Wesley Theological Seminary

Everything Brought to Speech

Oral History as Communal Healing After Pandemic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic affected every individual and institution; however, the nature of its impact was not universal. While the overall experience of the pandemic is commonly described as negative, the reality is that experiences ranged from traumatic to positive. The author argues that: 1. The pandemic's varied impact contributed to institutional challenges at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln; and 2. Sharing stories of the pandemic's impacts across the community could mitigate the sense of disconnection and communal trauma.

This project describes a method of telling individual stories in a collective environment that may be valuable in contexts beyond Covid-19. From August-December 2022, 91 members and friends of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln recorded oral histories of the Covid-19 pandemic, in groups of two or three. The author developed the interview format, transcribed the interviews, and shared the stories with the congregation as part of a Sunday morning worship service. Following the project and the worship service, direct participants and the broader congregation reported increased levels of connection with each other, and greater empathy towards each other's experience.

To the members and friends of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln.

The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma.
- Judith Herman

Thus [psalms of lament] make the important connection: everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God, who is the final reference for all of life.
-Walter Brueggemann

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Thank you to the members, friends, staff, and lay leaders of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln. This project would not have been possible without the full support and enthusiastic participation of the congregation. I am amazed at how many people participated, and how willing they were to share with each other and with me. As a student the first time at Wesley Theological Seminary a decade ago, I learned that the first duty of any successful ministry is genuine care for the community we serve. The people of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln make that an easy duty. If this project is successful, it is because of them.

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She is.

Rev. Oscar Sinclair, February 10, 2023.

Introduction

The recording is amateurish but passable, by late pandemic standards. The video quality is slightly grainy, the camera angle too high. The lighting, at least, is good: a function of a sunny late spring afternoon, rather than equipment or intention. "First, I know that some of you want nothing more to be in our building worshiping together again," the message starts. "We hear you, we see you, and all of us share your hunger for connection. And: I have heard from many of you that you value our commitment to being apart during this time. I am proud to serve a congregation that takes the health and safety of our members, friends, and staff so seriously."[1]

On May 14, 2020, the Unitarian Universalist Association sent out a message to churches and clergy in the denomination, with updated guidance for gathering during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Based on advice from experts…we also recommend that congregations begin planning for virtual operations for the next year (through May 2021)."[2] In the video update published by the Unitarian Church of Lincoln later that afternoon, many characteristics of three years of pandemic ministry are already apparent: new technologies and avenues for communication harnessed and adapted to quickly; guidance at the denominational and local church levels that emphasized much was unknown as much as specific recommendations; and tension between members wanting to return to the building and wanting to stay home.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, the church's shared story has fractured. Even as the pandemic has been universal in its impact, its effect on individuals in the community has varied wildly. Further, the nature of the pandemic has meant that the community has been less present

[1] Oscar Sinclair, "Daily Update May 14, 2020," www.youtube.com/unitarianchurchoflincoln, May 14, 2020, https://youtu.be/7QVOF0b4T14.
[2] Susan Frederick-Grey, "A Message from the UUA President: Updated Guidance for Gathering | Press Releases | UUA.org," www.uua.org, May 14, 2020, https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/message-uua-president-updated-guidance-gathering.

in individual lives: we have lost time in each other's company. In Lincoln, it blunted several major initiatives launched in late 2019 and 2020, and fractured the congregation's experience of the long running racial justice protests that escalated in 2020. Until recently, there has been little opportunity to intentionally reflect on these and other individual and collective losses as a community.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the Unitarian Church of Lincoln in ways that we are still trying to understand. This project is an attempt to gain a better understanding – telling the story of what happened to understand the effect it has had on the community. Over three months in the fall of 2022, 91 members of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln participated in an oral history project, recording conversations with each other about what the last three years have been like: what their first memories of COVID-19 are, what they struggled with and learned, what images stick with them, and what role the church played in the experience.

Through collecting these interviews, and then sharing them back to the congregation, I hope to generate and deepen the congregation's moral and communal imagination. Hearing each other's disparate stories can help us gain a deeper identity as a community that has collectively lived through a traumatic experience. In so doing, we may be better equipped to reintegrate our experiences into the story of our congregation's 150-year history.

This project operates under the assumption that the COVID-19 pandemic should be understood as potentially traumatic.[3] Fischer and Riedesser write that trauma is the "experience of a fundamental discrepancy between a threatening situation and an individual's possibilities for

[3] There is a debate in trauma scholarship over whether trauma is intrinsic to certain events, or to the reactions to those events. For the purposes of this project, I will use 'traumatic events' to refer to events that trigger a trauma response in at least some of the people who experienced them.

overcoming it."[4] If trauma is the result of a gap in magnitude between the threat we face and the margin of control we have over it, we can understand the last three years of lockdowns, mask mandate, toilet paper shortages, and mass deaths as a traumatic event. Even as we sewed masks and traded best practices for communal gatherings, no individual or church community could reasonably eliminate risk.

"The experience [of trauma]," Fischer and Riedesser continue, "is accompanied by feelings of helplessness, defenselessness and abandonment and can permanently disrupt the person's understanding of the self in the world." Unaddressed, traumatic experiences affect activities of daily life.

The field of individual trauma recovery is complex, but mature. Judith Herman's seminal *Trauma and Recovery* describes three necessary steps to heal from trauma:

1. Establish safety[5]
2. Mourn the traumatic experience
3. Reintegrate the survivor into daily life

Critically for the purposes of this project, mourning the experience requires narrative. Herman states that "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for both the restoration of social order and for the healing of individual victims…the survivor tells the story of the trauma, completely and in detail."[6]

That said, trauma is not only an individual experience. Kai Erikson, a sociologist working in the late 20th century, identified features of trauma responses in *systems and institutions* after

[4] Gottfried Fischer and Peter Riedesser, *Lehrbuch der Psychotraumatologie,* 3rd ed. (Munich: Reinhardt, 2003), 82, 375. Quoted in Ruth Poser, "No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature as Response to Exile."
[5] This is clearly complicated. In Herman's work, establishing safety requires distance and safety from the cause of the trauma. As of this writing, there are still several deaths each month from COVID-19 in Lincoln, and the degree to which we should talk about the pandemic as 'over' is a hotly contested political issue.
[6] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 1992), 1, 175.

major disasters. While events can be traumatic to *individuals*, they can also be traumatic to *communities*. Writing in the aftermath of the 1972 Buffalo Creek Flood, Erikson makes the distinction:

> By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively…by collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it…[is] a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared… 'We' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body[7]

Many of the current symptoms in the system of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, from difficulty recruiting volunteer leadership to staff fatigue, can be understood as a collective trauma response.

Just as Judith Herman provides a model for understanding and healing from individual trauma, Jeffrey Alexander proposes a model for understanding and healing collective trauma. In processing trauma, he writes, carrier groups in a community express:

- The nature of the pain
- The nature of the victim
- The relationship between the victims and the wider audience: the extent to which the trauma narrative prompts a wider audience that has not experienced the same suffering to identify with the victims in the community.
- An attribution of responsibility[8]

[7] Kai Erikson, *Everything in Its Path : Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon And Schuster, 2006), 153-154
[8] Jeffrey C Alexander, *Trauma a Social Theory* (Cambridge Malden Polity, 2015). p 17-19

This project of collecting oral histories from congregants (told directly to each other and then reflected to the congregation as a whole) is aimed squarely at the first three of Alexander's steps – particularly the third. How will we 'imagine' a communal narrative out of the disparate individual experiences of pandemic?

The relationship between individual and group trauma is not simply a sociological theory; it is lived out in religious communities spanning millennia. Chapter [**4?**] describes two areas of tension: first, the historical tension in how the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible articulates lament as a means of community formation. Second, the contemporary tension in Unitarian Universalism between our identity as an iconoclastic, individualistic movement, and our deep theological understanding of interconnection and community. In each of these cases, how the community understands its relationship to the speaker/victim is the hinge that collective identity turns on.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows:

Chapter 1 describes the context in which the project exists, describing the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, its history, and the congregation's collective experience of the pandemic years from 2020-2022.

Chapter 2 describes the theological grounding of this project, including the necessity of lament as a response to collective trauma, and the interplay in Unitarian Universalist theology between individual and collective narrative.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the project itself, including what tools were used, how the project evolved from its conception to completion.

