Interview with Reverand Paul Langston-Daley

By Jennifer Choate

I had a most interesting interview with Reverand Paul Langston-Daley Monday March 30 in the morning via Zoom from Canada, where he is serving the congregation in Ontario on the north shore of Lake Erie. We had a good relationship when he was here from 1998 to 2005, and our good will persists. I was, and I think he was, happy to reconnect. He continues to teach me things.

I asked him about his UU journey. He says he always knew he wanted to be a minister, he heard the call both in his life and in his dreams. He was brought up low Episcopalian (as was I,) but after he partnered with V, on her initiative, they went to a service of the Arlington Streat Unitarian Universalist Church in Boston, and instantly, they arrived at their spiritual home. They joined within two months, and Paul applied for divinity school including to Harvard and a multidenominational school called Andover-Newton to which he went, because it was more practical and less academic, more in keeping with what he wanted. He was still a young minister when our search committee chose him, and the couple agreed to come with their newborn baby Parker (as in Theodore.) The Search Committee packet is stored in the Green House, and it was part of the display for the History Service, March 22. I was part of that search committee, and I will tell you now, V was the most committed minister's spouse we have ever had. I will write about her later.

The most illuminating question I asked was, how did you see us as a congregation when you came, and how did we change? Paul saw us as fragmented into subgroups and cliques in 1998, perhaps the result of the contentious previous interim ministry of the late David Keyes (more later.) The. prime example of that was the Social Action Committee, which met off site, had its own bank account and was led by the wonderful, to me, Paul and Harriet Blue. Rev. Paul worked, and he feels successfully, to fold all the various groups back into the greater whole and get people talking to each other again.

He said the best outcome of the previous ministry was that we understood our issues; so, he didn't have to help us discover them. Rev. Keyes got us clear on our problems, so we were ready to work on the solutions.

When Paul left, he says, we had a deeper understanding of UUism and what it means to be a member of a congregation. That, he considers institutional as well a personal maturation. We were a Family Fellowship reaching to become a Program Church. That we have not yet quite reached that is not a criticism, as these kinds of changes take a long time.

Secondly, we moved from a "patriarchy" to a more democratic structure. Finance had been in the hands of four large donors who also held the purse strings. They wielded excessive decision-making power. During Paul's ministry, that was broken up a bit, and many more members acquired financial voices and input as to how the congregation was to be run. Congregational polity is core to UUism, I have known that forever. During his ministry there was a successful capital campaign led

by Iran Mohsenin (more later, a pillar of our Fellowship) and building expansion largely under the leadership of Dave Boone who happened to be an architect. (More on Dave and his wife Jane later.). Dolores Abrams' estate left us a half a million dollars for the expansion and finishing the interior of the sanctuary, and Paul remembers her well.

I asked Paul about what advice he would have for us with the 20-year perspective he has acquired since he moved away. He had two. First, lean into your strengths. We have a lot of social support for members and energy around social activism and environmental justice. We have for a long time, and we still do. Second, get into more circles of discussion, not just Small Group Ministrys, but between different kinds of people, worship and social activism for example. Finance and Helping Hands. The trust that is built by that kind of practice, which Paul also encouraged when he was here, can be a bulwark when conflict arises, as it always does. We also talked about some strategies other churches and fellowships have used to develop themselves for little money, in preparation for hiring new settled ministers. He also commented that Reverand Russ Menk's ministry was as successful as it was, because it was built on the hard work of all the previous ministers and members of the congregation in shared ministry. We will have an essay on Rev. Russ soon.

Our discussion wouldn't be complete without a discussion of Paul's transition, which took place toward the end of his time here after, sadly, he and V separated. She had no interest in being with a man. Paul says he felt generally supported and he remains grateful for all that, as do I for all I learned as a fellow traveler during the process, about which he was most transparent. He announced it from the pulpit, brought other trans folks in, and walked us through his challenges around it. We both do understand that it may have been difficult for some of the older, more conservative members, and his abrupt departure may have been partially due to their discomfort with the process. His name used to be Pam, but he asks us not to say it, because transitioned people feel hurt if we do. They call it their "dead name."

