

# the steeple

*The Congregational Newsletter of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington*  
December 2017

## Hospitality, Love, and Sacred Community

*By Rev. Mara Dowdall, Senior Minister*

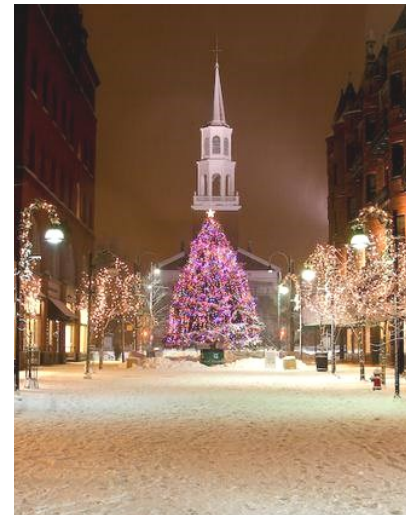


On the rocky island of Inis Mor (or *Arainn*, in the Irish language), off the coast of Galway, there sits a small stone hut (known as “the beehive hut” for its shape) that has withstood storms and wind since it was built sometime in the seventh century. The hut was connected to one of the Celtic monastic communities that peppered the island in those years—the ruins of which draw pilgrims to Inis Mor and its fellow Aran Islands, centuries later. In the 600s, the hut would house a single monk and offered a solitary life of prayer, devoid of creature comforts and in close contact with the elements.

I visited the beehive hut in early October, as part of a weeklong writing workshop and spiritual pilgrimage on Inis Mor. With my kindred pilgrims—and multifaith group of spiritual seekers, clergy and writers, I went in the hut, touched its ancient stones, and imagined the spiritually simple and physically harrowing existence of those who’d lived there centuries ago.

We were guided in our visit by Dara Malloy, a longtime Inis Mor resident and Celtic priest, who has written extensively about Inis Mor’s sacred sites and legends. That afternoon, he offered us a year’s worth of information about the island, monasticism, Irish independence, and Celtic spirituality—including a beautiful reflection on the monks’ practice of radical hospitality

*Continued on next page*



*Image credit: Benjamin D. Bloom*

### Inside this issue:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Hospitality, Love, and Sacred Community            | 1 |
| Meet Our Developmental Director of Family Ministry | 3 |
| From the FUUSB Board of Trustees                   | 4 |
| From the Stewardship Team                          | 5 |
| Theme Circles                                      | 6 |
| Socially Responsible Santa                         | 7 |

## *Hospitality, Love, and Sacred Community*

*Continued from previous page*



*Image credit: Rev. Mara Dowdall*

to those who visited the island. Monks at the hut were expected to welcome those who arrived in need of food and shelter. Dara reminded us of how important the spiritual practice of hospitality – of seeing the presence of the holy in the stranger and welcoming them – still is in our world.

Dara said something else that has stayed with me: that it's a miracle simply that the hut is still there. That it has remained standing, virtually intact, over these many, many centuries since it was built seems extraordinary. There is no material binding its stones together, nor is it protected from human contact; it's not behind a wall or in a museum – anyone can walk right up to it and go in. And still, no storm hitting the island in these centuries nor any number of potential human sources of destruction, from invaders to pranksters, have ruined or dismantled the hut. A site of the sacred, it has survived, now well more than a thousand years.

In times like ours, when it feels, as the late great

Adrienne Rich writes, “so much has been destroyed,” I am asking myself a new question: “*What has survived?*” What enduring examples of hospitality, love, and sacred community remain in our world? Whether they are places or people or practices, what are the “beehive huts” in our lives which can inspire in us awe, wonder, and hope?

Yours in the spirit of the season,

*Rev. Mara*



*Image credit: Rev. Mara Dowdall*



## Meet Our Developmental Director of Family Ministry

By Andrea Spencer-Linzie



Hello FUUSB friends. I am glad to join this wonderful community and staff team. I look forward to meeting and getting to know you in the coming weeks and months.

I'm a Jersey Girl, and have lived most of my life in New Jersey. I also have lived in Texas, Maryland, and Massachusetts, and have traveled to other countries on four continents.