Chapter 4 is a brief interlude, drawing out connections between the methodology of the project and the underlying theology described in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 draws out five common themes from the stories recorded by participants in the project.

Chapter 6 describes the impact of the project, using excerpts from post-project focus groups and surveys completed by participants.

Chapter 7 consists of conclusions and reflections on the project as a whole.

Each Sunday, as part of the liturgy at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, I stand in front of the congregation and say some version of "here we know that all life is interconnected, that what happens to you matters to me, and what brings joy or sorrow to my life affects you." It is this sense of interconnection that has been flattened during the pandemic. Many of us have experienced this time as isolating. I have spent three months listening to and transcribing the stories of this community. Some of the stories I knew already, many I did not. I have laughed, cried, and been struck silent by what members of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln have shared. It is my hope that in recording these stories and sharing them with the congregation, we will start to identify with each other and the community again. In so doing, we will deepen our resilience and be ready for the next chapter.

Context

This project was developed in, and is a response to, the adaptive challenges of the early post-pandemic moment at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln (UCL), Nebraska. Since March of 2020, COVID-19 has been a defining feature of congregational life at UCL. As the immediate crisis of responding to the pandemic has eased, the congregation has entered into a liminal period where we are still coming to terms with the events of the last three years. We recognize that we have changed since 2019, but we are not yet what we are becoming.

The congregational consultant and author Susan Beaumont writes that "entry into a liminal state always begins with the collapse of order. Something has come to an end: an identity, a program, a structure, or a process."[9] Liminal states are characterized by their adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are not responsive to expertise; arising from novel conditions, they require an organization or community to find new ways of responding to a problem outside of its previous experience.[10] Heifetz and Linsky contrast adaptive challenges with technical problems: problems that can be complex and difficult to address, but that are responsive to expertise and preexisting skills. Technical problems are common, including issues like how a church puts together an order of service, organizes bookkeeping, or schedules use of the church building. These questions can be complicated, but all (or most) variables are known, and the skills to solve them are present in the congregation. The situation in Lincoln is adaptive: responding to the current state of the congregation has involved asking questions as much as deploying existing skills.

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[9] Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). 10.
[10] Ronald A Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line.* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002). 13-14.

UCL has experienced at least three distinct liminal periods in the last decade. From 2014-2017, the congregation went through a challenging interim period following the retirement of their long-tenured minister. In early 2020, following advice from Public Health experts, the congregation moved out of their building and fully online. And from mid-2021 to the present, the congregation has reentered our building and members have had to re-learn how to engage in person. Each of these periods has been characterized by adaptive challenges.

In the midst of this third liminal season, we see signs of fatigue and loss across areas of the church. Membership, giving, and attendance are down from their 2019 peaks. The church is struggling to find volunteers willing to serve in leadership positions, and most of the staff team has expressed that they are suffering from symptoms of burnout. These are all consistent with behaviors that William Bridges identifies as characteristic of liminal or 'neutral' times, including a drop off in attendance, rising anxiety and falling motivation, overloaded personnel, and polarized membership.[11]

For UCL, the aftermath of responding to multiple adaptive challenges over a decade is, itself, a major adaptive challenge. How will we be together? How do we reconnect and collectively heal in the aftermath of a pandemic that was universal in its impact, but with highly varied effects on us as individuals? This project is an attempt to respond to this adaptive challenge. To understand the response, it is important to start with the history and context of the congregation.

The Unitarian Church of Lincoln History, 1870-2014

[11] William Bridges and Susan Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, 4th ed. (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2016), 34-36.

The Unitarian Church of Lincoln is a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, located in Lincoln, Nebraska. The congregation traces its history to September 1870, when the First Universalist Society of Lincoln was incorporated by seven charter members, gathered in the home of JD Monell.[12] The congregation had a difficult birth. Among the initial seven members was Rev. J.N. Parker, a traveling Universalist evangelist who inspired the others to found the church. Rev. Parker collected a significant amount of money to fund the construction of a Universalist chapel, before leaving town with the money.

In a letter dated October 20, 1871, GW Tomlinson wrote to Mary Monell, informing her that the Universalist committee of discipline had informed Parker that he must return the funds or be suspended from ministry. "I declare this to be good news," Tomlinson writes, "although I am reluctantly compelled to assent to Br. Montgomery's opinion, that Parker will neither pay, nor give security, & that the society will never be benefitted a single dollar by his collections… [you] can go before the Ex. Board with additional claims in view of the swindle at the hands of a recognized clergyman."[13]

In the years that followed, Mary Monell raised another round of funding for a Universalist chapel, oversaw the work constructing it, and ensured that the bills were paid on time. The first Universalist chapel was dedicated on June 23, 1872, though the following year a financial panic meant the congregation was unable to support its first pastor. The congregation flourished in the 1880s, before a series of crop failures and financial panics at the end of the 1890s left it in an untenable financial position. In May 1898, the First Universalist Society

[12] Arthur Badley Hayes and Samuel D Cox, *History of the City of Lincoln, Nebraska; with Brief Historical Sketches of the State and of Lancaster County* (Lincoln, NE: State Journal Company, 1889), 271–72, https://archive.org/details/historycityoflin00haye.
[13] G.W. Tomlinson to Mary Monell, Handwritten Correspondence, October 20, 1871. History Nebraska Archives.

dissolved, and All Souls Unitarian was founded. A letter from Kate Chapin, the wife of one of the early ministers, describes the congregation in the early 1890s:

> Its members were of all shades of belief – from old-fashioned Universalists who believed in the trinity, to 'broad gauge' Unitarians, who used to advocate to Mr. C the desirability of his saying "Good" instead of "God," and dispensing with prayer in the pulpit, and reading a poem instead of scripture. We had also spiritualists, theosophist, ethical culturalists and "advanced thinkers," as one lady unblushingly declared herself… There were the most excited discussions during the meetings and hot shot was frequently exchanged and blows delivered from the shoulder, but at the close of the meeting the belligerents shook hands in the most friendly manner.[14]

The story of the founding generation of Unitarian Universalism in Lincoln is one of resilience. In response to multiple crises (ministerial misconduct, crop failures, denominational transitions) the congregation not only endured, but laid the groundwork for Unitarianism to be a prominent faith in Lincoln through the 20th and 21st centuries. In contrast, the story of the UCL from the founding of All Souls Unitarian in 1898 to 2014 is one of relative stability. Over a century, the congregation had three long-tenured ministries. Arthur Weatherly served twice, from 1908-1919 and 1929-1942. Charles Stephen served from 1961-1996, and remained an active minister emeritus through the ministry of Fritz Hudson, 1998-2014. UCL moved from downtown Lincoln to its current location in the Eastridge neighborhood in 1961, and has reported a membership of 280-320 since then, with an average Sunday morning attendance of 155.

The last two years of Rev. Hudson's tenure began a period of rapid change, as the congregation began a major capital campaign to renovate the building. During the 2014-15 congregational year, while the congregation was meeting at a former Methodist church during the renovation, the congregation hired an interim minister. This first interim had a brief unhappy

[14] Kate Chapin to Ines Philbrick, Typewritten Correspondence, January 29, 1914. UCL Archives

tenure at the congregation, leaving after a single year. In his end-of-year evaluation, he wrote that he had observed

> …a streak of unhealthy behavior in the congregation that is worrisome. Considerable work needs to be done to create a healthier congregational culture in Lincoln… If the congregation can learn to have difficult, uncomfortable conversations with uncertain outcomes and result its issues with authority/trust/boundaries, then this could be a 600+ member church.[15]

This interim has since resigned his fellowship in the UUA, following complaints that resulted in the Ministerial Fellowship Committee recommending a disciplinary process because of a pattern of conduct unbecoming a minister.

A second interim period, from 2015-2017, focused on healing from the first interim. This two-year process resulted in a new congregational covenant and governance structure, as well as bylaws revisions and several listening sessions focused on the experiences that different members of the community had of the first interim. This was the context in which the congregation called me, in June 2017.

The Unitarian Church of Lincoln in 2017

The ministerial search process in Unitarian Universalism includes a congregational survey, so we have a clear picture of UCL's membership as it existed in 2016-17. In September 2016 the search committee sent a copy of a survey to the 302 active members of the congregation. 297 members responded, with 260 filling out the survey and 37 declining to complete it.

