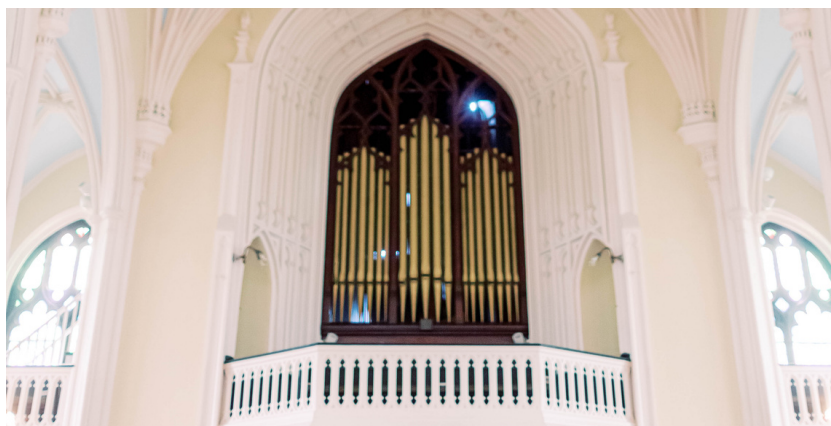
Looking ahead, I am excited to reimagine some of our children and youth programming as we reopen in the future.

### **Closing Note**

We have learned a lot over the past year and it is important that we highlight our successes and learn how to move forward and thrive in the next church year. I am thrilled to collaborate with Reverend Rebecca Hinds next year to continue to grow and foster our community and faith development.

**Danielle Lopez**  
**Director of Faith and Community Development**





## From the Music Director

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During this church year, our music program met with many challenges brought on by the pandemic. Our past goals of bringing as many folks as possibly together to make and listen to a joyful noise morphed into keeping folks safely apart while still finding ways for them to make and listen to music together. As our team members became vaccinated and CDC guidance changed, we responded by providing ever-increasing opportunities to safely make music together in-person. The added responsibility for managing the technical aspects of the on-line Sunday services fell to the music team. This included responding to the demand to set up hybrid methods of broadcast within the Zoom platform.

Our 2020–2021 Music Team consisted of the Music Sharing Circle (mostly our Choir members); our outside professional musicians that included accompanists Richard White Jr. and Bill Gesin, plus a host of professional musicians representing many genres and cultures; our tech team with Jeremy Holenko as main technician, the Music Committee headed by Diane Boyer and our Music Director, Susan Conant.

We created a diverse, equitable and inclusive set of performances and participation opportunities that included:

- Weekly music for Sunday services
- Weekly Music Sharing Circle
- Two outdoor drum circles, one outdoor concert and music for the all-church parades
- Online workshops featuring special guests
- Two weeks of in-person choir
- Music video productions utilizing our choir in a virtual setting
- Music video productions by individuals
- Music video productions that accepted contributions from the whole congregation

As a result of these activities we accomplished these results:

- Invited more than two dozen professional musicians (both local and national) to play for Sunday service during a period when most other performance opportunities had evaporated.
- Created over 45 music videos for our library.
- Kept our core team of accompanists and technicians together and ready to start regular church back in the Fall.
- Created a strong communal bond within our Choir and member musicians, increased their skills as individual musicians and added more repertoire to address our core principles. All this in anticipation of bringing the Choir back stronger than ever as we return to in-person church.
- Upgraded equipment, set up a tech team and protocols for presenting on-line and hybrid church through the Zoom platform including presenting the best possible quality live and recorded music via this platform.

