Best Foot Forward
January 12, 2025

Good morning!

I'm EmmaLia, I use she/hers. I am the nominee for the President of the Board of the Congregation for 2025. I am looking forward to the Congregation's Annual meeting on the 26th where members will vote on our new board and other church business.

We're looking at a big year within our congregation in 2025; one where we will make many decisions about how we want to be together, how we say farewell to how things have been, and how we will set up leadership in our congregation for years to come. This Sunday's service is quite a bit different than our usual services, and heavy on church business. For those of you here this morning who are not members (yet), I hope that this service can be intriguing and encouraging to you as well– all people have to face change and shifts in leadership, and all organizations are shaped by how we treat each other when we are challenged. We are glad you are here.

One large change this year will come with the resignation of our Senior Minister, Reverend Angela Herrera-Koren. She is set to leave her position on June 1st when the programming year comes to a close. Additionally, the role of Director of Religious Education and the role of pianist are being removed due to budget realities; Mia Noren will be laid off after 12 years as a staff member of our church, and Nicia after two.

Another significant area of change and discernment will be our approach to the budget. Did you know that we have done a **Close the Gap** effort every year for six years? What was once a method of emergency fundraising has essentially become a normal part of our fundraising to-dos. Again, we are in mid January and did not reach our pledge goal for the operating budget in 2025. We were aiming for 1.1 million dollars and as of this morning we are around 840 thousand dollars in pledges. In the Annual Meeting, the board will be presenting a budget that does not have a deficit. This means that our budget will shrink from 2024's, not the growth we hoped for but actual cuts to operations.

With these large changes and decisions in our near future, We thought it would be productive to talk through what we do know going into this year and what we have control over in this transition.Then I'll explore what we don't know and can't control.

First, we have control over the process. We will lean on the Unitarian Universalist Association, the UUA, for guidance in our ministerial transition.

We will hire an Interim Minister. Interim ministers are ministers who specialize in helping congregations through ministerial transitions. We will be voting on some of this process at the annual congregational meeting on the 26th. When we are ready, we will call a long term

minister, democratically selecting a senior minister that we believe we can support and will serve our congregation well. This whole process is likely to take two years, starting with a year focused on learning what to look for.

We know that we will learn. We will change, grow, and make mistakes. We will seek forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. Even with our best foot forward and our best intentions, we will make mistakes. Even when we lean on our processes, even when we include many voices in our discernment, we will look back and think 'wow, it really would have been better if I did that differently.' Some mistakes we will see coming from a mile away, others we won't know about until months or years after the mistake was made, and there will be some that we don't ever realize. May we have the wisdom to notice them and respond to them the best that we can.

We know that we will feel loss. There will be grief. Reverend Angela is an incredible leader and there are aspects of her leadership and presence that each of us will feel and miss. Also, Ministerial transition is a normal part of the life of a church. While it is a loss, it is a normal change– it will create infinite opportunities for reflection, growth, and new directions for our community.

I know that I am not alone in my resistance to change; I consistently seek comfort and stability; familiarity and facts. As Octavia Butler reminds us, "All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change."

We also know that we have been fiscally responsible. Under the care and guidance of many First Unitarian staff and volunteers, we have made significant changes to our budget that carried us through the difficult years immediately following initial impacts of COVID-19.

As with any responsible and budget-concerned nonprofit, our largest line item is overwhelmingly staff pay. We currently employ 17 staff members to support the operation of our church, not including facility hosts and childcare providers. These positions directly serve our community building efforts, maintain our physical surroundings, and enable a broad range of campus activities. Several of these employees have also contributed to significant reductions in operating costs- such as substantial reductions to the cost of running our physical plant thanks to efficiencies created by Director of Facilities Miguel Perez.

Over the past five years, we have ramped up leveraging our substantial physical footprint to support communities beyond UUs and fiscally support ourselves through rentals. These include sharing our campus with the Center for Spiritual Living, Minara Muslim Community, Roots Academy summer program, Vanguard Behavioral Health, and many other one-off or recurring events. Our partnerships with these communities are strong; we often are recipients of their generosity as they care for our shared spaces as their homes as well.

We also know that we have a generous and engaged community. You can see it every Sunday- we have many people attending in person, we have many people attending online. Something that being on the board has taught me is that the congregation is much larger than that. There are so many people who care deeply about this community but are rarely on campus- folks who were married here or raised kids in our RE programs and continue to feel connection and gratitude; folks who listen to all services online and feel fed by the wisdom shared from the pulpit; folks who tutor children, volunteer in the pantry, assist in ESL and citizenship, cherishing the joyous work of beloved community. This community care can also be felt in the memorial garden, where many people choose the memorial wall as one of their final resting places, home among beloveds.

