

Minister's Board Report

October 19, 2026

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

My funny valentine
Sweet, comic valentine
You make me smile from my heart
You're looks are laughable
Unphotographable
Yet, your may favorite work of art
Is your figure less than Greek?

—Rodgers and Hart (1938)

A funny thing happened to me on the way to the bank, after yet another lovely, home-made breakfast.

This week, I had a wonderful and inspired conversation with David Cook about the financial state of North Chapel. I was encouraged by our conversation. I cannot yet share the content of our conversation because its ideas are still in formation. I can, however, share the context of our conversation.

David and I spent almost two hours reviewing budget as it currently stands. We exchanged thoughts, concerns and aspirations. I am happy to be working with David as we reimagine North Chapel. Reimagining



church is new novel. It happens constantly. We are always doing it. The Social Hall has new life in it. The Parlors has new life in it. Spiritual Exploration has new life. Brave Light was new life. The Choir has new life. The Thayer Organ has new life, too (thanks to John Atwood and company). The Garden has new life!! That's a theological statement, if ever there was one.

There have been real changes to the Social Hall, The Parlors, Spiritual Exploration, the Choir, the Organ and the Garden. All of these changes mark the ways in which we have been constantly reimagining the North Chapel. It is simply not that same place that it was before.

We are beginning to break an old habit, an old and anxious habit. We have real challenges before us, challenges that are truly concerning. Yet, we also have a choice before us as well. We can choose to respond with grace. When church is working, graceful action is what happens.

So many of us are hurting now, hurting in so many different ways. We are hurting because life is difficult. We are hurting because of life's losses. We are hurting because of the dreadful state of the world. I shared a poem by Brian Lewis in a recent reflection. The title of the poem is *To Remain Human* (which

is hard to do). I was moved by how the poet talks about the burdens that we carry, sometimes without our knowing. The poet writes,

The nervous system
was never designed
to carry the grief
of an entire planet
Yet here we are

We carry this. We feel the weight of this bearing down upon our bones and we don't know what to do about that because not caring isn't an option. Yet, we don't have to bear the weight in misery. The poet writes about how tired we are of the invisible burdens. As Lewis explains,

This is the exhaustion
few know how to name

Not simply stress
Not simply fear

But the unbearable collision
between the human heart
and the scale
of modern awareness

We were meant
to know the sorrow
of the village

Now we are asked
to metabolize

the suffering
of civilizations

We don't know how to do this. No one does. Not just yet...but things are changing and we are slowly changing, too. We are beginning to reimagine who we are and why we gather. We are learning newer ways to fly. My guess that in short order, those new ways will feel familiar.

In seminary, we learned that a budget is a theological document. At Annual Meetings every January, we gloss over the details but we rarely sink in and really grapple, really dig in and down to it. Slowly over time, we will learn to do just that...as the leadership circle widens, as we move forward in new ways.

Perhaps, the non-anxious conversation that David and I had last week demonstrates the energy that draws new leaders. New leaders like Nathan and Wendy with the new kids program and new leaders like Ben Kogan, new leaders like Tatum and Taylor and Pluto and Sam and the rest of Kid's Club, new leaders like Will and Mimi from Brave Light (even though they're off in school), new leaders like any of the roughly seventy-five kids who have been direct beneficiaries of the Brave Light Project and we've paid for it all. New leaders like Michael Zsoldos and the 35,000 new singers who've joined the choir, new leaders like John and Donna Atwood who bring new life and brave-new meaning to the organ. New leaders like Lynn Sweat Miller who makes

delicious apple sauce out of the honey crisps that grow on the grounds of the church. And this, to say nothing of the ongoing challenges that are met and resolved by people like Laird Bradley and Michael again, people like Kevin Geiger and Mary Blanton, people like Joanne and Paula Boyle, people like the Marinellos and Sash and Tim. The list goes on these days. We are lucky.

There are many who are not directly in the North Chapel community but still see North Chapel as their spiritual home. Joanne and I have learned this over the years. We are learning it again with the passings of Stephen Frost and Stephen Crossmon. Their memorial services took place at North Chapel over the last few weeks.

In seminary, we learned that a budget is a theological document. In coming months, I will be exploring ways (if I'm lucky, with David's help) to reimagine how we think about the resources that we are blessed to steward, to reimagine ways to continue being a beacon in the Upper Valley and to reimagine what leadership is at its best and how we might strengthen it in one another.