

Developmental Ministry Report  
Compiled by Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley, Developmental Minister  
May 19, 2024

## What is Developmental Ministry?

Developmental Ministry is a kind of Transitional Ministry in which a congregation identifies particular goals they are committing to develop and hires a minister to help them achieve these goals. The Developmental Minister may serve up to seven years with an annual renewal option of the contract at the end of each year. The Board will be voting to ratify my proposed contract for next year at their May meeting. The Developmental work and ministry are supported by a Transition Team made up of members: Deb Baillieul, Barb Fiorini, Rev. Suzan McCrystal, Cindy Whicker, and Jim Conlan. Their role at this early stage is to help me understand congregational dynamics and to be a sounding board for my efforts.

## How did we get here?

The last few years for the congregation have been challenging with multiple levels of conflict, particularly in regard to Rev. Marian Stewart's ministry which began in 2017. In 2019 a charge of abusive supervision of a staff member on her part was given to the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) who responded by placing Rev. Stewart on probation. During that probationary time two more charges were made by other staff members. Once the Board finally learned of these concerns they attempted to mediate these conflicts but due to the turmoil between her and staff, they placed Rev. Stewart on administrative leave, and within a week Rev. Stewart submitted her intention to retire. After a months-long and arduous negotiating process, a retirement agreement was negotiated by the Board with the understanding that Rev. Stewart's ministry in the congregation ended in August, 2022. A more detailed timeline of these events may be found here:

<https://firstuucolumbus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Timeline-Of-Departure.pdf> Rev. Kelli McNeal, the Minister for Congregational Life, assumed primary responsibility for the ministry of the church with the staff as a whole becoming a collaborative team.

Due to confidentiality concerns imposed by an ongoing review process by the MFC, the details of these occurrences could not be shared publicly until the spring of last year. This created chaos and distrust in the congregation, and the Board and staff felt traumatized by the ongoing conflict. Rev. Stewart's back-door communications with members of the congregation, both directly and indirectly, added to distress. At the request of the Board in the fall of 2022, the UUA's "Hope for Us" conflict team came in to work with the leadership, staff, and members of the congregation hoping to help heal some of these dynamics. This work culminated in two sharing sessions: first, on May 29, 2023, with the Board telling the congregation in more detail what had occurred and their responses. This session may be viewed here: <https://bit.ly/4byffsd> The staff also shared their experiences in a session with the congregation on July, 2, 2024. The recording of this may be viewed here: <https://bit.ly/3UTkb5u>

It should also be noted that all of the difficulties in the congregation cannot be laid solely at the feet of Rev. Stewart. There are always systemic dimensions to any conflict that we will be trying to come to terms with as part of our developmental work.

During this time, the congregation and Board also received support and guidance from Rev. Sunshine Wolfe, the Regional Field Staff person from the UUA assigned to this congregation. Ultimately, the UUA determined that due to the ongoing conflicts and distress that they would designate First UU as a "Special Care Congregation" meaning that the congregation cannot avail itself of UUA ministerial search services until substantial progress has been made in five goal areas.

The Board, Staff, and Reverend Wolfe then determined that the following goals would set First UU on a better path. These goals will shift over time as progress is made, but for now they are:

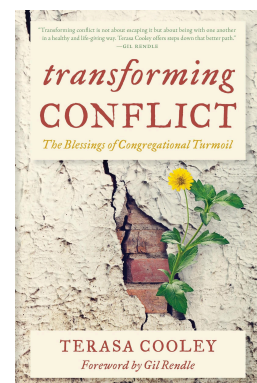
- Recovering from Rev. Stewart’s departure
- Improving Staff/Board relations
- Engaging in conflict resolution and transformation in all areas of church life
- Creating a covenant between members of the congregation who are ministers (both UU and from other denominations), the ministers, and the congregation itself
- Engaging in intentional work as a recovering congregation - i.e. a congregation that has experienced ministerial misconduct and challenging conflicts.

In November, 2023 the Board, Transition Team, and staff met with Rev. Wolfe to engage in a Developmental Ministry startup in which we discussed the goals in more detail as well as learning more about the nature of collective trauma, and how to have some of the difficult conversations that will need to be had. Rev. Wolfe and I shared some of the results of this gathering in this service: <https://bit.ly/3wlBiUd>

## Reflections About Where We Are

Before I address these specific goals I want to share my observations about the congregation and some strategies that I have utilized this year.