We have consistently witnessed fiscal generosity as well. Collective raises such as 'Raise the Roof' for roof repairs, purchasing the building that Vanguard Behavioral Health is in, and 'Close the Gap' efforts in years past, we reached our fundraising goals. We have had people step up and pitch in for their passion projects as well- one recent contribution includes a new sign on the street corner. Additionally, in 2024, we had our membership grow by 60 members; each person representing infinite possibilities of connection and growth.

It is also known that transitions are expensive. Searching for the best fit for our congregation will come with several expected costs for relocating the interim ministers. More generally, it is known that the church will always have expenses. Exciting growth projects, reactionary repair costs, and standard operating costs will all need continued and sustainable generosity and support.

The Board has a proposed budget drawn up to present to the congregation on the 26th. The current proposal is based on our raises from the pledge drive that officially concludes today. The budget does not include a deficit.

This is not an ideal budget. It includes cuts to several line items. Some of these line items are removing any adjustment we were hoping to increase as presented in our pledge campaign, such as properly staffing a Technical Arts Director. The other half are cuts to existing programming- from reductions in worship and honoraria, partnership contributions to ABQ Faithworks and ABQ Interfaith, and elimination of two staff roles. To learn more about the budget, please come to the Town Hall at 12:15 today in the Sanctuary.

We prefer to present a budget that does not include these cuts. If you have procrastinated for the last minute or just forgotten, this is the last minute and time to put in that pledge commitment. If you give regularly, even scheduled, and have not submitted a pledge, please

submit one because that's the only way it can be included in the 2025 budget. If you can sustainably promise more in your pledge, please do so. We want to present a budget to the congregation on the 26th that matches our ability to fund with a sustainable approach to our cost of operations. We want to pass a budget that is truly within our means.

Okay, so that is what we know. We will need to be patient. We will need to engage in the process to feel any solid ground below our feet.

No one knows what this year will bring. No one knows how this congregation will change for you, how it will feel different for you, how it will feel the same, and no one knows how your relationships to people and UU theology will change during this time.

Okay, take a deep breath.

We will need to sit in the discomfort of not knowing together, and put our best foot forward to invite the best possible outcomes. I bet that we will regularly be sitting with **these** unsatisfying answers this year as we run in to new questions:

- We will not know this right now, and that is okay.
- We don't know what is going to happen, and that is okay.
- There is something we don't know- and maybe it is something that we shouldn't know. That is okay.
- We may never understand why this is, and that is okay.

Now let's talk about what is unknown and we do NOT have control over:

First, it is unknown who will be our next senior minister. Although we do have a process to follow and guidance from the UUA, we will not know what leadership will look like in our church until the end of the process when our congregation democratically calls them to ministry. This process is a long and participatory process. There will be many opportunities to ask questions and contribute.

We also don't know what will happen with Reverend Bob. We have a process that we will follow for ministerial transition, and it is too early to speculate what Reverend Bob's role will be in the future. One of the things that the congregation will need to do is to learn more about what we will want in a minister. That will be the work that the search team will be doing.

We also don't know how these changes will impact staff and congregants.

We have an incredible crew of staff– as you have heard from the pulpit over the last couple of months, not only have many of our staff members worked here for many years, many of them have found spiritual home and community in the congregation as well. Even with that backdrop,

it is natural that there will be rippling effects of leadership transition. This is a great moment to show your support and encouragement to staff. Letting staff know that you feel and appreciate the impact of their work, especially in these years of large changes, will make all the difference.

Those are the unknowns that I have to share today. Perhaps there are many more unknown unknowns out there for us to discover, and I am curious to hear about ones that you may have in mind right now. You will have an opportunity to raise those at the Town Hall after the second service.

We are entering quite an interesting year! There are many spiritual themes in this change– acute moments to practice saying goodbye in a kind and meaningful way, opportunities for engagement and growth and skill building while we shape a large organization during a significant change, and of course finding peace in not knowing all information and not knowing what the future holds. While this is a noteworthy point in this community's journey, we have been practicing for it in ways large and small, and we will meet this challenge.

My wish for this congregation as we make this massive step is that we put love in the center of all that we do. May it be so.

BENEDICTION
May love guide us on our journey forward, go in peace.