

Senior Minister's Report to the Board of Trustees

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Westport

October 28, 2025

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1.2.4 We become a financially sustainable, engaged, growing Congregation comprised of all generations.

Board Chair Beth Cliff has invited me to reflect upon this end and to share the opportunities I see for the congregation to stop, start, or continue practices related to it.

- **“financially sustainable”** – Given the faithful work of the Sustainability Task Force, I venture that the congregation is financially sustainable in the short run and unsustainable in the long run. As with other members and friends, I find the spending of the endowment to meet operating costs concerning, especially in the context of the financial uncertainty in our national economy, growing inflation, and job insecurity. The congregation does have its share of members and friends whose abundant resources are growing even larger in our “K-shaped economy”, where a small subset of the population is thriving while more and more middle and working class citizens struggle to make ends meet. I can imagine that the financial sustainability of UUWestport will rely more upon the generosity of its thriving members and friends and less upon those who might choose to decrease their contributions. I’m certain there are critical conversations to have about how UUWestport goes forward as a vital community given these dynamics that have implications for planned giving, endowments, staffing, and restricted funding. I look forward to working with Brian Lasher, the Development Consultant, Beth Cliff, and others as we discern how to create the foundation upon which the next settled Senior Minister can build.
- **“engaged”** – In my observation, individuals and clusters of congregants are engaged in the communities within Fairfield County, but I don’t sense that is true of the congregation as a whole. For example, I was recently at a rally held by CONECT, Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut. I was inspired to see the energy in that room and the celebration of the legislative and justice work those congregations had realized over the past few years. UUWestport was not represented, though UUWestport is known among CONECT leaders and congregations. My understanding is that the financial commitment required of CONECT member congregations is a barrier to UUWestport’s participation. This is a place to look and see how the congregation’s financial commitments reflect its intentions. Another place will be the nascent movement toward a CT UU Social Justice Ministry, which seems geared to launch in late 2026. None of what I’m saying is to detract from the beautiful work the congregation is doing with Share the Plate, the Beardsley School, Make the Road CT, and the many other worthy service, educational, and social justice partners in the congregation’s circle of care. I do suspect that there might be benefit for the congregation writ-large to align itself with a community or a project of a considerable size and investment that would be a breakthrough in engagement. This could grow UUWestport’s reputation and impact in beneficial ways. I would make the case for sustained congregation-wide focus on a given issue or project over the course of five or ten years.
- **“growing”**: There are various types of growth that can be measured in the life of a congregation, and I will consider UUWestport in each of these. Numerical growth has to do with

membership and financial contributions. Relative to the congregation's heyday, membership is on a declining trajectory, not different from comparable UU and mainline predominately white congregations. Some of this is the impact of demographic and economic shifts in the larger culture. Organization growth pertains to structures and systems that support the congregation's mission and vision. UUWestport has a very horizontal approach to leadership, which is empowering in some ways and disabling in others. I believe the needed work on deferred maintenance of structures and systems at UUWestport is a separate, full-time job in itself, beyond the pastoral care, worship, and community aspects of congregational life. Spiritual growth reflects the understanding the congregation has of itself as a religious community. I see this reflected in the Pastoral Care Associates, the Shawl Ministry, the Soul Matters Circles, and other areas. The place where I would like to see it more is in UUWestport's orientation toward newcomers and in the way members and friends treat each other. There's a level of aggression that surprises me at times. My hope is that when people come to 10 Lyons Plains Road, they are coming to practice being their best selves, and I don't always observe that. Missional growth is where we discern how the congregation is known in the wider community. As I mentioned in the "engaged" section above, UUWestport does a beautiful job of turning out people for things like Read Aloud Day and the No Kings Rally. Again, I'm confident that there is a breakthrough waiting when the congregation collectively makes a bold, visionary commitment to a landmark project or cause. Associational growth is about how a congregation interacts with its denomination, in UUWestport's case, our Unitarian Universalist Association. While UUWestport has a long and proud history of training ministers and having members serve as leaders in the larger Association – Denny Davidoff and Lynda Bluestein among the most prominent ones – the congregation is not an Honor Congregation in our UUA's Annual Program Fund. Again, I wager that UUWestport being among the leading congregations of the nascent CT UU Social Justice Ministry could be one of the opportunities to connect with and support other UU congregations in the state.

- **"all generations"**: UUWestport does provide services, programs, and support for people across the age spectrum. Having a dedicated Faith Formation staff person is a considerable part of that, as is having dedicated spaces for programs for children, youth, and adults. I do notice from week to week that the default of how the congregation operates is fairly segregated by age, with families with young children largely in spaces apart from individuals and couples without young children. For a congregation that desires to serve more young families, the Sunday worship experience doesn't reflect that. It would be a significant culture shift, yet I suspect a congregation-wide orientation toward support and engagement with young families might actually attract that demographic.

Respectfully submitted,

Carlton

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