

To prospective ministerial candidates:

This is an exciting time for this congregation. They've worked hard during the interim process to gain a better understanding of who they are and where they need and want to go. They know there are real challenges facing churches like the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Milford, (UUCM) and they're exploring ways they can become more responsive, more relevant and more radically welcoming to a wider range of people. They're trying to make the shift from thinking of themselves as a spiritual community of like-minded people to an open-hearted community that wants to embrace diversity, inviting people to bring all of who they are to the table.

There is a strong group of leaders, including the Board and the Search Committee committed to this work. They realize the world is changing and that UUCM needs to respond to the changing needs of people looking for spiritual community, grounded in the gifts UUCM has to offer.

The Board facilitated a congregational process that led to the revision of the Congregation's Mission Statement. They've shifted the focus of their work toward more policy-based governance with the goal of focusing on mission/vision and policy development. The Congregation just affirmed a Covenant of Right Relations, that I hope will

provide them with some healthy guidelines they can use to deepen their relationships. The Board hopes to develop a policy of “Right Relations” that will shape the focus of the Committee on Ministry, which was disbanded when I arrived.

The Board helped organize a vigil in support for the Climate Strike this fall and a group has been gathering outside the church every Friday, (Fridays for Future) ever since. Strong leadership is helping this congregation focus both on its relationships within and beyond the walls of the building. That’s a very good thing.

Based on the pool of ministers interested in serving this congregation last year, the Search Committee suggested the congregation work with the webinar series developed by the Transforming Hearts Collective; “Transgender Inclusion in UU Congregations”. I’ve facilitated a couple of group discussions based on this series and am pleased to report that people are really engaging in the material, exploring the ways dominant culture plays out in UU congregations in general and at UUCM — helping folks see their relationships with each other and with newcomers in a new light.

There is a core group of folks that have belonged to UUCM for a long time, in some cases 20 years and longer, that think of UUCM as an extended family. These dedicated,

caring members keep the wheels of the church turning. The problem is the same people have been doing things the same way for years - creating a closed system. As these folks age they're getting tired. They want to turn over the reigns but they don't always seem to know how to do that. It can be hard to see the possibilities for doing things differently from the inside. They're beginning to understand that they're not always as welcoming, inclusive or open as they think they are -- but it's hard to know how to break out of old, well established patterns -- especially when those patterns have become such an important part of their lives.

I'd love to see this congregation find a spiritual leader who can help this congregation navigate the complexities of the changing cultural landscape, nurturing ministry that is relevant and meaningful for the congregation in a contemporary context. For this kind of ministry to bear fruit I think it will be important to engage with long-time members directly, helping them become more conscious of both the power they have in the congregation and the feelings of loss that are a natural part of change.

In general, this congregation responds well to energy, ideas and resources from outside the system that can help

them expand their way of thinking, doing and being together. They need those breaths of fresh air.

For example, the Music Director that had been serving UUCM for several years resigned in August. The Board decided to hire two musicians who are members as consultants to work together to cobble together a music program for this year. The infusion of energy these musicians are bringing to worship is palpable. One of the musicians invited a voice coach to offer a workshop open to the congregation. The quality and the confidence of the choir is much improved and the feeling is contagious. There's a lightness and joy in making music together that's new in my time here. In short, introducing a new way of doing music has brought new energy and spirit to the music program, to worship and to congregational life in general.

I've come to love this congregation. I try to appreciate everyone for who they are and the gifts they bring. I have compassion for those experiencing the loss of "the way things used to be". And I stand firmly with those who know this congregation needs to change if it's going to keep pace with the times, offering a vision of Unitarian Universalism grounded in love and justice. I wrestle with ways to offer pastoral support and prophetic witness.

I think this congregation will be well-served by a minister who can love them, challenge them and help them create linkages that can open up the system to new ways of being and a broader sense of vision.

Best wishes in your journey, wherever it takes you. You may be just the minister that can help this endearing congregation move towards a new chapter in their lives. They're longing for a minister who will walk with them on their journey.

Rev. Carol Strecker, Interim Minister