The survey describes an older congregation (55 percent of respondents over the age of 60), highly educated (84 percent college graduates, with over half reporting advanced degrees beyond bachelor's), and majority white (just over 90 percent of respondents). Theologically, 195

[15] Interim Final Report, Unitarian Church of Lincoln, 2015.

respondents reported that Unitarian Universalism's humanist teachings were important to them; of the six enumerated sources of Unitarian Universalism's living tradition, Jewish and Christian teaching were important to the fewest number of respondents (See Figure 1).

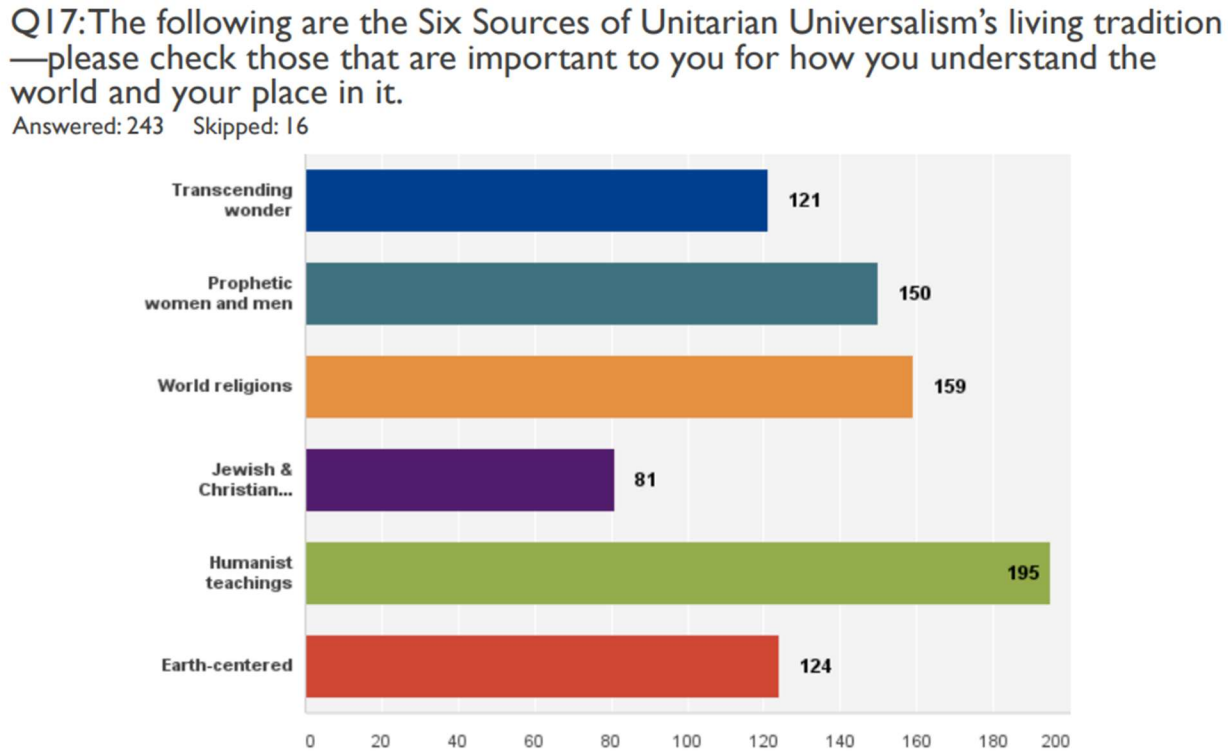

Figure 1. Unitarian Church of Lincoln Congregational Survey, September 2016

A clear majority (63 percent) of members reported that they would like to see the church grow, with 35 percent reporting no strong opinion, and 2 percent responding that they would prefer to maintain the current size of the congregation. When respondents were asked what they hoped would be priorities for the next minister, the top three answers were Sunday worship services, building a sense of community, and being visible in the broader community.[16]

When the congregation called me in June 2017, I understood UCL's medium term vision as increasing its presence in the broader Lincoln community, growing in numbers and

[16] Unitarian Church of Lincoln, *Congregational Survey, September 2016.*

visibility.[17] From 2017 through late 2019, we engaged in a self-study to understand the opportunities and challenges we faced as a congregation. We hired a new Music Director in 2018, and conducted a retreat to imagine possibilities for our music program, eventually launching a monthly evening service using secular music as its primary inspiration. In 2019, we expanded mid-week childcare for congregational events and meetings, and planned for a second worship service on Sunday morning. Significant time and effort went into these new programs, and I framed them in my communication with members as laying the groundwork for the next decade of congregational life:

> I am looking forward to continuing our ministry together in the 2019-2020 congregational year. In the coming year I hope to continue building relationships with our partners, as well as focusing (along with other staff members and lay leaders) on how we structure our outreach and communication with the broader community of Lincoln. By adding a second service, we will build capacity for future growth. Our vision is ambitious. To truly 'transform ourselves and the world' we have to be willing to show up, and to tell the world what we have found in this community.[18]

On January 12, 2020, UCL launched a second worship service. I missed the January 12 service due to illness, but on January 19, I preached on church growth not for its own sake, but as a response to the challenges of a new decade:

> More Unitarian Universalists are always a good thing. And at the start of a new decade, and the start of this new decade, that is truer than it has ever been in my lifetime. The twenties will be defined, I believe, by the three interlocking crises of inequality, civic instability, and climate change. As much as these crises may define the age we live in, our responses, individually and collectively, will define who we are.[19]

[17] From this point forward my role in the congregational system, and in authoring this project, is that of a participant-observer.
[18] Oscar Sinclair, *2019 Annual Report*, Unitarian Church of Lincoln.
[19] Oscar Sinclair, "Don't Sleep (Through the Revolution)," Unitarian Church of Lincoln January 19, 2020.

In retrospect that sermon missed a major crisis. I had missed the January 12 launch of our second worship service because I was unexpectedly severely ill. At the same time my mother, with whom I had just spent Christmas, was hospitalized with pneumonia of unclear origin.

January – February 2020

Two months after UCL launched a second Sunday morning worship service, the congregation moved fully online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is a respiratory virus that originated in China in late 2019, and spread worldwide in the spring of 2020. Between January 10, when the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the rapidly spreading illness in China was caused by the 2019 Novel Coronavirus and February 25, when the CDC announced that "disruption to everyday life may be severe," the emerging illness was often in the news, but rarely as the most important story in Nebraska.[20]

Sunday, March 1

Following the sermon, UCL addressed COVID-19 in worship for the first time, reminding members to stay home if they are ill and to wash their hands for 20 seconds (the length of a single verse of a well-known UU hymn, which we sung). I concluded the remarks with:

> …if the Lincoln Lancaster County Health Department (LLCHD) need us to temporarily move to more meetings held by video conference, we will do so… None of this is new. We're in the middle of influenza season right now, [and the] same rules apply. If all this means is that we get better at washing our hands and staying home with the flu, that's still a good outcome.[21]

Sunday, March 8

[20] CDC, "CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, August 16, 2022), https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html.
[21] Oscar Sinclair, "The Wisdom of Story," Unitarian Church of Lincoln, March 1, 2020.

Following an Executive Team meeting on March 4, UCL began livestreaming our services over YouTube for the first time.

Tuesday, March 10

UCL's Board of Trustees met for its regularly scheduled meeting. On the scheduled agenda was a proposal from our affiliate community minister, Rev. Kimberley Debus, to visit Lincoln in June. In spring 2020, Rev. Debus was serving as a sabbatical coverage minister in White Plains, New York, near the epicenter of one of the first COVID-19 clusters in the United States. That night she met with the board in White Plains, which she recalled in her 2022 oral history:

> *And so every day there was new information and we found out it was closer and they did a containment area around New Rochelle. And some of our families were in that mile wide area and the cases were closer. And then we got word that we had people, we had families whose kids were at a school where teachers were getting sick. And then we had like five in a day, five cases, right in White Plains. People knew who they were. And we, fortunately there was a board meeting previously scheduled, but we walked into the board meeting. And I said, before we do anything else, we have to shut it down.*[22]

In Lincoln, we were still several days away from a similar meeting. The next morning, March 11, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic.[23]

Thursday, March 12

Following an emergency meeting, the Safety Response Team at UCL sent an email to the congregation, announcing that "the Unitarian Church of Lincoln will close for onsite events, effective Monday March 16, through March 31."[24]

[22] Participant 39 Oral History, Recorded September 21, 2022
[23] CDC, "CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline"
[24] Letter to UCL Membership, March 12, 2020

Sunday, March 15

At the final worship service in person at 6300 A Street, we announced the building closure, and provided everyone who attended a brief verbal and written guide to logging onto Zoom and YouTube.

