

Annual Congregational Meeting Minutes – June 2023

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines

Annual Congregational Minutes

Sunday, June 4, 2023

Board Chairperson Reba Eagles provided opening words and chalice lighting. The meeting was called to order at 11:19 a.m. by Moderator Bill Brauch. Bill Brauch outlined the process that would take place as this was a Zoom as well as in person meeting. He thanked several members for their assistance today including staff Emily Petty's help with on-line.

Board Chairperson Reba Eagles recognized all the Board members for their efforts this year including Sally Merritt, Crystal Loving, Jeremy Guenther, LeeAnn Back and Kevin Boeckholt. She recognized and thanked the retiring members: Greg Nichols, who provided thoughtful, insightful support, his intelligence and diplomatic manner assisted the Board in reaching reasonable solutions: Fern Stewart, provided kindness, creativity as well as teaching in the RE program, her heart is on the pulse of the church with dedication and quiet dependability; and lastly Andrea LeMeuse, who served on the LENS committee, speaks from the heart with truth and clear vision, while life has offered her challenges during her term, she has found time to be with us when we needed her, she loves this church.

Chairperson Eagles noted that everything the Board accomplished this year was based on the goals established by the congregation about what matters most. Those goals were: building community; stewarding resources and engaging our congregation. She thanked Walter Pearson for his leadership in re-establishing the adult religious education program. This fall the Board will establish new meetings to engage in the goal setting process once they have met with Interim Minister Rev. Meredith Garmon.

Chairperson Eagles invited members to participate in the UUA General Assembly, scheduled for June 21-25 in Pittsburgh, with attendance in person or virtually. Member Linda Lemon will be participating, leaving seven available.

Scott Emison Clair, Interim Search Committee, thanked the following members who served on the committee: Crystal Loving, Doug Aupperle, Elliott Nassif, Shelly Kaldenberg and Steven Herwig. He thanked Gene McCracken for his questions submitted earlier in the week. He explained the process included meeting with Rev. Safford three times, the UUA two times, interviewing two of the applicant's references, reviewing the applicant's ministerial record, two two-hour interviews with the applicant and reviewing past sermons. The Committee recommended him for the Interim Minister position based on the congregation's communicated key areas of focus. Fostering community, Rev. Garmon stressed the importance for us as a congregation to live into our mission, asking if we were growing ethically and spiritually, if we were serving justly and loving radically. He fostered community by starting up journey groups, similar to our Soul Matters, in which he expects to broaden participation. Pastoral Care, the candidate currently partners very closely with the Pastoral Care Team and was willing to respond to emergency calls. He would collaborate with congregational members on arranging ways for members to care for each other. He has a pastoral presence, calm, centered, not anxious. When asked how to handle grief in the congregation, he responded how conflict manifests in congregations, one needs to be intentional, one needs to recognize loss, naming this isn't there anymore, this happens in life. I don't get over it, but I do heal. Growth, one of his

references stated he was inspiring and brought it to every service. He focuses on developing our spiritual journeys, including his core use of meditation. He said what you need is to make church a place that is good for your congregation and growth will happen. He emphasized his belief in growing the depth versus the numbers of our congregation and paying attention to caring for our current members. Leadership strategies should be fun versus sense of duty, make it meaningful and fun on the path forward. Scott Emison Clair introduced Rev. Garmon to the congregation via a previously recorded video.

Vice Chairperson Sally Merritt announced the UUnsung award for 2023 and described her many contributions including unending service to the church, the community working tirelessly to help others, creative, kind, well organized, fun, energetic and full of enthusiasm. The UUnsung award goes to Elaine Imlau. Elaine has overseen Family Promise coordinating over 50 volunteers and involving 300 hours of time. She solicited donations, ran the auction, and followed up with individuals hosting and being hosted for the annual The Food Fair Fun event. She is involved in the refugee efforts and getting others involved in the process. And, most recently she has volunteered to serve on the Kitchen Care Team. Her outreach to Elaine, AR demonstrates her commitment to kindness, truth, and justice. Thank you, Elaine.

Vice Chairperson Sally Merritt announced a special Extraordinary Reward for this year to recognize two volunteers whose devotion to the youth RE program kept it alive and thriving. They worked through COVID, making religious education more relevant, more intergenerational, recognizing its importance for our children. Anne Stamper and Chelsea Hayes were called out for their outstanding efforts and success in bringing religious education to our church. They recognized the need for a vibrant program, with or without staff assistance, countless hours to class curriculum, providing supplies, training, and providing leadership for the OWL program. Theirs is not a highly visible path, but a most important one. One child, one teacher, one pen, one book can change the world. Thank you, Anne and Chelsea.