After he left, he went back to Massachusetts and reunited with the Unitarian Universalist Association doing various jobs including interims. It sounds as though he landed on his feet. Most recently, he had a wonderful three-year stint as Social Justice Minister at Concord Mass UU. Last year they were concerned they might not have the funds to continue the position, and there was the shock of Trump 2.0 and his scapegoating of LGBTQ, especially trans individuals like Paul; so he decided to only apply for positions outside the USA.

He accepted a parish ministry in Canada in Leamington, the Olinda UU church, which is rural and agricultural, and slow paced, which is fine with Paul. He told me about it. He is very happy, still single and almost 60. it was a pleasure catching up with him.

My own experience of his ministry was very positive. Along with Bruce Fihe (chair), Andy Kreche, Steve Morioraity, Mark Rogers, Lorainne Sandoval-Vigil, I was on the search committee

I recall the first time I met Paul and V. They came from the east coast prior to his transition to interview with our 1997/8 Search Committee. We met at the now defunct restaurant China Village on the bay end of Pacific Avenue, and they appeared full of enthusiasm and only slightly nervous. They seemed to be a Lesbian couple and were new parents of a son, appropriately named Parker. Paul wore a flowered, frilly pants suit and informed us in no uncertain terms that this was the most feminine look we would ever see him in (probably way more than he wished.) We didn't care; they were perfect.

Paul was young and brought his personality to the Fellowship in a way I appreciated as a youngish mother. He preached original sermons and brought warmth to the Fellowship that had been missing for some time. He was inclusive and wise, and he wrote a column for the Unicorn in which his image looked more like a boy than the way he actually looked. He offered leadership, and an appropriate amount of social activism for the congregation at the time. We enjoyed the couple and loved watching Parker grow up. V was an ideal minister's spouse leading and co-leading youth programs such as OWL (Our Whole Lives, a spiritual sex education program offered by the UUA for which outside adolescents flocked) and also CUUPS (Coven of UU Pagans.)

However, sadly, a rift grew between Paul and V, the source of which we were not to know. V was reached out to the greater community, and she was also suffering an illness from which sadly, she lost her life.

One day, Paul announced from the pulpit that he was transitioning and would be taking the name of Paul. Comfortable though we were with Gay and Lesbian ministers, this came as a shock to our aging, white congregation. Good UUs, most of us were determined to go with it, although a faction less enthusiastic with the ministry in general added it to their list of discontents. We were all, however, swept up in the drama it entailed. Paul had already been on hormones and was experiencing the belated adolescence trans authors such as Jennifer Finney Boylan write about. V was essentially gone from our orbit, eventually finding a new, wonderful partner, Dani Hope with whom many of us are still in touch. At least for me, Paul guided us through the frontier of transitioning, explaining what he was going through and eventually having a Coming-of-Age service to which he invited several trans friends from San Francisco. I, at least, am very grateful for the experience. Paul may be the first minister in the U.S. of any denomination to transition in the Pulpit.

He left soon after in a haze of controversy, barely saying goodbye. To me it was a loss, especially since the UUA Guidelines forbid contact with a former minister for several years. Paul is not a dogmatic rule follower; so, there was Facebook and a visit or two to the Bay Area, so it was easy following his career, which continued to be illustrious. V passed away, and Dani raised Parker until he finished high school. Later he moved east and has a good relationship with his dad. The next interim minister, Ann Schranz was helpful in healing our loss, but she was only able to stay for two years, and she did adhere to the guideline of ghosting us after she left.

I asked Paul what he remembers most about his time at UUFSCC. He said the intimate moments with individual congregants such as Dave Boone to whom he was talking early in his ministry, and an earthquake terrorized Paul, but was no big deal to Dave. He fondly remembers the late Beth Coats who would say wisely, he says," I'm not sure, but I wonder…" so gently. Paul too was and is gentle, gentle and brave. He is one of my heroes.