Monday, March 16

With the building closed, UCL staff began working from home, prepping for our first online worship service. I recorded the first of what would be over 300 daily video updates from my home office.[25]

Early Pandemic: March-June 2020

The first months of the pandemic were productive ones. Over the course of twelve weeks, the congregation launched

- Online worship through YouTube on Sunday morning.
- Weekly vespers services on Thursday night via Zoom, including time for reflections in small groups.
- Weekly interviews with clergy around Lincoln and the United States.
- Daily email updates from the church office and videos from the minister.
- Text-based giving.
- Work from home communications tools for staff.
- Online religious education.
- UU Connects, a small group ministry program facilitated by our lay worship associates.[26]

[25] Oscar Sinclair, Daily Update March 17, 2020. https://youtu.be/ChCktlk7m8Q
[26] Oscar Sinclair, *2020 Annual Report,* Unitarian Church of Lincoln.

Additionally, I began working toward a Doctor of Ministry degree, and began serving as president of the Faith Coalition of Lancaster County. During this time, the Unitarian Universalist Association asked congregations to be ready to stay out of their buildings through May 2021. Over the summer of 2020, we joined with UU congregations across Kansas and Nebraska for a shared 'worship collaborative,' as we began to plan for a year of online church.

Racial Justice in the Summer of 2020

On May 25, 2020, police officers in Minneapolis murdered George Floyd. As the latest in a series of police killings of black people across the country, the murder triggered significant protests (and counter protests) many cities, including Lincoln. The first events that many members of UCL saw each other or me at were outdoor protests in June and July 2020. In addition to supporting my own congregation, I was asked to organize white clergy to show up as support – and if needed, to place ourselves between police and protesters. It was a dramatic, heartbreaking summer. While this is not a direct part of this project, the protests in the summer of 2020 galvanized UCL's anti-racism work, giving energy and volunteers for our Task Force on Dismantling White Supremacy (formed in 2019), and contributing to the large participation in Beloved Conversations, described below. That work continues in 2023, as the congregation prepares to vote on adding an explicit anti-racist commitment to our organizing documents in May.

Settling In: Fall 2020

Over the summer, leadership at the church began to hear expressions of frustration from members and friends. In the first months of the pandemic, the congregation experienced Susan Beaumont's description of entering into a liminal state "with the collapse of order. Something

has come to an end: an identity, a program, a structure, or a process."[27] As the first congregational year in the midst of COVID-19 began, the congregation started to grapple with what we had lost. In August, the Board of Trustees sent out a survey to members of the congregation. Of the over 250 surveys sent out electronically and by mail, we received 120 responses. In the open-ended responses, loss was expressed in multiple ways:

> *The church offerings are more than accessible. We just find the in-person experience so much more rewarding for our family. It's hard to get motivated to get on-line more.*
>
> *I haven't been accessing the online church opportunities because of my mental bandwidth for connecting virtually.*
>
> *One long-time member told me months ago, if other churches opened their buildings and UCL did not, she would leave UCL and join another church.*
>
> *Meeting online is like looking at black and white photographs of people. It's not as vibrant of an experience as in person, although I realize that can't be helped.*

Nearly 40 percent of respondents reported that they rarely or never participated in UCL's online offerings, and 10 percent were unsure whether they would be able to meet their financial pledge for 2020.[28]

While the rate of innovation slowed in the latter half of 2020, we were intentional about trying new ways to engage UCL's membership. The 2020-21 congregational year began with an online congregational retreat incorporating educational opportunities, worship, and socializing. By the fall of 2020, the staff team had grown more comfortable with video editing, and there was a noticeable jump in technical quality between the videos the congregation published in June and September 2020. In response to the disconnection expressed in the August survey, my family and I plotted a bike tour of Lincoln, visiting 42 members of the congregation over two weekends.

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[27] Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). 10.
[28] Dorothy Ramsey, *Unitarian Church of Lincoln Household Survey of Members and Friends,* September 16, 2020.

Lockdown: Winter 2020-21

By late September 2020, COVID-19 cases were increasing rapidly in Lancaster County (see Figure 2). Beginning in November, cases increased exponentially. In the four months between October 2020 and February 2021, 197 Lincolnites died of COVID-19, nearly half the total recorded deaths over the three-year course of the pandemic.

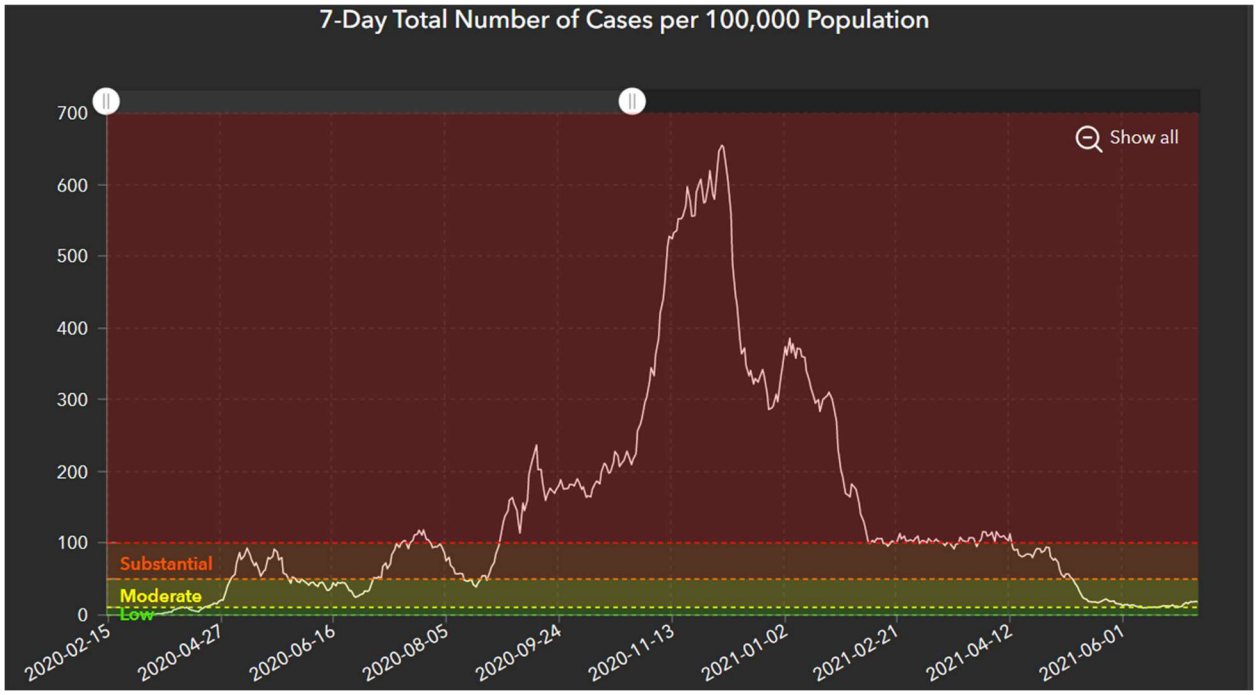

Figure 2. Lincoln Lancaster County Health Department Data

During this time, the congregation maintained an online presence, including weekly Sunday worship on YouTube, vespers services on Thursday nights, and daily video updates from the minister. My family and I spent three months in Upstate New York in early 2021, as part of a 'pod' with my parents to help share childcare responsibilities. The congregation went through its first major financial crisis of the pandemic, as end-of-year giving sharply decreased from what we received in previous years.