Alice Stewart, Director of Finance and Administration and Eileen Jackson, Financial Oversight Committee (FOC) Chair provided the Financial Report. They explained the year 2023 was a benchmark year for most organizations in the country, having come out of the pandemic and establishing the new normal. At First Unitarian, our benchmark was moving away from two years of year-round pledging and returning to an annual pledge campaign. Confusion and frustration may account for the slight lag in contributions, as of April we should be seeing 83.3% instead of the 80.2% currently. The fundraising revenue target was \$15,000 and we surpassed that collecting \$18,000 so far. Expenses were half a percentage point above budgeted, which reflects the efforts to keep expenses in line. Other receipts, especially our fundraisers, have been more successful than the previous year. In summary, we should exceed budgeted revenues by the end of the fiscal year. Overall, expenses were lower than expected, final fiscal year expenses should be either at or just below budget. Ms. Jackson stated the endowment funds amounted to \$736,177.00, the Noble Fund was \$16,148.

Bill Brauch stated total membership as of today totals 394 members, 15% quorum will require 60 individuals; 119 in the room and 9 zoom accounts were on-line. We do have a quorum. He proceeded to review the process for participation, voting in the room and on-line.

Minutes for the Annual Congregational held June 5, 2022, were approved as presented.

Gene McCracken motioned to amend the agenda by moving the Faith in Action Partners item to after the budget discussion. Sue Huber seconded. Via voice and online vote: Motion passed.

Annual Elections: Fern Stewart announced the three nominees for the Board of Trustees: Natalie Mason, Walter Pearson, and Kathryn Sutton. Gene McCracken requested, according to the by-laws, including Jeremy Guenther as a nominated Board of Trustee member due to his appointment mid-year to fill a vacancy. There were no nominations from the floor, elected by acclamation.

Fern Stewart announced the two nominees, Lori Emison Clair and Allan Kneip were nominated to serve on the Endowment Committee. There were no nominations from the floor, elected by acclamation.

Reba Eagles stated this was not the budget that we had hoped to have and provided a background for the proposed budget. She explained upon Rev. Safford's arrival in the fall, the Board, the minister, and the Stewardship Committee to create a timeline to get as much input and as many voices involved. In early November, leadership support and committee chairs were asked what they would need to create their ideal year. In early January, with a budget of over \$700,000, although aspirational, not realistic, the Board made initial cuts to make it more in line. In late January and early February, two meetings were held to discuss with the congregation what the budget looked like and what it would take to accomplish it. Input was appreciated and taken into consideration. In late March, the Stewardship campaign had launched and by mid-April we were 64% short of where we wanted to be. Two additional budget meetings were held for further input and discussion of what the budget would look like by the members of the church. Intercom articles, special emails, postal letters were sent requesting pledges and increases to pledges explaining the shortfall. In early May, FOC weighed in on the budget reviewing potential cuts, and in mid-May the Board met again to review and with the FOC and minister made significant, dramatically painful cuts to the budget. Two additional meetings were scheduled thereafter to allow the congregation to review the updated budget and what it meant. Ms. Eagles then asked members who had attended any of the budget meetings to stand and noted all those standing, thanking them for their input, suggestions, and thoughtfulness. She described the Stewardship Team as capable, visionary, and commended them for their efforts. She summarized while the budget wasn't perfect, and we lack the money to donate, we have the opportunity to spend time together, to create relationships we need in the crisis we are faced with, if we are going to be a safe house for the Trans community, if we are to be a shining beacon for democracy, if we are going to be a welcoming station in the age of fascism, welcome to Iowa, and if we are going to be one of the few places people can go to experience free worship, we need to all be together. When I stand here, I see so much joy, so much potential, so many friends, we can concentrate on the feast right inside these walls. Next year we can put in the work of our mission on growing ethically and spiritually, it doesn't cost much but really pays off. Chairperson Reba Eagles made a motion to approve the budget for the 2023-24 year.

Discussion ensued regarding the potential of increased pledge income in the upcoming fiscal year. Chairperson Eagles noted additional income had been received and the goal of stewarding our resources, avoiding the past few years practice of running a budget in the red, not relying on our assets and providing a balanced budget was essential. She further explained once an excess of revenue things could be added back. Discussion continued regarding the cuts to the cleaning line item, Amos and Faith in Action programs, use of church assets and building on the momentum of increased attendance, the completed kitchen and on the wealth of the church as related to Endowment and the mortgage retirement from an anonymous donor.

It was moved by Kerry George to return to a second basket strictly for social justice and a designated drop down on Push Pay for Faith in Action partners, seconded by Harvey Harrison. Clarification was given that the funds would require the creation of a restricted fund and

therefore would not be part of the current budget approval, two baskets would be passed, the first for the operating budget and the second for Faith in Action partners. Discussion included the initial use of two baskets, the impact on the service, the initiative of the Social Justice team to concentrate on one basket for social justice and the negligible operating fund donations.