I'm the third child of four, with an older brother and sister, and younger brother. My father was a professional musician/singer and teacher. My mother was a science teacher and plays the piano. We all had music lessons: older brother on violin, sister on piano, me on cello and piano, and my younger brother on trumpet, but his real love is his guitar, on which he is self-taught. I still play my cello and I'm hoping to find a place to play here in the Burlington area.

My family of origin is also a "game" family. We play sports together, lots of board and card games, charades, catch phrase. If you dare, you could join me in a 6-10 handed game of solitaire. It's crazy and fun!

My parents were very supportive of each of us. Yet, growing up I learned early that being a girl was a deficit for many activities. Girls were not allowed to play during third grade recess kickball, nor recess softball in fifth grade. Boys only. I had a few things to say about that and by the time I left fifth grade, boys *and* girls were playing together, including me. I was also initially turned down for a

fifth grade "safety patrol" position because the teacher thought I couldn't hack it because I wore skirts and dresses to school. I ended up on the safety patrol anyway. I started to wear pants.

This early understanding of direct and subtle discrimination has shaped me and my life's work. Consequently, most of the work that I've done has been in community service and social justice.

I met my husband in seminary. We have two sons. Justin and Galen are complete joys for me, and are now adults. Justin lives in Philadelphia and is the Director of Youth Programming for the YMCA in Camden City, NJ, which is a deeply distressed area on many levels. Galen lives in Hoboken, NJ and is an Associate Strategist for CBX, a branding agency in New York City.

Here are a few things that I love to do: laugh, read, watch movies, play tennis, create, build, imagine, connect, have fun, learn, try something new, be with friends, play music, sing, listen to music, seek truth and compassion, honor each day and see the beauty in it.

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## *From the FUUSB Board of Trustees*

### **Your Insight Needed: Directions for Our New Minister**

*By Louis deRosset, Trustee-at-Large*

At last year's annual meeting we took a bold step forward. We voted to support a plan which culminates in the hire of a second minister in the coming years. We haven't met or even heard of this person yet, but we know we want them to help us do great things together.

As you may recall, our second minister will be responsible for the ministries we offer to one another in our congregation. That's why the plan calls the position a Minister of Congregational Life. Among many other things, these ministries include what we do to support our spiritual development, minister to families of all ages and stages of life, and educate ourselves and our children. The board is responsible for setting broad goals in these areas, articulating what is sometimes called a "vision," to guide Mara's and the new minister's efforts.

We know what we all want in very general terms. We want the new minister to help us become the community we have been dreaming of: a place where we are nourished, recharged, educated, and inspired. And, we want Andrea Spencer-Linzie, our new Developmental Director of Family Ministry (that is, our bridge RE director), to prepare the way. But what do these words stir you to imagine? We would like you to tell us.

We are organizing a series of conversations, to take place in early and mid-January, in which you share your insights regarding the purposes and functions of our faith development, family, and religious education ministries. Board members will be listening and recording, not talking. The point is to find out what you think. These conversations will inform the

goals the board sets for our new minister and guide the efforts of Mara and Andrea in the meantime.

The plan is to compile your insights, and make a report to Mara, Andrea, and the congregation later in the spring.

Board members will be calling for your participation and specifying times and places for these conversations in other communications over the coming weeks. We hope you will answer that call.

Our Society has a unique opportunity. We don't get a new minister every year. Now is the time to reimagine the purpose and point of our spiritual development, religious education, and family ministry programs. Let's get this right. Join the conversation, and be part of determining the direction we will take our congregation over the coming years. Help us tell our new minister where we want to go.

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## From the Stewardship Team

By Debby Bergh



Hope, in addition to being Emily Dickinson's "the thing with feathers," has many synonyms. Some of them are *anticipation, aspiration, belief, desire, expectation, promise, prospect* and *wish*. From the perspective of the First UU Society Stewardship team, pieces of all these synonyms of *hope* are how we enter the prelude to this year's Annual Stewardship Drive in March.

We are in year two of our vision for a sustainable staffing plan for our Society. The keystone of this plan is to add a second minister, with a focus on Congregational Life. We voted to go on this path at last June's Annual Meeting. Now it is time for us to start to think about our hopes going toward that vision, and what it will mean for each of us in our own generosity, according to our own circumstances, to make that happen so we can be interviewing candidates next year to join us in the summer of 2019.