Over the course of the winter, over fifty members of UCL participated in the Beloved Conversations program, run by the Fahs Collaborative at Meadville Lombard Seminary. Beloved Conversations is one the primary programs for Unitarian Universalist congregations engaging in anti-racism work in the aftermath of the protests of police killings in the summer of 2020. Participants engage in self-reflection, reading, worship, and small group processing, initially focused on each participant's individual understanding of anti-racism. From January-February 2021, members of the congregation were sent a survey to 'ascertain the level of knowledge and commitment of our staff and members regarding the imperative of dismantling white supremacy.' 80 percent of staff and lay leaders surveyed reported that they 'welcome' UCL's work to dismantle white supremacy, with broad support for further education and training in this area of congregational life. [29]

Spring 2021: First Reentry

By early March 2021, twelve months after UCL's building closed, two significant developments contributed the to the beginning of conversations about reopening our building: COVID-19 cases in Lancaster County dropped dramatically from their December high, and members of the congregation began to finish their initial two-dose vaccination. In Lincoln, like many other settings, vaccination was prioritized primarily based on age. Elderly members of the community were largely fully vaccinated by March. Adults aged 18-60 followed, although children would not be vaccinated until mid-2022. This contributed to sharp disparities among the UCL community, with some fully vaccinated members eager to reenter the building, some younger members unsure, and parents expressing anxiety that they were being left behind. In March 2020, the Board of Trustees appointed a Reentry Task Force, who engaged the

[29] Task Force for Dismantling White Supremacy, "Executive Summary of Survey Work," February 2021.

congregation in (yet another) congregational survey, this time with 165 respondents. Comments in the open-ended responses illustrated the range of opinions held by our membership during this period:

> *We won't attend until we're vaccinated*
>
> *If the county is in the "green" zone I don't expect any of these precautions.*
>
> *I hope that when you do open the church that you will continue to offer the Zoom worship services, Thursday evening services and other interest groups on Zoom. I think that is where you will find me for quite a while yet.*
>
> *The longer this goes on the longer the damage prevails. People with greater concerns about all this are not going to be sitting in a church anytime soon anyway… Tracking a vaccination is a logistical nightmare and discriminatory. This has been more than a year. Doing nothing is Nothing!*
>
> *There should be no consideration of returning to in person activities until it's completely safe within circumstances.*
>
> *Good luck, glad I am not on the committee given what I am sure will be lots of diverse opinions.*[30]

After several weeks of discernment, the Reentry Task Force developed a step-wise plan that set up levels of in-person activity corresponding to the public health information published by the local health department. As case rates, mortality, and test positivity rates fell over the course of the spring, the county lowered their 'risk dial' from red, to orange, to yellow, and we opened the church building correspondingly (albeit with pre-registration, capacity restrictions, mask and social distancing requirements, and a Plexiglas window in front of the pulpit). On May 9, 2021, we met for our first in-person Sunday worship service in 419 days – the month the UUA had told us to aim for a year earlier. My 2021 annual report to the congregation ended on a positive note:

> When the scope of the pandemic became clear almost a year ago, many of my colleagues and I privately worried if this would be the end of organized churches. We wondered if online worship simply would not meet the needs of the

[30] Unitarian Church of Lincoln, Returning to In-Person Church Survey, March 2021.

> community, and if we would watch our communities evaporate the longer the pandemic dragged on. This has been a challenging year, and there is more to go but: we are still here. The congregation has endured to this point, and we can see the end of the pandemic approaching quickly. Thank you for your trust, faith, and grace in the last year. By making it to this point, we are well positioned to thrive in the coming years.[31]

2021-22 Congregational Year

The May 2022 Annual Report captures much of the arc of the congregational year. In it, I wrote:

> This is my third Annual Report since COVID-19 became a driving force in the life of our congregation and broader community in March 2020. My last Annual Report was written in a hopeful moment, assuming that with vaccines broadly available we had turned the corner of the pandemic, and would return to a more normal way of being by late summer 2021. The Board's goals reflect the optimism of the moment: in returning from our time in the pandemic wilderness, we thought, we would emphasize congregational connection and engagement.
>
> As you know the trajectory of the last twelve months has not been what we hoped for last year. In September, just as we were beginning the congregational year, we closed UCL's building in response to the Delta variant, and increased cases in Lincoln. In late October we reopened for in person worship, only to briefly close again as Omicron became the dominant variant. In late November we shifted the congregation's reentry policy, deemphasizing the Lancaster County Risk Dial and leaving the choice of participation with individual members. Since March, we've seen a noticeable downturn in cases, and have restarted coffee hour and in person children's programing on Sunday morning… Our membership is tired after over two years of living through a pandemic.[32]

The second full congregational year after the pandemic was harder than the crises of the early pandemic. We were unable to reenter the building consistently, and congregational conflict and apathy became more noticeable. Over the course of the year the congregation navigated another difficult budget cycle, as well as a more-contentious-than-usual series of town halls in

[31] Oscar Sinclair, Annual Report 2021, Unitarian Church of Lincoln.
[32] Oscar Sinclair, Annual Report 2022, Unitarian Church of Lincoln.

the winter. In the spring, we reentered the building again, but without the enthusiasm of the previous year. By the summer of 2022, when this project was conceived, we were starting to see noticeable breakdowns in volunteer and staff capacity.

In *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change,* Robert Burns describes liminal seasons in an organization as "The Neutral Zone." These seasons are characterized by five common behaviors, all of which were present at UCL by the summer of 2022:

Anxiety rises; motivation falls.[33] While there are notable exceptions to this (the summer indigenous programming series, for instance), the anxiety level in the congregation was high. Lay leaders often brought up communication and engagement and areas we are lacking in, responding to a decrease in congregational engagement.

Attendance drops off. From 1961-2019, the average weekly attendance at UCL was remarkably consistent, staying between 155 and 165 each year. This number has dropped to approximately 90 in person attendees each week, with another 30 participating online.

Old conflict issues reemerge. In the mid-1970s, a now-deceased member of the congregation built and donated a harpsichord to the congregation. Multiple ministers and music directors have worked to rehome it over the past decade, largely in the background. In early 2022, this became a flashpoint in conflict between the music director and lay leaders. The conflict escalated rapidly and unexpectedly.

[33] This framing of Burns comes from Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, 2019.

Personnel are overloaded. UCL employs six staff members, including myself. Four of us have expressed that we felt burnt out this year – the two that have not expressed burnout were hired in the last six months.

People in the organization are polarized between wanting to move forward and wanting to slow down. This is most visible in our anti-racism work, with some members wanting to engage in concrete, meaningful action, while others express the need for further education before we can move forward.

This struggle is noticeable, because in the fall of 2022 the congregation put together a list of accomplishments that would be impressive in other years. We have gathered for theologically grounded, innovative worship; deepened our partnerships with other UU congregations in Nebraska; helped to launch a new community organizing network with 20 other Lincoln churches; made dismantling white supremacy central to the work of the church; sent in our application for 501(c)3 status, and updated our safety policy. **Why, amid what looks like a productive and exciting season of church life, in which we are gathered back in our building and engaging our mission deeply, are the dominant feelings expressed among volunteer and staff leadership fatigue and disconnection?** This is the primary adaptive challenge facing the congregation in 2023.

I believe that the cause of this discrepancy is not simply explained by liminal periods – although we are certainly in one as we move out three years defined by the COVID-19 pandemic and into whatever comes next. The nature of the pandemic itself contributes to this feeling of disconnection. While the COVID-19 pandemic affected everyone in the congregation, and profoundly changed how we collectively experience the church, individual members experienced it in different ways, ranging from a net positive to a deeply traumatic time. If we understand that

disconnect as a response to the individual and communal upheaval of the last three years, then any intervention to the adaptive problem must be primarily pastoral, leading with questions and curiosity, rather than technical fixes.

Theology

When considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, it is not enough to simply report the factual events that transpired. Unitarian Universalist Churches are meaning-making communities. Each Sunday in Lincoln, we proclaim that "The Unitarian Church of Lincoln is a loving community, uniting reason with spiritual exploration, to transform ourselves and the world." We are about the work of transformation, but the tools we use are spiritual exploration and reason, experience, and rigorous attempts to understand.

COVID-19 fractured our shared story as a religious community. The experience of the pandemic was universal in its impact and deeply personal in lived experience. Unitarian Universalist theology draws heavily on the dance between collective and individual narrative. Our principles describe these as "individual worth and dignity," and "the interconnected web of existence."[34] Over the last three years, our web was disconnected in concrete ways as we closed the church building and interacted with each other behind masks and screens.