Crystal Loving moved to amend the motion to split one basket with the proceeds half to Faith in Action and half to the general operating fund. The proposed budget would not change.

Discussion included the current budget allotted half to Faith in Action and the other half goes to Social Justice. Decisions made on the fly cannot be good decisions with the suggestion the Board review the budget in three to six months with the goal of creating more opportunities to fund social justice based on actual income. Current funding for Faith in Action partners funding ends in September. It was noted that the budget is a tool, it can be reviewed, and the Board can change it based on updated information.

Vote was on the amendment to the amendment, to split one basket with the proceeds half to Faith in Action and half to the general operating fund. Motion fails.

Sally Boeckholt moved to amend the amendment of one basket designating a quarter of funds to Social Justice, a quarter to Faith in Action and the other half to the general operating fund. No changes to the budget. A show of hand and online vote to amend the amendment: 52 yes, 41 no, Approved.

A vote on the amendment of one basket designating a quarter of funds to Social Justice, a quarter to Faith in Action and the other half to the general operating fund. No changes to the budget.

A motion was made to refer it to the committee, which was clarified would be the Board of Trustees. A show of hand and online vote: 53 yes, 29 no, Approved.

Discussion resumed on the budget.

Gene McCracken moved the Faith in Action item of \$1,000 be moved to zero and the \$1,000 be added to AMOS, seconded by Kerry George.

Discussion ensued regarding the removal of the line item completely, concern was voiced for those agencies who had applied for the funding. Support was voiced to maintain the current status and find additional ways to raise money for the line item. Disappointment was voiced by members regarding the reduction of the Faith in Action funds as well as support for adding the money to AMOS. Current funding goes through September. via voice and online vote: Motion fails.

Discussion included the need to show up at the congregational meetings as well as showing up with pocketbooks ready to support this church and its social justice initiatives. All in favor of the budget as presented. Via voice and online vote: Approved

The Faith in Action nominees were presented by Sue Huber: Al Exito, Clive Community Services, Family Promise, FreeStore, Iowa Trans Mutual Aid Fund and Just Voices. Elaine Imlau withdrew the Family Promise nominee. Dave Witke and Gene McCracken withdrew Al Exito from the nomination process. Vote: Iowa Trans Mutual Aid Fund and FreeStore adopted via voice and on-line vote.

Greg Nichols, Stewardship Committee, composed of Mike Merritt, Sally Boeckholt, Margaret Schultz and Adrian Stamper, reviewed the difficulty of having a solid revenue estimate from the results of the canvass and other fundraising activities and the challenges it places on the Board as they create the budget. The Stewardship, Congregational Life and the Governance committees discussed this difficulty for months resulting in the proposed amendment to the By-Laws addressing membership pledges. Currently, to be a member one must make a contribution, but nothing about a pledge or the ramifications if one doesn't pledge. He noted that approximately 30% of the members did not respond with a pledge. The proposed change requests they make a pledge each church year and they make a contribution of record towards that pledge. A policy was adopted by the Board which allows the minister to make exceptions for exceptional circumstances for those unable to pledge. It was clarified that a pledge is a communication to the church of what you intend to contribute. A contribution of record is a monetary contribution towards that pledge.

It was moved by the Stewardship Committee and the Board of Trustees to adopt the proposed Bylaw Amendment:

Article III: Membership

Section 1: Becoming a member

There shall be no creedal test, explicit or implied, for membership. Individuals who are 16 years of age or older may obtain membership status by ascribing subscribing to the purpose set forth by Article II (The Board of Union) and completing the following steps:

1. Participate in the path to membership process;
2. File a pledge and pay the first installment of the pledge; and,
3. Sign the Membership Book in the presence of a member.

Section 2: Continuing membership

- a. Membership continues as long as the member remains in covenant and has made a financial pledge and has paid a contribution of record toward that pledge during the fiscal year ~~(or has been granted a waiver)~~. A member is in covenant who honors our shared values (the Seven UU Principles and our Bond of Union) in our relationships with one another. Or
- b. The Senior Minister extends a congregant's membership as per policy.

Discussion regarding the timing of the payments, number of individuals affected by the change in the by-laws and concern for individuals unable to pledge. It was explained the UUA dues were no longer based on membership. As well as the need for the Board to have the means to create a more accurate budget by addressing the thirty percent who have not responded. This is not to remove members from the church but to clarify one aspect of responsibility to the church and its members.

Motion to close debate, via voice and online vote: Approved.

All in favor of the by-law amendment as presented, via voice and online vote: Approved

Vice Chairperson Sally Merritt thanked Bill Brauch for his moderator role in the day's meeting. She provided the closing reflection, and the meeting was adjourned at 1:36 p.m.