Interview with Russ Menk
~ Part 2 ~
August 19, 2026

On August 19 the History Team met for our second of three interviews with Rev. Russ Menk. Present were Bob Bates, Jeff and Carol Rudisill, Sylvia Forsyth and Jenny Choate Wood. We asked questions, and I would like you to submit questions for our third interview which should occur in October to our former minister who most of us remember fondly. I assure you; he has a lot of wisdom to impart.

Bob started by asking Russ' impressions of our congregation when he first came in 2013. Russ sadly told us we had the reputation in the denomination as being a "clergy killer." The reasons, he said, are that 1) we had issues with authority, 2) we had cliques, 3) we were too focused on what was wrong, not the positive. Our strengths were in hospitality, small group ministry and excellent services (thanks to the Sunday Services Team,) and music (thanks to Gail Swain.) TGIF and Chavarots were also working. Social Justice was working well also.

Finances, the physical campus and culture, and labor of love all needed work, and we did work out our challenges in those areas to a great extent.

Regarding finances, we were depleting our reserves. Only 3 or 4 members who had deep pockets were keeping the finances going. During Russ' time here, more members began to step up until by the time Russ left, 45% of us were carrying the financial load.

The campus was also at risk, at a state where people were beginning to think we should close it; do we really need a campus? YES! We recovered whatever was missing, and now our property is secure.

I asked Russ about the 2016 Celebration of 150 years of Unitarianism, later UUism in Santa Cruz, and 50 years on this campus, and he responded with a tape of the event which will be downloaded onto our cloud for all interested to review.

The group asked Russ what he was proud of and challenged by in his ministry, and he responded positively 1) we continue to exist, 2) finances were stabilized, and we no longer have any debt, 3) membership stayed about the same at 100-120, we didn't shrink (Russ thinks growth is overrated,) and 4) communication improved. We learned to talk to each other better.

Regarding the challenges again 1) finance, 2) continued development of communication, 3) RE deteriorated during Covid, but that is true for all churches and fellowships, it is national tread since Covid, 4) we tend to blame when things don't go our way, but as the culture changes, we need to

realize that things changing doesn't necessarily mean we are stuck. We need to give ourselves permission to try things, experiment and have agency.

Russ and Laura are in communication to make sure her ministry is optimal; they are in covenant. Zoom has made hybrid ministry possible.

We talked about making Russ Minister Emeritus and bringing that to the board. Russ introduced us to Arturo for whom we are eternally grateful.

As always, it was a joy being in community with our History Project and Russ. We are grateful and look forward to our next meeting with your questions and comments.

Jenny Choate