In this third year of the pandemic, the congregation has shifted from acute crisis response to a more amorphous, adaptive challenge. Members of the congregation express as much uncertainty in this moment, if not more, than they did at the height of the pandemic in Lincoln:

Uncertainty:

> *I think there's more of a struggle coming out of the pandemic than actually at least for me. I just, I'm not [pause] the same things are not important to me anymore. And I'm just trying to sort that out and I'm not there yet.*[35]

[34] The first and seventh of the "Seven Principles" in Article II of the UUA Bylaws. Barbara Wells ten Hove called these two the "pillar principles," that the other five build from.
[35] Participant 30 Oral Interview, 9/18/22

Grief:

> *I've come to understand a mourning of life and community, the way that it was before and during the pandemic, like having to mourn that loss of, you know, things are just different… So I, there are a lot of struggles financially and emotionally and mentally and just everything wrapped up in that.*[36]

Fatigue:

> *Sometimes I still don't feel very good. Like I, you know, am still really, really tired or fatigued and a little sad, like this ennui, and it's like, even though life is picking up, why?*[37]

This last speaker went on to address their own question:

> *Because this was just so much trauma, collective trauma over such a long period of time.*
>
> *[Speaker 2 responds] And it wasn't just one trauma. It was pandemic and it was George Floyd and it was Brianna Taylor. And it was like, those are just, it was thing after thing, after thing, after thing.*

The lens of collective trauma is critical to understanding what happened at UCL during the pandemic, and what the medium- and long-term effects of that experience have been.

Fischer and Riedesser define trauma as:

> …[the] experience of a fundamental discrepancy between a threatening situation and an individual's possibilities for overcoming it. This experience is accompanied by feelings of helplessness, defenselessness, and abandonment and can permanently disrupt the person's understanding of self and the world.[38]

The lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic incorporates all elements of Fischer and Riedesser's definition of trauma. Many members who participated in the Oral History Project highlighted the discrepancy in scale between the worldwide threat, and the relatively uncertain,

[36] Participant 69 Oral Interview, 10/2/22
[37] Participant 25 Oral Interview, 9/18/22
[38] Gottfried Fischer and Peter Riedesser, *Lehrbuch der Psychotraumatologie,* 3rd ed. (Munich: Reinhardt, 2003), 82, 375. Quoted in Ruth Poser, "No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature as Response to Exile."

mundane responses available to them, from stocking up on toilet paper to sewing masks. In the aftermath, the three speakers quoted above articulate a disrupted sense of self, abandonment, and defenselessness expressed through fatigue. The pandemic can be understood as traumatic for these speakers and many other UCL members that participated in this project. [39]

The process of recovery from individual trauma is a well-developed field of scholarship.[40] In her 1992 book, *Trauma and Recovery*, the psychologist Judith Herman describes the three stages of recovery from trauma as establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community.[41] While establishing safety is a complicated stage in the third year of the pandemic, trauma and recovery are not linear processes; even with ambiguity remaining around safety, telling the story and reintegrating into community are crucial tasks for this moment. "The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness," Herman writes, "Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*… Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims."[42]

"Remembering and telling the truth about what happened" can take many forms, from work with a mental health professional, to art, to participation in liturgy and spiritual practices in

[39]As discussed earlier, for the purposes of this Chapter, we will use "traumatic events" to refer to events that trigger a trauma response in at least some of the people who experienced them.
[40] Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth Boase, "Defining "Trauma" as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation." In Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth, ed, Boase *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 8.
[41] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 1992). 3
[42] Ibid. 1. Taken alone, this quote implies that the prior social order is a desirable state. In the broader context of Herman's feminist critique, it is about restoring broken connections between individuals.

religious settings. If the latter, there is a rich tradition of scripture speaking the unspeakable, "complaining in faith to God."[43]

Psalms as Truth Telling

Religious community, with its liturgies, language, and traditions, can be a powerful setting for telling stories, including stories of trauma. My own story is an example of this: in 2010, a friend was killed in a mugging, I was diagnosed with cancer, and I joined the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore. It was in the context of that congregation, with the help of people in the community and the weekly rhythm of worship, that I healed in body and spirit.

Walter Brueggemann's writing on the book of Psalms claims that there are three seasons present in faithful life, and that these three seasons are also present in the language of the Psalms: orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.[44] Psalms and times of orientation are the dominant narrative of much of society: God's in his heaven/All's right with the world.[45] Seasons of disorientation are times of "hurt, alienation, suffering, and death," which profoundly challenge the orientation of the status quo.[46] New orientation comes when joy breaks through, even after disorientation: when the experience of disorientation is integrated, and life continues in a new way.

This arc roughly mirrors the recovery process described by Judith Herman. In both cases, articulating the trauma/disorientation is a necessary step towards healing, or a new orientation of life. It is not enough for a lament to simply be a lament, it also functions as a voice of faith, with

[43] Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Journey through the Psalms* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2002). Loc 1662 (Kindle Edition)
[44] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms : A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984). 19.
[45] Robert Browning, "Pippa's Song."
[46] Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms.* 19.

a function and goal.[47] Fully a third of the book of Psalms consists of psalms of lament, articulating the movement from orientation to disorientation. Lament psalms put disorientation into words, and "bring this pain of shattered order to expression… Laments can help us as individuals or as a group to bring this new, painful situation to speech and acknowledge the reality of our experience."[48]

The language of lament psalms is often stark. Miroslav Wolf observes that

> In the imprecatory [lament] psalms, torrents of rage have been allowed to flow freely, channeled only by the robust structure of a ritual prayer… rage belongs before God—not in the reflectively managed and manicured form of a confession, but as a pre-reflective outburst from the depths of the soul.[49]

Lament psalms do not avoid blunt, at times brutal language, because they assume that God is present in the whole of the human experience, including in times of disorientation.[50]

For Christians, the book of Psalms offers a "ready vehicle for telling our whole story."[51] Lament psalms can *evoke reality*, prompting reflection on a time of disorientation before the hearer is fully aware of their own pain. In hearing lament, we can better understand our own lament.[52]

In 2018, the Unitarian Church of Lincoln started a monthly worship service on Thursday nights. Building on a model I learned from Rev. Jennifer Brower at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Long Island, these Thursday night services use four to five songs, performed live, as their primary text. Rather than a single twenty-minute sermon, spoken word

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[47] Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Journey through the Psalms* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2002). Loc 613 (Kindle Edition)
[48] Ibid. 640-657
[49] David W Stowe, *Song of Exile: The Enduring Mystery of Psalm 137* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). 171.
[50] Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*. 52.
[51] Dombkowski Hopkins, *Journey Through the Psalms*. Loc 60
[52] Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*. 52.

reflections alternate with music, with a single theme guiding both music and word. Critically, the music at these services is secular – in the last year we have drawn from music of Nina Simone, Florence & the Machine, Michael Franti, Sam Baker, Sting, and many more. We do this, we say in the liturgy that opens each service, because inspiration is not confined to Sunday morning, or the Church, and because music speaks to the reality of our lives.

The Book of Psalms is not easily accessible to all members of UCL. Many of our friends and members join UU communities after significant religious trauma around their religions of origin. Each time I use scripture from the Hebrew Bible or New Testament, I ask myself: is there no other text that can serve this same purpose? Does the value in using it outweigh the potential hurt some members of the community will experience hearing it? How do I, in presenting it, contextualize it to minimize that harm, while holding up the message embedded in it?

Secular music does not have the same set of challenges. In using it on Thursday night, however, we are engaging the text similarly to how Brueggemann describes using the Psalms: to evoke reality, surfacing disorientation or thanksgiving that is deeply felt, but hard to put into words. In 2010, as I healed from cancer and mourned my friend, I could not always articulate what I was going through – but I could absolutely tell you what song was in my soul. Our Thursday night services at UCL are an attempt to harness that liturgically, using music to articulate the movement of orientation and disorientation in faith.

One of the first adaptations we put into place when moving online in March 2020 was to find a way to hold these services on Zoom, and to increase their frequency from monthly to weekly. From March 2020-June 2021, UCL held a weekly Thursday night vespers service with three pieces of secular music, prompting a discussion question for members of the community to

share the experiences of their lives. Religious communities are a place where we can bring difficult, even traumatic experiences and hear them reflected in the language of community.

Collective Trauma

The current challenge of responding to the aftermath of COVID-19 is larger than individual healing from traumatic events. Individual trauma does not tell the whole story of what the Unitarian Church of Lincoln (and the larger community) experienced, or the current congregational dynamics described in Chapter 2, above.