We encourage people to be thinking about how hope and generosity can come together to bring our vision to fruition even though you won't be asked to make a commitment until March 2018.



### Holiday Schedule for Worship Services

Please note the following  
schedule for our worship services  
during the holiday season.  
*We hope you will join us!*

**Sunday, December 24:**  
Christmas Eve services  
at 4, 6, and 8 p.m.  
No morning services.

**Sunday, December 31:**  
One service at 10 a.m.



## Winter To-Do List: Join a Theme Circle...Check!

By Kenneth Russell



I'm an introvert by nature. On top of that, I've always felt "different" when in crowds or groups—even being light skinned and male. So as I took my first steps into the Meeting House at the top of Church Street soon after I had moved to Vermont in 2004, I had mixed feelings. I knew that I would feel completely at home with the ideas that echoed in this space, but my stomach tightened a bit as I thought about the challenge it would be for me to feel at home with the people in this Society. To "feel at home" anywhere was a challenge, but I stepped up to that challenge then...and failed.

Fast forward to 2015. Still only attending in and out Sunday mornings, but inspired by Mara, I noticed a call in the bulletin for people who might be interested in facilitating the new program called Theme Circles. Interestingly enough, I'm quite comfortable facilitating groups since it's part of my work, so I gave it a shot. And come to find out, being part of Theme Circles was the key to my starting to really "feel at home" in our Society.

A Theme Circle is a greenhouse, an intentional place with all those metaphorical things that get those different seeds—stuck in dirt, side-by-side, sitting in the dark—to sprout. With a bit of time and magic...poof...the lonely sprouts grow and connect. And for me it was the connecting with the other "sprouts" at a FEELING level that made a difference to me. The five different Theme Circles that I have enjoyed being part of have provided me the opening I needed to share myself with others and to

hear the stories from others. I now know more than ten people by face, by name, by shared stories and definitely by feeling.



In January, the Theme Circles program will be taking sign-ups again for our Winter-Spring semester—February through June. Stay tuned for the details. Tune into your own heart and see if this might be a great place for you to sprout and grow!





## Socially Responsible Santa

By Maggi Hayes

In the fall of 1986, Michael Ferrell, chair of the then Social Responsibility Committee, presented the group with a new idea for holiday giving. In keeping with our first principle of the dignity and worth of every person, he proposed giving a cash gift to selected families in order to allow them to choose the way in which they celebrated the holidays. The idea was immediately accepted and we found three families for our first gifts. While Santa distributed "Responsible" gifts (small boxes of raisins) to the RE children, the elves collected money from the adults. The collection was successful, the raisins not so much.

As the project grew, it went through many changes. The raisins were immediately eliminated and for several years we were able to offer Ben and Jerry's ice cream sandwiches and, working with various community organizations, increase the number of families each year. Unfortunately the sandwiches proved to be quite messy so new treats were found. We did continue to work with various community groups such as COTS, Parent to Parent, and Women Helping Battered Women.

About ten years ago the RE committee approached us and asked if we would consider reducing the commercialism of the holidays by actually eliminating Santa and the treats. We agreed, so now we use the title "Socially Responsible Santa" to represent our original idea of giving cash gifts and allowing families to make their own choices. While many have purchased traditional gifts, others have used the money for past due bills, assistive devices for handicapped family members, and security deposits on apartments, allowing them to move out of a shelter.

Our families come in many forms, from those headed by single parents going back to school to those just recently arrived in our country. They speak many languages and observe many different traditions. Now in its 31st year, the program has given gifts to approximately 450 families and we are incredibly grateful for the generosity of this congregation.

*Thank you to all who participated in Socially Responsible Santa Sunday on December 3. There is still time to contribute. Checks written to FUUSB with "Santa" in the memo may be sent or dropped off at the main office.*





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**Interested in submitting an  
article for the next issue  
of *The Steeple*?**

Next month's issue will be published on January 10. The deadline to submit articles is **December 18**. For our February issue, the deadline will be January 15.

Please send to [newsletter@uusociety.org](mailto:newsletter@uusociety.org).

For more information, please [click here for a copy of How to Get the Word Out](#).

Email [mary@uusociety.org](mailto:mary@uusociety.org) with questions.