

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

October 25, 2021 Minutes

President Don Barber called the special meeting of the Board of Trustees (BoT) to order at 7:00pm on Monday, October 25, 2021.

Trustees Present: Don Barber (President), Therese O'Connor (Vice President), Diana Nier (Clerk), Valerie Graves, Simon Catterall, Nancy Miller, Margaret Nichols, John Gaines, Elton Hall, Walt Peck (Treasurer, ex officio).

Trustees Absent: none

FUSIT Members & Guests: Michelle Waffner (Administrator), Emily Richardson (DRE), Loretta Heimbuch (Admin Assistant), Harry Dutton, Kathy Hopkins, Marie Benedetti, Susan Murphy, Elizabeth Bixler, Maureen Cowen, Fran Helmstadter, Carol Whitlow, Hans Fleischmann, Russ Charif, Beth Howard, Madonna Stallmann, Dick Kurtz, Elizabeth Einstein, Barbara Shew, Beverly West, Jennifer Streid-Mullen, Rick Geddes, Kathy McHugh, Sue Roenke, Jens Wennberg, James Skaley, Arthur Woll, Kevin Moss, Jessica Brown, Sue Rakow, Don Rakow, Sam Weeks & Terry Star, Matt Hare, Marie McRae, Fred Connor, Phyllis Smith-Hansen, Lexa Liepe, Wendy Salomon, Jo Carcich, Gretchen Ryan, Angela Zhang, Carrie Lang, Jeri Gallucci, Carsten Hess, Magdalen Lindeberg, Jan Pflaiderer, Brian Heltsley, Marsha Kardon, Rebecca Elgie, Andrew Quagliata, Amelia Habicht, Fred Balfour, Jim (last name unknown).

Agenda Item # 1: Welcome and Chalice Lighting

Therese O'Connor read some opening words, lit the chalice, and offered a brief introduction of the meeting topic.

Agenda Item # 2: Discussion of Rev. Anthony Johnson's Letter of Resignation

MOTION: Accept Rev. Anthony Johnson's letter of resignation. (Full text of the letter appended to the end of the minutes.) Moved by Therese O'Connor, seconded by John Gaines.

Don Barber presented Rev. Tony's letter of resignation and opened the floor to questions and discussion. Therese O'Connor moderated and called upon attendees to speak.

Discussion topics included:

- Why are we still paying Rev. Tony for four months of work he will not be doing?
 - This is part of the UUA's standard interim contract. Breaking those terms might open us to legal challenges.
 - This would not have been a great point to negotiate in detail during the hiring process, since it gives a bad impression.
- Was Rev. Tony fired? Did he quit unexpectedly?

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- Rev. Tony resigned, after a process of discussion with the Board.
 - This was a mutual decision, undertaken with care and deliberation.
- Will we be searching for another interim minister for the remainder of this year?
 - According to Keith Kron, no interim ministers are currently available
 - No ministers of any type are available. There are over twenty congregations currently in search with no candidates to be found.
 - We will be a lay-led congregation for the remainder of 2021-2022. We have been in this situation before and will rise to the occasion once again.
- Was Rev. Tony misled about what his job included?
 - The search team and contract negotiators were very clear during the search and contract process.
 - At the time the contract was negotiated, it seemed likely that we would resume in-person services much sooner than we have. The Covid-19 situation changed abruptly and unexpectedly.
- Multiple expressions of support for congregational leadership
 - We need to work together to live up to our best selves as a community
 - Importance of working toward forgiving Rev. Tony and ourselves
- How are interim ministers accredited? Was Rev. Tony unqualified for the job?
 - Rev. Tony has been an interim minister for many years, and was certified by the UUA. During the search process, he appeared to be a good fit for our needs.
 - The Interim Search Team checked his references and everything looked fine
- Legally, can we make Rev. Tony work during the 4-month period of his notice? If so, should we?
 - The Board will discuss our way forward with staff this week, and we will raise that as an option
- Should the Transition Team be dissolved?
 - The Board will provide some direction on this issue later in the week.
 - The Team's current charge will need to be rewritten if it continues
 - Suggestion to let Transition Team members switch to other teams and committees, such as the Outreach and Engagement Team
- What happens with his Ithaca apartment lease?
 - Rev. Tony will need to negotiate that with the Dorias
- Will this affect our image as a congregation and make it harder for us to find a new minister?
 - The UUA is aware of the issue, and Renee Ruchotzke and Keith Kron understand the situation
 - The idea that we are considered a difficult congregation is not necessarily true.
- Rev. Tony's resignation is very recent, and the Board and staff do not have answers to all questions yet. Please be patient and allow congregational leadership to work.
- Many people are hurt and angry that Rev. Tony has not fulfilled the responsibilities his contract stipulated, and that we have to pay him for an additional four months.