In 1972, the sociologist Kai Erikson described the effect of a mud slide on the small Appalachian mining town of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia. In *Everything in its Path,* he describes the results of the disaster as both an individual trauma, and a collective trauma:

> By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively…by collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the same quality of suddenness normally associated with 'trauma…' [it is] a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared.[53]

Erikson goes on to observe that, while related, individual and collective traumas do not require the presence of the other. An individual who was not directly affected, but who loses the support of a community that surrounds them and whose feelings of well-being deteriorate in response, is exhibiting collective, but not individual trauma.[54]

[53] Erikson, 153-154.
[54] Ibid, 154.

As of September 2022, no UCL members have died from COVID-19, though several have lost family members. Even those who have not been directly affected often articulate a sense of loss of community:

> *[the first time I returned] to the building after we had closed the building, working in the office and the building was just incredibly emptier feeling than when you're just in on a Saturday morning and no one else is here. It was empty because it was empty and it felt hollow and it echoed differently and it felt, oh my goodness, when will we be together again? It was, it was very weird.*[55]

Another member reflects:

> *…Later on when the coffee hour was less attended and people were finding other ways or moving on, I was, I was afraid that this church was, would kind of wither away and that my place in the community here would go with it, that this place might not exist*[56]

If the challenge of collective trauma is that it impairs the prevailing sense of community, it is an existential challenge for local churches. Unitarian Universalist clergy have documented the profound and lasting effects of traumatic experiences in churches, primarily in the aftermath of ministerial misconduct.[57] Even years after the traumatic experience, 'afterpastor' congregations that have gone through these experiences are often chronically dysfunctional, struggling with boundaries, lines of responsibility, welcoming new people, finances, and the ability to tolerate conflict.[58] The effect of trauma on the community reaches well beyond the people directly involved. Telling the story of what happened, fully and publicly, is an important part of moving afterpastor congregations out of dysfunction to a healthy and thriving community.[59]

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[55] Participant 3 Oral Interview, 8/27/22
[56] Participant 29 Oral Interview, 9/18/22
[57] See Deborah Pope Lance "Whence We Come and How and Whither," and Gail Seavey "If Our Secrets Define Us" in *The Through Line: 200 Years of the Berry Street Essay* (Boston: Skinner House Books), 2022.
[58] *Through Line,* p 402-403.
[59] Ibid. 413.

Jeffrey Alexander, in *A Social Theory of Trauma*, presents four representations that are part of creating a communal trauma narrative, as part of a process of healing. These are:

- The nature of the pain: What happened that caused the pain?
- The nature of the victim*:* Who was affected? Were they individuals, or a group sharing some common characteristics?
- The relationship of the trauma victim to the wider audience*:* How does the wider community relate to those most affected?
- Attribution of responsibility*:* Who is the "antagonist" in the trauma narrative? [60]

Alexander's model is primarily descriptive, telling the story of how communities respond to collective trauma. The model can also be read as constructive and prescriptive, laying out a roadmap of how communities have healed after traumatic events.

Parts of Alexander's model do not work well to explain COVID-19 as a communal trauma. In particular, Alexander's work is based on human-caused catastrophes. It is easier to describe a single person or group as responsible for the trauma of war or ministerial misconduct than it is a natural disaster or infectious disease.

The first three steps of Alexander's model, however, are clearly applicable to communal trauma in the aftermath of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is universal in its impact: nearly every individual and institution was affected in some way by the virus and the related shutdowns. Within the community of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, our building was closed for over a year. This closure affected every member, friend, volunteer, and employee.

[60] Jeffrey C Alexander, *Trauma a Social Theory* (Cambridge Malden Polity, 2015). 17-19.

The pandemic was also highly variable in its *individual* impacts. Some congregants struggled immensely, others felt little impact. Still others described the pandemic as a strangely positive time in their life, even as they expressed guilt over their experience.

> *I mean, it was, it was probably the most loneliest part of my life, worse than being in jail. And I know about that <laugh>, but it was or has been a struggle for me.*[61]
>
> *To tell you the truth, it was really more or less pretty well life as normal. And I think a lot of that is because I, I didn't have to worry about going to a job. I didn't have children at home. I kind of was off in my own little, our own little world <laugh> and I kept going to the grocery store, but was real careful when I went.*[62]
>
> *COVID forced me to like look inward and actually focus on... So it's really weird because everybody was always like COVID was so hard and is so hard. And like so many people died and there's that trauma from it. But at the same time, like I became happier during COVID, which is weird to admit to people… I became happier and I grew as a person and I'm a lot more confident in myself and a lot happier where I am. I'm not just okay anymore. And I am no longer willing to be just okay.*[63]

Because of the nature and length of the building closure at UCL, there has been little opportunity for our members to hear these stories from each other. In that absence, it is easy to generalize from one's individual experience. Members who fared moderately well (or even thrived) during COVID-19 might wonder why others are having such a difficult time now that the worst of the pandemic seems to have passed. Meanwhile, many of those who were most harshly impacted, directly or through isolation, are hurt that others seem ready to move on very quickly.

"Typically, at the beginning of the trauma process," Jeffrey Alexander writes, "most audience members see little if any relation between themselves and the victimized group."[64] The

[61] Participant 59, Oral Interview 10/2/22
[62] Participant 12, Oral Interview, 8/27/22
[63] Participant 42, Oral Interview, 9/25/22
[64] Alexander, *Trauma.* 19.

effectiveness of a communal trauma narrative depends on whether it prompts a wider audience that has not experienced the same suffering to identify with the victims in the community.[65] To do so, a community needs to be able to hear and honor the stories of individuals, while identifying both the speaker and listeners as part of the same community. "Only if the victims are represented in terms of valued qualities shared by the larger collective identity will the audience be able to symbolically participate in the experience of the originating trauma."[66]

The three speakers from the congregation who quoted different individual experiences of the pandemic are a musician at UCL in their sixties with significant health conditions, a retired lay leader serving in congregational leadership, and a twenty-something graduate student at the local university who has recently started attending UCL. It is unlikely that these congregants socialized or told each other long stories, even before the church building shut down. As the building and other parts of our community open back up, the questions become: How do we create a shared communal experience given these disparate individual stories? How do we achieve this among congregants who may have been acquaintances or less prior to the pandemic (in addition to those who were previously close)?

Individual and Communal Stories in Unitarian Universalism

In Unitarian Universalism's seven principles, member congregations covenant to affirm and promote both the "inherent worth and dignity" of every individual, and the "interconnected

[65] Elizabeth Boase, "Fragmented Voices: Collective Identity and Traumatization in Lamentations," in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma, 55.*
[66] Alexander, *Trauma*. 19.

web of existence, of which we are a part."[67] It is in the tension between these two truths that Unitarian Universalism's richest theology and most heated debates are located. [68]

The 2020 final report of the Unitarian Universalist Association's (UUA) Commission on Institutional Change 2020, *Widening the Circle of Concern*, articulates a position commonly held among the current leadership of the Association:

> Over the decades since the consolidation of Unitarians and Universalists, an overemphasis on individual exploration and experience as the primary, if not sole center of religious experience developed. This centering of the individual decenters the communal as a locus of theological exploration. One of the unintended consequences has been the atomized individualism of the search for truth and meaning without accountability to its impact in communities.[69]

Undoubtably, mid-20th century Unitarian Universalism put a heavy emphasis on the individual. Rev. Kenneth Patton, the author of many hymns from the period, wrote (in a book of poetry published by the denomination)

> Our new names for "species" and "tribe" are "organization" and
> "institution" and "bureaucracy…"
> Detest all formulas and types
> Love that which is craggy and resolute and unclassifiable.
> Force them to say after you die, "He didn't really belong to the
> Species. There was only one like him."[70]

While the UUA has engaged in self-critique over individualism since its founding in 1961, there is also a long history of emphasis on community and covenant. In 2001, the UUA's Commission on Appraisal published *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership* that explored

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[67] Unitarian Universalist Association, "Bylaws," Unitarian Universalist Association, 2019, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/uua_bylaws_2019.pdf.
[68] Tension here refers to creative tension, without implied unhealthy conflict. Catharine Clarenbach describes the same interplay as a dance: "Dances don't work with individuals," she writes, "nor do they work without connection among the dancers." (personal correspondence, 10/14/22)
[69] Commission on Institutional Change, *Widening the Circle of Concern* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2020). 10.
[70] Kenneth L Patton, "The Difference," *This World, My Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). 32-33.

theologies and practices of membership in Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations.[71] In focus groups held by the commission, many Unitarian Universalists expressed that connection with other people in their congregations was the single most important factor in their UU membership and identity.[72] "Membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation can be a profound experience" the Commission wrote, "an experience that brings us into covenant with other people who, though diverse in their personal experiences and needs, all seek one thing in common: wholeness."[73]

This is not simply an abstract theological tension in Unitarian Universalism. Debates over the relative emphasis on the individual vs. the collective have been at the center of major conflict in the Unitarian Universalist Association. Over the last decade, publications ranging from *Widening the Circle of Concern,* quoted above, to the UU Minister's Association Berry Street Lectures,[74] to Commission on Appraisal reports,[75] to controversial self-published books critical of the UUA[76] have all claimed to speak for the best of Unitarian Universalism's concern for community, each drawing a contrast with a described over-emphasis on the individual.

