

Annual Report 2019

Joseph Sittler was a beloved professor of religion at the University of Chicago. Following his retirement, Sittler continued an active life of scholarship and writing. As he approached his 80th birthday he composed a memoir, including musings on aging. In that collection he wrote, “old age is a time for summing up and letting go.” The same can be said of retirement. Now is the time for summing up and letting go of more than twenty years of friendship and common work between me and you, the people of the Chequamegon Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

First, I wish to express my gratitude to this congregation and to the genius of the Unitarian Universalist living tradition. With you and through you I have found my home spiritual home. A life-time of struggle and reflection on spiritual matter and theological concerns led me, accidentally it would seem, to the doorstep of Unitarianism. Already a convinced Universalist, the threshold of modern Unitarian proved to be an open door, and I have not only entered the front door, I have made it my home. This is immensely satisfying and along with my work at Northland College has become the great work of my life. I will ever be grateful for you and your invitation to become “a part time, occasional speaker” for the CUUF.

I suspect my own experience is not that unusual. The work of this congregation provides a liberal, affirming and progressive open door to many neighbors in northwestern Wisconsin. People find a home here with fellow travelers searching for a spiritual community that affirms a common and open search for meaning and purpose in life, that promotes justice and equity in society, that is multi-generational by design, that works hard to promote the use of reason and democratic processes in self-governance, that honors the natural world of which we are a responsible part. That’s who we are, and that’s what many are looking for in a church and religious community.

We have an imperative to serve this larger community while taking care of each other. As your minister I have tried to represent you to the larger region, providing pastoral care and ministry in your name to any who seek our support. The statistics of this ministry reflect that.

I have also tried to prove to this congregation that you can support a professional ministry to enhance spiritual leadership and congregational life. That has always been a primary goal in serving you. Now, after three years, I hope this experiment has proven the case. The success of these last three years is due to you – your support, work, and commitment. It’s not me, it’s you!

Now, after three years (and twenty years before that), it is time to make way for a new era of ministry for the CUUF. When I began my official service as you minister I identified three areas of critical importance: worship leadership, pastoral care, and religious education. I still believe those three areas form the heart and soul of the congregation. But, I have come to realize that fellowship and mutual support (hospitality) is equally important, followed very closely by administration support.

Summing up this past year of ministry includes some interesting statistics. I have averaged a little more than 13 hours of work each week (some weeks include almost 30 hours of work, some as few as 6). My work record shows this time almost evenly divided between worship, administration, pastoral care and communications (which included study and writing). I responded to interest in adult education by offering a course on “Death and Dying” and by sponsoring “The Other Sunday”. We are now offering opportunities to gather every Sunday of the month throughout the school year. I believe we need to continue that commitment.

The surprise for me is the amount of time dedicated to “administration”. Administration includes meeting with the Board and Board leaders, meeting with committees and members for planning, communicating with our Administrator, now Fellowship Assistant. Looking back, I think this dedication of time is inevitable and necessary to provide effective pastoral leadership for the congregation.

Letting go. I have come to love this congregation. I love you. So I care about what the future holds for you. I have areas of concern that I hope you will address. Religious education is a strength and a concern for the congregation. We have an amazing group of young members (from babies through Middle Schoolers) who will need effective programs to nurture and mentor them. We need more members to volunteer to teach and lead programs. And, we need volunteers to help us with Middle School and potentially High School programming. The congregation must continue its efforts to provide creative and meaningful worship services, study opportunities, pastoral care, and hospitality opportunities. And, the congregation will have to make decisions about managing growth, including the relationship with Northland College.

But, I cannot be part of those decisions and plans. You are ready for a new minister with new insights and fresh ideas. The ethics of pastoral transitions require me to withdraw and make way for a new minister. I look forward to hearing good things about this wonderful congregation, and the unique spiritual community you offer to our region. And, I’m not quite done yet. I look forward to the summer and fall as a wonderful time together, exploring the things that matter most, while celebrating our joys and healing our sorrows. Blessings and peace to you all.

David Saetre