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- How unexpected was this?
 - The Board, staff, and Transition Team have been working with Rev. Tony to set goals and guidelines
 - He has been struggling with a context that works against his strengths as a minister, and trying to minister almost entirely via Zoom was harder than he expected
 - FUSIT leadership has been aware of his struggles
- Discussion of narratives surrounding events within FUSIT
- We have been going through many transitions in rapid succession. What is the best/most productive way to deal with that?
 - Use Listening Circles to begin discerning our way forward
 - Dislike for interim ministers in general, and for the potential financial drain of multiple interim contracts
 - Lay leadership is not a viable long-term plan; desire for a new settled minister
 - Settled ministers are also very rare right now, which must be kept in mind when planning for the future
- Staff were struggling to cope with Rev. Tony's inability to fulfil his job responsibilities.
 - They felt they were working without a minister anyway.
 - Expressions of heartfelt support for FUSIT staff
- FUSIT currently has no Celebration Team. This will need to be corrected soon!

Discussion was closed at 8:08pm and the Board voted. **MOTION PASSED.**

Agenda Item # 3: Reading of the Board Letter to the Congregation

Valerie Graves read the text of the letter, which is appended at the end of the minutes.

Agenda Item # 4: Discussion of Upcoming Events

- Don Barber reminded all those at the meeting that we are in this together, and announced a (hybrid) meeting of congregational leaders, date and time TBA
 - Michelle Waffner will send out a Doodle poll to help schedule that meeting
- Discussion of Board participation in October 31st Sunday service
 - Should Board members host a congregational conversation during the coffee hour period after the service?

Agenda Item # 4: Closing Words

Therese read some closing words and extinguished the chalice.

MOTION TO ADJOURN: Moved by Therese O'Connor, seconded by Simon Catterall. **PASSED.**

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Meeting adjourned at 8:11pm.

Minutes taken by Diana Nier, 10/25/2021.

Rev. Tony Johnson Letter of Resignation

October 22, 2021

Don Barber, President
The First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Dear Don,

I write to offer my resignation as interim minister of the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca with my final work day to be November 8 and with the understanding that compensation and benefits will continue for four months thereafter.

I intend to work with the church leadership and staff and the UUA staff to make the transition as smooth and constructive as possible.

It has been an honor to work with the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca.

Sincerely,
(The Reverend) Anthony P. Johnson

Board of Trustees Letter to the Congregation

Dear Beloved FUSIT Congregants,

This past week, Reverend Tony and representatives from our Board of Trustees have negotiated a mutually acceptable dissolution of Reverend Tony's role at FUSIT. The Board has accepted his resignation effective November 8. We, as a congregation, are faced with immense challenges this church year. Unfortunately there have been insurmountable obstacles to building the relationships we need right now between our interim minister, and the staff, the Board, and the congregation.

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There have been times in recent history, when FUSIT has been without a minister. Those periods left us strong and inspired by our lay leadership, the wealth of spiritual knowledge in our beloved community, and guests from the Ithaca and UU communities.

Right now our community needs inspiration and connection. We need to be together, while being careful to protect our most vulnerable members. We must look out for each other. We must help each other to heal from the isolation, disappointment, and despair of the past year. We must reach out to each other to cultivate joy and playfulness despite it all.

Looking forward, the Board wants to reassure you that the church will be well cared for and the FUSIT ministry programs will continue. Our church will be opening our doors in November as planned. We are encouraged by the strength of our programs like Living the Pledge to End Racism, Small Group Ministries, Babies First, support for the Ithaca Sanctuary Alliance, and the Treasure Auction to name a few. And we are heartened by the commitment and energy of our staff.

The Board of Trustees and the FUSIT staff are engaged and active. We are eager to hear from you, and to support the important role FUSIT can play in our lives and greater community. We hope you will reach out to staff, to the Board, and to each other. Your involvement is a vital part of the process of healing, connecting, and living more deeply into our covenant.

With all the pain and suffering in the world, let this community provide a haven of kindness and warmth to you and may we, as a congregation, provide the same to the greater world.

With love and support,
Valerie Graves for the FUSIT Board of Trustees