

**Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist
Board of Trustees
Board Meeting: March 10, 2026
MINUTES**

Board Member of the Month: Heather O'Connor

Attachments

1. *February Board Meeting Minutes*
2. *March Minister's Report*
3. *Treasurer's Report FY2025*
4. *RE Program: Visitor information*
5. *RE Program: Registration*
6. *RE Program: Current information*

<u>Board Members</u>	Present	Absent
Dean Peterson, President	X	
Will Hoye, Vice President		X
Dawn Carter, Past President	X	
Catherine Grodensky	X	
Heather O'Connor	X	
Briton Bieze		X
Ginger Guidry	X	
Deborah Day		X
Peter Hendee	X	
<u>Ex Officio</u>		
Thom Belote, Minister / Chief of Staff	X	
Andrew Wright, Treasurer	X	
Brian Pence, Secretary	X	

<u>Insch Fellow</u>		
Tobin Wright	X	
<u>Guests</u>		
Caleigh Grogan, Interim Minister	X	
Bonnie Nelson, Stewardship Chair	X	
Barb Chapman, Legacy Chair	X	
Marion Hirsch, Director of Religious Education	X	
Josh Socolar, chair, Music Director search committee	X	

*****Requires Board Action***

Opening

7:00-7:15

Chalice Lighting, Opening Reading and Welcome

Heather O'Connor

Thirty Second Check Ins

All

Acknowledgement of Consent Agenda

N/A

Agenda
February Minutes (Att 1)
March Minister's Report (Att 2)
Treasurer's Report FY2025 (Att 3)

For 2026, the Board has decided that the Consent Agenda items will be considered accepted if no objections are raised before the end of the meeting. Objections or discussion points may be raised at any time before or during the meeting, but particularly now or under Other Business.

Updates

7:15-7:35

Annual pledge drive update
(5 min)

Bonnie Nelson

Pledge drive is going well. A bit of a slow start due to weather. All board members have pledged, thank you! And thank you for messages from Board. 185 pledges to date, \$510,000. Pledges overall are up a bit. 8 first-time pledges.

Public phase has ended. Still ~150-180 pledges outstanding. Follow-up is continuing: email, mailed packages, calls, asking at church. This is very par for the course. Outstanding support from staff.

HVAC financing plan update
(10 min)

Bonnie Nelson, Andrew Wright

Project moving forward. Working with architect. Main scope: Roof membrane and HVAC. Secondary components: Stage floor and lights; balcony glass railing. Still refining estimates. Estimates have gone up a bit. Top of the range is ~\$500,000. Final number may be less than that. Achievable with successful building campaign. Exact timing will depend on HVAC, still defining specs to place order.

Financials:

HVAC system: \$90,000.

Roof membrane: \$100,000

Rest: Electrical, dimmers, LEDs, balcony, flooring, door

Next stage: Bids from general contractors. Should have those before next board meeting. Signature probably around next board meeting.

No action from board needed, project already approved.

Door replacement: From security strategy, if we have the opportunity to remove a window we may want to take that opportunity.

Consider steel door with some sort of treatment that doesn't require painting, as paint may not hold.

Prior approval from board: (1) approved project; (2) approved purchase of materials. Board has not approved dollar amount. (May be helpful to refer back to minutes.)

Where will the church come up with \$500,000?

Roof + HVAC will be \$190,000. Balance is secondary priorities, could be tweaked if needed.

Plan to bring full cost estimate either to next board meeting or executive committee if before next board meeting.

Treasurer has plan for covering initial costs.

Could be financed, but good to avoid if possible. Avoid burdening next capital campaign with debt from this project. Very difficult for churches to get loans right now.

Request to Andrew and Bonnie: Please update board within next two weeks of status.

Security Committee update
(5 min)

Heather O'Connor

Excellent report from consultant identifying gaps in security needs but acknowledging that we want to continue to be a welcoming community - how can we balance those two things and make progress toward security.

Consultant gave advice about next steps. Lots of points for improvement. Clear plan forward.

Two major areas:

- Conflict prevention
- Early threat detection

Next steps

- Develop lock down, lock out, and shelter in place policies.
- Formation of security team; training
- Procedures for incident reporting. Who is called, how is congregation alerted

Coordination with campus police? Being researched.

Stretch break!

~ 5 minutes

Discussion item

7:45 - 8:30

RE Program visioning
(40 min)

Marion

RE Program: Visitor information (Att 4)
RE Program: Registration (Att 5)
RE Program: Current information (Att 6)

[See Marion's comments appended below]

Discussion:

- Unique: Our RE professionals do direct ministry with children. Rather than administrate and delegate curriculum to volunteers.
- Why come to church? - Transformative personal experience; building community; change the world. Our children are here for the same things.
- Regular question here: How can we involve children in X?
- Role of Mosaic? Consistently expressed desire of congregants for us to be better about racism and dismantling racism. Mosaic is a program being rolled out by UUA - guidance

on engaging with this issue. Are rolling out elementary program this year. Expanding to youth next year.