**Susan Conant**  
Music Director





**CHARLESTON**

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**UNITARIANS**



## Social Distancing Memories

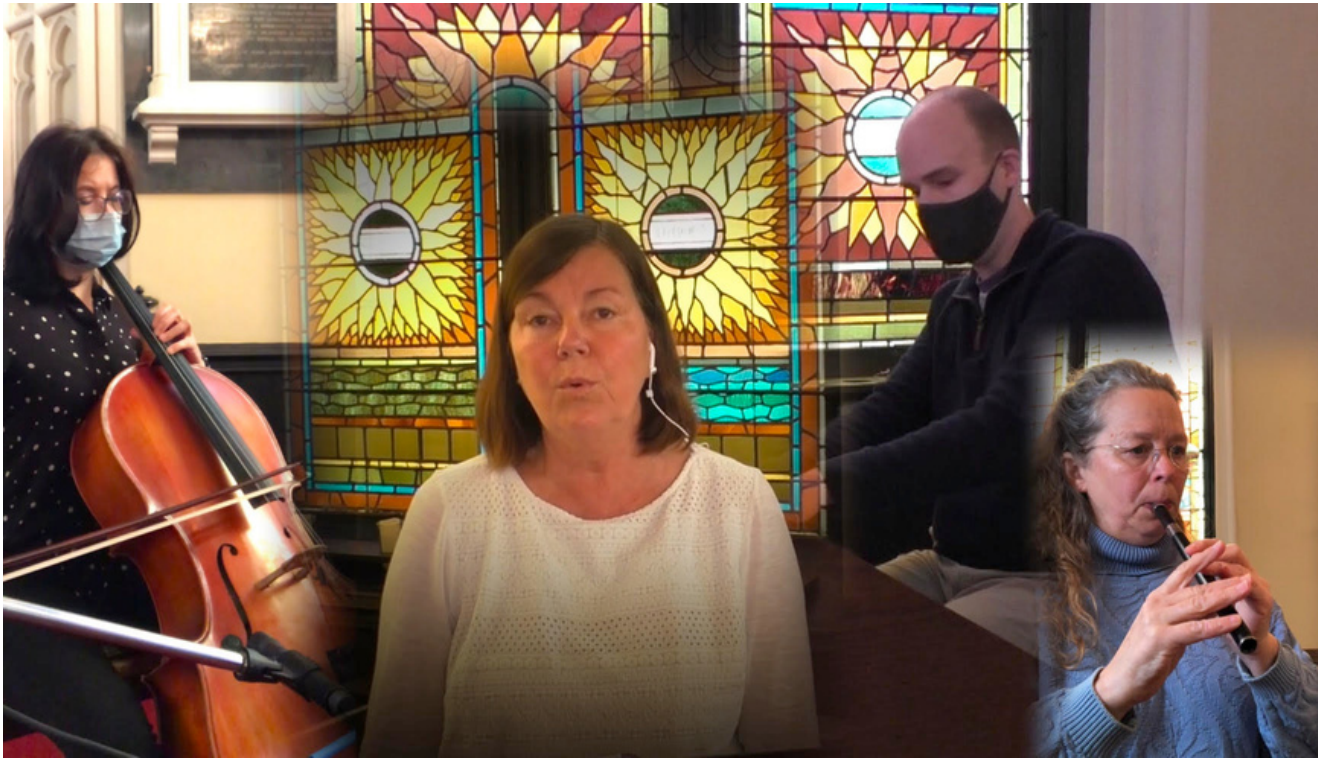
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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we found creative ways to connect with each other, whether it was a drive-by Water Blessing or Easter Parade, nature outings, outdoor concerts, drum circles, working together in the Churchyard, marsh clean-ups, and of course video conferencing via Zoom.

Our community continued to connect, grow and nurture each other in new ways we had never imagined before.























UNITARIAN CHURCH  
IN CHARLESTON

Est. 1772

The Unitarian Church in Charleston is an inclusive community of inspiration, love, and service committed to creating a better world. We seek to inspire, love and serve with open faith, open hearts and open minds! We're active in the struggle for racial equality, gender equality, sexual orientation equality, civil liberty, religious freedom and peace. We're the oldest UU congregation in the South, and the second oldest church in downtown Charleston, SC.

For more than two hundred years, The Unitarian Church in Charleston has welcomed those seekers of meaning and purpose who are not satisfied to search alone. We gather, not because we have found all the answers, but because we wish to question together.

All are invited to join us for Sunday services at 11 a.m.







## **Unitarian Church in Charleston**

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