



Thomas Burt, Director of Music
Annual Report, June 2020

As I sit down to reflect on this year of music ministry, it's hard to remember anything before March 5. That was the day Rev. Kristen called me to let me know we would have to suspend choir rehearsals, starting that evening. Soon we would not be meeting in person to worship. It was hard to imagine how our music ministry would continue if we couldn't sing together. I wasn't even sure our church would continue at all. But of course, there were several months of music ministry before that day, so let's go back.

In July 2019, I travelled to Denver for the national conference of the Association for Unitarian Universalist Music Ministries (AUUMM). The whole conference was focused on inclusion and equity, examining and confronting our attitudes and policies regarding race, ability, and transgender issues. All of the music selected for the conference was composed by people of color. Innovative workshops challenged longstanding assumptions. Sometimes these group experiences were painful and left me feeling very raw and vulnerable, but I emerged with an even deeper understanding of true inclusivity. I returned to my music ministry at Saltwater with a more open mind, ready to face previously unexamined aspects of my professional practice and philosophy that had helped perpetuate inequity and (yes, I'll say it) white supremacy. This work is ongoing.

After all the staff changes last year, I feel like we began to hit our stride in the fall of 2019, as Oleg, Kristen, and I got used to working together. I took on a much more active role as song leader for hymns, coordinating with Oleg to lead hymns together. Kristen implemented quarterly worship planning meetings that involved many members, as well as staff, and we started to get into a regular rhythm of planning and execution. Monthly themes from Soul Matters gave us a focus to unite the efforts of every part of our church, so we could keep the big picture of our mission in mind as we collaborated.

Then everything changed. All of a sudden, there was no choir, no accompanist for hymns, no singing together. Instead of quarterly planning, we had to scramble each week to put together a service for the coming Sunday. What works in person doesn't always work online, and the topics and music we had chosen had to be changed to align with the drastic changes in everyone's lives. Hymns had to work with guitar, and I had to become an accompanist as well as song leader. At times it was messy, and I felt incompetent, but a sense duty to each other, a need for each other, kept me marching, however ploddingly, forward. We all pulled together, and I was truly amazed at how meaningful and rewarding worship could be created online, even with the technical issues of Zoom.

Beyond the technical aspects, I think I grew even more around the spiritual aspects of staying connected despite our physical separation. I've had to be much more intentional about fellowship and push myself to connect in ways that haven't come naturally to me in the past. Recognizing the importance of the fellowship aspect of choir rehearsal, I started weekly choir fellowship on Zoom at the regular rehearsal time, so even though we couldn't sing together, we could stay connected. I started a project to call every member and compile a list of potential musical offerings. I gathered so many musical gifts that it wasn't possible to include them all in today's service, but often the personal connections I made turned out to be more important than the musical inventory I was taking. It's easy to take that connection for granted when we're all in the same room. Making the effort has deepened my relational bonds and my appreciation of my fellow members. It's been a good year.