- Board and leadership have been incredibly supportive of children and youth ministry. Shared vision of program.
- Marion expects to retire in 5 years, in 2031.

Updates

8:30 - 8:45

Music Director search update (12 min)

Josh Socolar

Position advertised in December. 7-9 applications, wide geographic spread and wide range of backgrounds and strengths. 5 viewed as competitive, completed interviews. Consensus formed around top two, and third strong alternative. Top two have had second interview. Search committee will meet on Sunday to try to decide by consensus to whom to make an offer. Two candidates are quite different. Focus on consistency: Same interview, same questions to each candidate. Candidates met with staff.

Staff appreciated being included in interview process.

Advertised as 75% position, with flexibility of 50-75%.

This Sunday: Expect to name one person as finalist and invite them to come visit, meet with choir, staff, other musicians - mini candidating week.

Report from listening sessions led by Patty: How did that feedback factor into search process?

- Looking not just for best musician, but for someone who shares our sensibilities of role of music in worship and church life. Factored into interview questions.

Communication with congregation: Might take a week or two to arrange a visit. Official offer may be made ~April 1. Aiming for some overlap with Glenn.

Other Business (next month items) (3 min)

Dean Peterson

Recent board discussion about possible additional ministerial needs. Thom to discuss with HR committee what are key staffing needs. Expect a main topic in April board meeting to focus on this discussion.

Rachel to come to April board meeting to discuss Welcoming Ministry.

Smith Center renovation / relocation may have relevance to church - Odum Village site.

Getting to Know you Continued

If time allows

Backgrounds and Interests / what would you like to share

- Why UU?
- Family
- Background / Education / Work
- Recommend a favorite movie!
- Check in - anything else to know how you are doing

Closing

8:50-9:00

Prior Month Action Items

N/A

Action Item List (with due dates and who)

Brian Pence

- Bonnie and Andrwe to notify board within next two weeks of status of project
- Music director search committee to consider congregation communication process.
- Barb will pass to Deborah Day all relevant HR materials.

Meeting evaluation (plus / delta)

Heather O'Connor

Plus

- +++Marion. Thank you for everything.
- +++Josh and search committee.
- Carving time out of board meeting for program presentation
- Stretch break
- Security committee's work
- Commitment of board to what is going on in church
- Materials in advance
- Non-bolded minutes 😊
- Bonnie and Andrew's dedication
- Appreciate invitation to Marion
- Appreciate time management

Delta

- Cold!! (Or warm!!)

Chalice Extinguishing and reading

Heather O'Connor

Board Presentation on the Future of Religious Education

Marion Hirsch, Director of Religious Education

March 10, 2025

Thank you. I was very honored that Dean asked me to come and talk with you about the future of our Religious Education Program and what our vision for it might be.

I sent you materials to give you a sense of our religious education program as it currently is. Included is the brochure we share with visitors, what our numbers have been over the past twentyish years, what is included in our program, who our leaders are, and our current statistics. When we get to the discussion part of our time together, you can ask me questions about our current program. What I want to do in my presentation is talk about the future and what our approach might be.

But first, I want to provide some context. This congregation is unusually healthy in its culture, finances and growth. I'm continually grateful for this. Our religious education is the 7th largest program in our whole movement. This is due in no small part to the unwavering support the leaders of the congregation, both ministers and boards, have given to programs and staffing for religious education for decades. I am deeply appreciative of being part of a community that treasures its young people so deeply. What you might not know is that our deep commitment to children and youth predates my joining the staff in 1999. I say this because often people attribute our success to my leadership. Not understanding that the success of a religious education program is the commitment of a whole congregation.

We did not use to be anywhere near the top 10 in size. We have grown, but our current status has more to do with the decline in the size of religious education programs across Unitarian Universalism. The number of children and youth in RE programs has dropped from 50 thousand to about 20 thousand since 2008.

Why are RE enrollments dropping, and why haven't ours?

There have been big changes and disruptions in the last 20 years: the pandemic lockdown, the 2008 financial crisis, and the current political situations are obvious changes that disrupted everything, including the church. But there are also more subtle cultural changes that impact religious education that could have disrupted our success.

But equally evolving changes in our culture have had a big impact on religious education programs for youth and children:

- Increasing secularism of American life, particularly in the millennial generation
- Collapse of old models of volunteerism
- The impact of technology on community cohesion
- Busyness of families
- Increase in sports practices on Sundays and the erosion of Sunday as a church day.
- Pressure for academic success and resume building for kids
- Impact of smartphones on young people's social needs
- The epidemic of anxiety among children and youth

Increase in neurodivergent children and youth in the population

Responding to these changes required attention and discernment. In order to be able to pivot in a crisis like the pandemic or the 2008 financial crisis, which had an impact on our budget, adjust to slow-moving cultural challenges, or embrace ambitious goals, we had to be very clear about values. We had to know we doing and why.