My area of speciality as a Transitional Minister (Developmental Ministry is one type of Transitional Ministry) is assisting congregations who are recovering from ministerial misconduct. This is the third such congregation I have served. My experience as a settled minister, a regional staff member, and UUA senior staff member has afforded me many experiences with congregations in distress. Out of these experiences. I



developed a book which offers ideas for understanding and working with conflict in a healthy way: <https://bit.ly/3wtyyUN>

My understanding of conflict transformation has led me to focus on four primary things this year: recovery from trauma — both institutional and individual; shared leadership; training in various conflict transformation methods; and opportunities for members of the congregation to connect with one another across generations and cultures by sharing their stories with one another. Below are links to services that further explain these concepts.

Collaborative Leadership - Oct 15, 2023: <https://bit.ly/3JXh5Hj>

Covenant and Community - Nov 5, 2023: <https://bit.ly/4bz6xd7>

Cycles of Growth and Change - Jan 28, 2024: <https://bit.ly/4aiUqQy>

Transformation - Feb 25, 2024: <https://bit.ly/3URJZPj>

Does the Story Have an Ending? Feb 11, 2024: <https://bit.ly/3K0smXr>

## Recovery from Trauma

I know from experience that people who have experienced trauma have far less capacity to engage in complex tasks and creative endeavors. Trauma engages the part of the brain that makes people reactive rather than responsive, self-protecting rather than connecting, and oriented toward the past rather than the future. Different people have unique responses to trauma, so these effects may vary in intensity. And, of course, in a congregation in which some people are intimately involved with the inner workings of the church and many are not, it would be easy for the majority of a congregation to generally know something disturbing has happened, but not feel much trauma at all. Trying to minister to this wide array of responses is challenging! Some want to push ahead and get going on the future, others are hardly ready for any movement. In this case, given that the leadership and the staff are those who were most traumatized by recent events, forward motion toward creative change can go only so far.

This is not meant as criticism of leaders or staff — they are incredibly committed and faithful people, but they have been through a lot of painful experiences. We practice congregational polity — meaning that the minister is not the only one responsible for decisions and choices, so it is important to move at the speed of the leadership, which requires time for the community to process. This has meant that my primary goal for this first year has been to create a sense of stability, to remind people why we are here, and to make space for healing.

## Shared Leadership

As stated above, we do not practice the kind of polity which puts the minister in charge of everything. At the basis of our faith is an understanding that leadership is a shared enterprise. That being said, there are different levels of authority and power in a congregation, and a minister, especially a senior minister, has considerable power.

Given the abuse of that power experienced with the previously called minister, there has been a desire among both the staff and the leadership to try to “flatten” the structure and create more collaboration. This means more emphasis on creating a culture of mutual respect in which each staff member may have specific areas of concentration, but we may also share aspects of different projects depending on specific skill sets and bandwidth.

My contract specifies that I am chief of staff, and the Board affirmed this status in October. But I try hard to carry this lightly. While it helps clarify some things, it also brings suspicion and distrust given that it was exercised badly in the past. Not only am I aware of this past history, I genuinely believe in collaborative leadership. People work best when they believe their work and their skills are valued. Teams work best when there is a constant interchange and creativity sparks. I can't say that I have always been successful at living into these values. I've made mistakes and we keep working through them. But I believe we are on our way toward a

more cohesive staff culture. This congregation is incredibly lucky to have such a dedicated and skilled group of staff and I'm grateful that they have remained despite the challenges they have faced. This is a statement that they wrote:

We have spent a lot of time in this first year of the Developmental Ministry focused on recovery from Rev. Stewart's departure. It has taken some significant time for us to be able to reflect on our experiences, and we are still working to identify and unlearn bad systems that were used as tools of manipulation.

We also are aware that we have work to do as a staff to repair broken relationships, rebuild trust with one another, and provide space for all of us to heal from the experiences that we shared in our staff sharing time with Hope for Us.

