Interview with Russ Menk
May, 2026

On May 27, Bob Bates and I had the first of what will probably be a series of interviews with Rev. Russ Menk. He was and is the Minister many of us remember fondly, he still lives in SCC, and in my subjective opinion was the most unifying and encouraging minister we have had in our short history of minister-led, family style congregation. His ministry was from 2013 to 2023.

Russ grew up in Texas in a Methodist Church but stopped all religious activities after his marriage in 1973. He somehow found UUism in Salt Lake City where he joined the UU congregation there and had a meaningful experience. He rose to board president, and his wife Jackie was the treasurer. There he became close to the minister Tom Goldsmith to whom he expressed his calling to ministry. Rev. Tom encouraged him to go to Divinity School. He had been working as an aerospace engineering manager; so this was a pivotal decision and a turning point. Jackie was supportive. Within a year and a half, the couple had moved to San Leandro for him to attend Divinity School in Berkeley, CA, where he attended not Starr King but Pacific School of Religion. Within five years, he had achieved a Master of Divinity in 2013. Neither he nor Jackie were satisfied with SL, so they bought a place in SC in 2010, and he attended the Monterey Fellowship as an intern where his mentor Rev. John Behrens was the minister. Russ preached and was on the Worship Team, but he didn't join because the UUA discourages seminarians from doing so. He also attended the UUFSCC occasionally and became known and liked here.

When it was time to look for a position, John didn't recommend he apply here, because he told Russ, we had a bad reputation as contentious in the denomination, something we also heard from Rev. Keyes and which I had previously not accepted. Later Rev. Behrens changed his mind. Russ applied and was hired, although he still had doubts. He came, and the rest is history

In a rare moment of humor, Russ said Rev. John told him the UUFSCC needed "man" to help us be who we could be. I don't know what Behrens meant, but I like to think he was talking about the loving father archetype who offers supportive structure and self-discipline. Russ is sensitive to being thought sexist.

Russ signed on as ¾ time Developmental Minister in 2013. He immediately recommended that the foliage in the front blocking the view from the road be removed - it was. He thought it was isolationist and not welcoming. He believes only the Board and the Music Program made it through the schism prior to his arrival. That there was division under Rev. Pallas Stanford was similar to the state Rev. Paul found us in, but in my opinion the situation was quite different, and although we had disagreements, Rev.Pallas' intentions were good. She taught us a lot. She was brilliant and willing to try new approaches to theology, and she was a social justice warrior. Russ knows her and concludes

her ministry was a "poor fit" for UUFSCC. There will probably not be a chapter on Pallas' ministry, although I lived it, and am available for questions if you wish.

When he started here in 2013, Bob Bates was the Board President, and both Russ and Bob recall it as a wonderful time. Jane Boone and the Krafts offered leadership, but sadly Jane and Rosalie passed away, although Bob Kraft, a famous Astrophysicist at UCSC, was a pillar of the Fellowship for many more years. John Thiemann, the "gentleman farmer" also contributed. Russ' plan was to improve the organizational structure with love, trust, and awareness.

Russ recalls the response to his sermon on "ANGER." Afterwards, Lorraine Sandoval-Vigil came up to him and said, "I get it—we get it. Can we move on beyond our past conflicts?" Others evidently had the same response, because this seemed to Russ a "tipping point"/ turning point in his work here.

Russ' calm support and creative approach soon pulled the congregation together, and we enjoyed spiritual growth, community growth, a lot of organizational growth and renewed hope both for ourselves and the planet. We were also in the hopeful Obama presidency. We could start building and run "experiments". Experiments were Russ' way of trying things out here and seeing what did and didn't work.

He recalls a "budget crisis" from which Art Anton and Bill Sampson bailed us out.

He was ordained in 2015, installed here in 2017 full time, and he stayed until 2023. His was the first formal Ordination here. The previous ministers were ordained elsewhere. He mentored Terra Collier-Young as community minister and, also Sangy Hawk, an intern who is thriving in her ministry now. He led a Coming-of-Age service and a course of OWL, the first since V passed away.

Perhaps the peak moment for Russ was the 150/50 Celebration in 2016. It drew in UU ministers from across the nation, and much history was gathered and reported there. We had a grand Banquet and Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt (President of Starr King Ministry) spoke. There will be more about this later.

Russ sees retirement as the end of an arc. After he left, he did a 6-month sabbatical ministry in Massachusetts, a state which he and Jackie love. He attends various UU services via Zoom which gives him inspiration, but he is not a member of any one congregation. He is on the Pacific Western Regional UU Board and mentors two ministers via Zoom.

He views the job of being a minister to maintain calm. If he stays in control, members and groups are less likely to spin out of control. In seminary, they advised ministers to be observers, but members quickly taught him he needed to be involved, and he was as we remember. He reads a lot of philosophy, especially the Stoics.

His spirituality is to be present to others and nature, he walks daily and "putters." He is happy and healthy, does yoga, strength training and stretching.

He values community, awareness, understanding, connection, and security. Financially he is okay, even though he did much for us that wasn't remunerated.

At the end of his decade here, he says we were more self-starting and discerning.
The low points were disruptive individuals mostly from outside. A group who happened to be Roma (Russ doesn't want to be thought racist, and neither do I) camped in our parking lot and made trouble. A woman tried to sell marijuana there as well.

The high points were working with the congregation on a one to one basis

He says he was privileged to live 100 lives with members of the UU community, he has walked with us, and for that he is very grateful. He fells honor, and the joys and sorrows of all of us.

There will be more chapters on Russ' ministry in future Current Happenings.