Oddly, the thing that helped me the most when I first started in this work was thinking about church, UU, and Religious education as a brand. Before I was a religious educator, I was a librarian/archivist. My last position as an archivist was at Duke University Library in the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History. What I learned in that job was that when you are trying to establish a successful brand, you identify what makes that brand special and different. What that brand offers that is unique or nearly unique functionally. The idea is that the church is special and UU is special, and if we understand what makes it special and stick to that, then we will be focused and effective. It is to get distracted from what is important if you don't understand your niche.

Church is a place that is focused on shared values. It is one of the most genuinely multigenerational spaces. People come to church for 3 reasons (irrespective of theology): transforming spirituality, authentic community, and a chance to change the world. So I always think about shared values, a multigenerational community and why people come to church. I focus on meeting those needs.

In addition, it is important to understand that Unitarian Universalism is a particular faith, unique. (I shared an anecdote about Coca-Cola's company fundamental failure in New Coke as a response to Pepsi Cola's Pepsi Challenge. Being distinct is important.) It is hard to tell real differences between mainline protestant denominations today and they are all losing membership precipitously.

Some understandings and values are the foundation of our religious education program and guide us as we navigate change.

- Understanding that relationship is the most important element for any community. More important than any program.
- Understanding that community requires that people show up. There is no substitute for presence. So making this a place that people actually prioritize and come is essential.
- Providing programs that parents and young people enjoy and need. And being flexible about what that looks like is key. For example, we have a youth staff internship and as far as I know we were the first to start this kind of program in UUism, but now many of our peer congregations also have a program like this.
- Understanding more any curriculum or program, love is our real curriculum, and it is conveyed in everything we do.

- Children and youth are human, and they have spiritual needs and aspirations. Their needs are more similar to adults than different. They need church too. Not just supervision. Or learning. They need ministry and to belong. Spiritual, Community, and a chance to change the world.
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What makes us stand out is not just our numbers but the way our program is structured now and the ways we have changed. We were able to respond to the changes in the culture and disruption because we were flexible about things that could change so we could be faithful to things that matter.

Here are some changes we have made.

- Primarily worship-based (except for special programs, OWL, Neighboring Faiths, and Coming of Age, which are curriculum-based)
- Our youth program and our children's programs are nearly equally sized. We pay attention to what the youth need.
- Volunteer Structure: In most congregations, RE programs are led by volunteers. Professional staff provide administration and training, but mostly don't lead programs. We have flipped it. Programs are led by the professional staff and a small group of volunteer leaders who are deeply committed to the subject matter and have a call to serve. OWL, youth group advisors, Neighboring Faiths. We also have a deep group of volunteers who serve on Children and Youth Ministry Teams who are responsible for the ongoing evaluation, vision, and direction of those programs. We also have a parent cooperative for almost all parents, which allows them to help out in ways that are simple, straightforward and engaging.
- We prioritize OWL
- Not singing out of the service after 15 minutes. Kids deserve a full worship experience. Not truncated.
- We have enough space.

As we consider the future (this was also a handout)

S(w)OT Analysis

Strengths

- Demography and geography
- Usually strong, broad, longstanding support for Religious Education and young people from ministers, board, wider congregational leadership, and the congregation as a whole, both philosophically and with resources.
- Committed and creative lay leaders in our Children, Youth, and OWL Ministry Teams
- Financial position
- Congregational health
- Wonderful children, youth, and families.

- Congregational support of religious educators (salaries, benefits, professional development, and esteem)
- Excellent leadership from our Religious Educators

Known Opportunities:

- New staff leadership
- Epidemic of loneliness/lack of 3rd places
- Our Whole Lives Program
- Mosaic and working for Collective Liberation
- Increased understanding in the population of the need for community, solidarity, belonging

Known Threats:

- Staff retirement
- Changing demographics
- Increasing secularization
- Technology
- Broader political and economic disruption
- Need for space and parking

What about weaknesses?

Why do we use appreciative inquiry in our analysis and deemphasize weaknesses? It is easier to build from strengths so we start there.

What about unexpected threats and opportunities?

The key to our past success and our future success is how we respond to change, both the expected and unexpected. It is the unexpected changes that are the most challenging. Often, when we are in the midst of demographic and social changes, we don't really understand what is happening until it is well underway. Being proactive is not enough; we must also be effectively reactive. For me, it is listening and reading

Vision for RE in the Future

Transformative Spirituality– Worship Associates for Chalice Chapel, Theology Cafe for Teens and Parents, Integrating Spiritual Practice

Authentic Community– more fellowship for children, parents and families,

A Chance to Change the World – antiracism learning, social justice camps, more service/learning trips, leadership opportunities for children