Through Hope for Us, we were able to identify the patterns and systems that were creating roadblocks for us in our work with one another and with our community. The work to heal these wounds continues as we know that it is not possible to heal from trauma overnight.

This developmental time has been instrumental in not only our own recovery, but also in reigniting our love and drive for this work. We are excited to continue working on our developmental goals together.

## Conflict Transformation Training & Implementation

Since this is a primary goal, as well as one of my priorities, I will reflect on this in the section below.

## Opportunities for the Congregation to Connect

Most UU congregations struggle with how to get various groups of the church to engage with each other. Connecting children, youth, young adults, young parents and older adults is extremely challenging given their different stages of life and interests. But it is possible to create a multigenerational, multicultural church — it just takes a lot of intentionality. One of the ways in which this can be achieved is by telling our stories to one another. In such processes we can discover what we have in common, as well as honor the uniqueness in each other. We have had story sharing practices in our worship services and there are storyboards in Beach Hall. These efforts are in their fledgling stages but we hope to grow them with intention.

### Goal # 1: Recovering from Rev. Stewart's departure

As stated above, everyone has their own individual experience of trauma and grief. Giving time for the healing of wounds has been essential. Sharing information in ways such as the staff and Board Sharing Circles created a new level of transparency that has helped enormously in restoring trust. But there are still simmering difficulties. Part of the purpose of the conflict transformation trainings and the work of the Covenantal Relations team has been to encourage healthy practices to engage in conflict and to facilitate difficult conversations. Increased attendance at Sunday services and programs, increased giving and a greater degree of energy experienced by many point to a degree of recovery. And we will continue to be attentive to the continued needs for healing.

### Goal # 2: Improving Staff/Board Relations

In the previous ministry, staff were isolated from one another as well as from the Board. And given that staff were not included in the difficult decisions the Board had to make regarding Rev. Stewart, distrust developed between the staff and Board. There is still a lack of clarity about

roles of staff and lay leadership. We have begun to address this by having full-time staff attend Board meetings. We write a joint staff report to the Board each month including contributions from multiple staff members. Two weeks before each Board meeting, we meet as an Executive team consisting of the two Board Co-Chairs, myself, Rev. McNeal, Brian Hagemann (Director of Administration,) Amber Scott (Director of Spiritual Exploration) and a rotating Board member to develop the agenda for the Board meeting.

And, there is still work to be done. I am confident that next year's Board will engage with the lessons learned by the folks going off the Board, and bring some new energy to the role. We will conduct a Board / senior staff retreat in the summer to set some intentional goals in this area.

### Goal # 3: Engaging in conflict resolution and transformation in all areas of church life

At the beginning of my time here I offered a one-day workshop on conflict transformation concepts and tools. About 50 people attended and engaged with one another in small group conversations. Since then I have offered smaller units of pieces of the larger curriculum around deep listening, polarity management, and powerful questions. People have been enthusiastic about these small workshops.

Before I arrived, a great team of people had been assembled to create a Covenantal Relations Team (originally named Right Relations, then Healthy Relations.) The team members attended an extensive online training program and have made themselves available for assistance to congregants in working through difficulties they may have with one another. We meet monthly and share ideas for how the congregation can deepen its learning. We have developed a new policy for the work which will be put before the Board for ratification soon. This group includes: Rev. Kelli McNeal, Lisa Brandt, Kristin Hartmann, Rev. Kathleen Fowler, Greg Denby, Ohma Willette, and Ryan Agnew.



**Goal #4:** Creating a covenant between members of the congregation who are ministers, both UU and from other denominations, the ministers on staff, and the congregation.

This goal was developed to address the manipulative ways in which Rev. Stewart engaged some minister members, hurting both the staff and the Board in ways the minister members did not intend.

Collegial relationships are important for the health of our ministers and the congregations and institutions they serve. "Covenant" is of central importance to UU governance, UU theology, practices of "right relations" and accountability. The ministerial relationships between the congregation's hired ministers, hired ministerial candidates, student ministers, affiliated ministers, retired ministers and called ministers are supposed to be in accordance with the UU Ministers Association (UUMA) Guidelines for the Conduct of Ministry. This is the comprehensive document that includes the covenant, standards of professional practice, responsibilities and expectations among colleagues, and additional information pertinent to the professional practice of ministry as a UU minister. It includes information on the importance of covenanting between former or retired ministers who are members of the congregation and the actively serving (called or hired) ministers of the congregation. "Letters of agreement" (or covenants) and ongoing conversations make the covenantal relationship explicit and enable the ministerial staff to work together with clarity in their roles and the boundaries of service to the congregation.

Since I began, I have been intentionally engaging with the member ministers, getting to know them better and honoring the ways in which they connect with the congregation. For example, Rev. Suzan McCrystal was appointed to the Transition Team, Rev. Sylvia Howe works diligently with the Archives group and collaborated with Susan Williams to produce a report about the congregation's culture and history (shared below.) Rev.

Kathleen Fowler is integral to the Pastoral Care Team and the Covenantal Relations Team. Rev. Dana Reynolds is on the slate to become the Moderator next year, Rev. Meg McGuire is now an officially affiliated community minister of the church. And Rev. Marco Belletini, Minister Emeritus, has been enthusiastically welcomed back to attend and conduct periodic services (Rev. Stewart would not allow him to attend.)

Rev. McGuire, Rev. McNeal, Amanda Hays and I have created a covenant that addresses guidelines for our collegial relationship with one another. Amanda, Rev. McNeal and I are in the process of creating a covenant specific to the three of us. And now that we have grown to know one another better, I will be convening the minister members to create a covenant among us, and between ministers and the congregation.

Goal # 5: Engaging in intentional work as a recovering congregation - i.e. a congregation that has experienced ministerial misconduct and challenging conflicts

I mentioned above that Rev. Sylvia Howe and Susan Williams created a report about the history and culture of the congregation, and particular challenges it has faced. They did a deep dive into the church archives and engaged in listening sessions with over 100 of our members. Their report does not address the issues with Rev. Stewart (nor does it name the people involved in past misbehavior). And while it does detail some instances of ministerial misconduct, some other experiences people have talked about with ministers cannot be independently verified and so were not included. It describes, in a very valuable way, systemic issues that have haunted the congregation in the past, and that are still occurring in the present. A link to the report can be found here:

<https://firstuucolumbus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/A-Challenging-Congregation-Susan-Williams-Sylvia-Howe.docx.pdf> The recovery, like much I address in this report, will be ongoing work. In the next year we will be holding a history workshop that will invite people to share their stories

about their experience of the congregation at different times. I often say that there is no one “true story” about a congregation. Instead it is an ongoing process of naming different stories, sometimes similar, sometimes radically different. The goal is to become aware of the multiplicity of stories without trying to force a reconciliation among them.

## Future Steps

In partnership with the Board, staff and Transition Team:

- Conduct a history workshop
- Establish a governance review task force that will be transparent and offer multiple avenues of involvement
- Deepen the story-telling project
- Conduct an asset-mapping exercise to gain a sense of possibilities for the congregation

## What is Needed From You!

There are many ways in which people show up for one another in this congregation in a caring and supportive way. This time will require that of all of us, given that the work is not confined to me, the staff or the Board. We will continue to look to you for your ideas, your participation, and your generosity. If you have not found a particular way to get involved and wish to, please contact one of the staff. We can help you find your way.

This pledge season is particularly challenging. We are trying to create a budget that will fairly compensate the staff. Given everything they have been through it adds to the distress that none of us are paid even the minimum of the UUA suggested salaries. There were minor increases last year, but no COLA raise. This year we are looking at a major deficit in trying to simply give a 3% raise across the board. Please turn in your pledges and consider whether you might give more.

## Summary

In just about every section above I think I said: the work is ongoing. We cannot hope to wrap a bow around such complex issues and call them complete. But I do believe that the congregation is more stable, more connected and more energetic than when I came, which positions us well for taking up more concrete work in the next year. This is due to the hard work of the Board, the staff and all of you who bring your goodwill to this enterprise we call a faith community.

It has been a privilege to partner with you in this work. I look forward to hearing your questions after the service on May 19, or you may email them to me at [terasa@firstuucolumbus.org](mailto:terasa@firstuucolumbus.org) or set up an appointment to talk with me.