[71] Established in the early 1960s, the Commission on Appraisal in charged with investigating and reporting on topics of importance to the membership of the UUA as a whole. The commission issues a report every four years. Since 2000, the commission has written reports on church membership, congregational polity, the seven principles, ministerial authority, and covenant.
[72] Commission on Appraisal, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2001). 21
[73] Ibid. 18.
[74] "For most of Unitarian Universalist history, we have lived the story of the iChurch, which birthed an ecclesiology that sacralized individualism, and not surprisingly, our congregations have not flourished." Fred Muir, "From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice," in *Through Line.* 389.
[75] "[Peck's analysis suggests] that strident individualism is an impediment to building alliances and allegiances among our congregations, the Association, and the larger community." *Unlocking the Power of Covenant* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2021). 38.
[76] "Nearly two centuries before Holmes wrote these words, other liberal ministers were stressing the need for religion to shift its attention away from the interests of the individual." Todd Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers.* (Spokane: Self Published, 2019) Loc. 255

The Unitarian Universalist Association is preparing to hold its 2023 General Assembly in Pittsburgh. Delegates will vote on a new UUA president, and a proposed revision of the UUA's Principles and Sources – the most familiar piece of Unitarian Universalist theology in most congregations. It is striking that in the leadup to those votes, each "side" is claiming to speak for the social, community-based tradition in Unitarian Universalism, casting the other side as either *reactionary* individualists or *revolutionary* individualists.

In the runup to Pittsburgh, what divides Unitarian Universalists is their approach to a related question: who do Unitarian Universalists mean when speaking of "we" as a collective identity? For most of our history, "we" described experiences that were predominantly white, male, and often ordained. Whose lives and experiences do our collective stories center? Whose lives and experiences *should* those stories center? How do we honor the experiences of those who do not share the dominant culture narrative or identity, while also recognizing our shared humanity and covenantal relationship? What Unitarian Universalism will we imagine and, in so doing, bring into being?

Imagining a Collective Story

Collective identity is imagined through the formation of shared narratives. Imagination does not necessarily imply something that is unreal. Jeffrey Alexander writes

> My own approach to the idea of "imagined" is more like what Durkheim meant in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* when he wrote of the "religious imagination." Imagination is intrinsic to the very process of representation. It seizes upon an inchoate experience from life, and forms it, through association, condensation, and aesthetic creation, into some specific shape.[77]

[77] Alexander, *Trauma.* 14

This imagination is one of the steps in the dance between individual and collective stories in Unitarian Universalism. We hear individual stories and imagine that they mean something for our collective narrative – we imagine the story of "we" every time we hear a story of "I." Because of this, it matters whose individual stories are told.

In *Widening the Circle of Concern,* the UUA's Commission on Institutional Change took a novel approach to this challenge. Charged with "working to identify and propose redress to issues of structural racism within the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations,"[78] the Commission was appointed in the aftermath of a 2017 controversy over hiring practices in the UUA. At issue was the wide gap between the UUA's stated aspirations to be an anti-racist institution, and the lack of people of color in leadership positions at the UUA.

The 2017 conflict resulted in the resignations of the UUA President, the Executive Director of the UU Ministers' Association, and several senior staff members at the Association's Boston offices. As part of their work, the Commission on Institutional Change gathered testimony from over 1,100 respondents, including significant figures at the UUA, lay, and ordained leadership across the county.

From that testimony, as well as documentation gathered during the process, the commission created five "avatars," i.e., composite figures whose narratives anchored the final report. These included a "Lay Leader of Color Avatar," "Minister of Color Avatar," "Religious Professional of Color Avatar," "White Accomplice Avatar," and "White Counter Narrative Avatar." Each avatar was highlighted in a single-page, first-person narrative, describing their experience in Unitarian Universalism – five relatively straightforward stories, implicitly

[78] *Widening the Circle of Concern,* 151

imagining a collective narrative with the many individuals who contributed to the avatars at its center.

If we view the 2017 events in Unitarian Universalism as a kind of communal trauma, *Widening the Circle* presents a model for articulating the nature of the pain, victim, and relationships between the victims and the wider community.[79] "Typically, at the beginning of the trauma process," Jeffrey Alexander writes, "most audience members see little if any relation between themselves and the victimized group."[80] Collective trauma processes are processes of imagining a collective story. By highlighting five composite stories, the authors of *Widening the Circle of Concern* invited Unitarian Universalism writ large to imagine a Unitarian Universalist story with lay leaders, ministers, and religious professionals of color as the primary representatives of the Association as a whole. "Only if the victims are represented in terms of valued qualities shared by the larger collective identity will the audience be able to symbolically participate in the experience of the originating trauma."[81] By telling the story in this way, the authors invited the Association as a whole to symbolically participate in the 2017 conflict, as well as the ongoing lament of individual Unitarian Universalists of Color responding to the micro and macro-aggressions they regularly endure in Unitarian Universalist spaces.

Composite Narratives in the Book of Lamentations

Widening the Circle is not the first model of imagining a communal narrative through individual stories. Composed in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonian empire in 586 BCE, the book of Lamentations is an extended response to the

[79] In telling the story of the 2017 hiring controversy, the Commission addressed the causes of the conflict, but did not attribute responsibility to a single person or group.
[80] Alexander, *Trauma.* 19.
[81] Ibid.

traumatic end of the Kingdom of Judah. Composed of five poems, Lamentations is striking in the graphic imagery employed to describe the city overrun by invaders. Many commentaries suggest that the author (or authors) of Lamentation had direct experience of the destruction the book describes: "a sense of a poet who has seen with his own eyes all the horrors of the siege and the consequent destruction of Jerusalem."[82]

In contrast to all but one of the Psalms of lament, the book of Lamentations ends in unambiguous tragedy: "Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored/renew our days as of old/unless you have utterly rejected us,/and are angry with us beyond measure."[83] In the Hebrew Bible Lamentations is titled *Ekah,* translated "How," after the first word of the first poem. How, Lamentations ask, could this happen? Despite the repeated question, God remains silent in response to the suffering described. While Judith Herman begins her book on trauma by reflecting that "certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable,"*[84] Lamentations is a lengthy recitation collective memory, speaking the unspeakable. In that recitation of unspeakable trauma, Lamentations imagines a communal narrative in the aftermath of events that dealt a "blow to the tissues of social life" so profound that it is remembered two and a half millennia after the events described.

Elizabeth Boase suggests that Lamentations does this work of imagining a collective experience through the varied points of view represented in it. Four distinct voices are present: the lamenter, who narrates the tragedy in third person; Daughter Zion, the voice of the city speaking in first person; a single male speaker who narrates Lamentations 3; and the collective

[82] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary Volume 3 the Writings* (New York London W.W. Norton & Company, 2019). 644.
[83] Lamentations 5:21-22 (NRSV).
[84] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*. 1.

voice of the community speaking in first person plural.[85] By articulating lament in diverse ways, the book creates space for those who have experienced trauma, either in the destruction of Jerusalem or in later catastrophes, to have their experience reflected in scripture.

While Lamentations is clearly descriptive, Boase argues that these four voices also serve a constructive role, forming a new post-destruction communal identity through representational language: "Literary form, metaphor, personification, and multiple voices function together to create an aesthetic representation that draws the members of the audience into its world and unites them around a common vision of who they are as a collective." [86] This is the work I hope to accomplish in Lincoln through this project.

Story Will Save Us

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic is unlike the devastation described in the Book of Lamentations. The challenge facing church communities is not what we will do in the face of violence, destruction, and a subset of the population taken into exile. Rather, we are struggling to respond to hundreds of individual exiles – stories of grief and loss suffered without the community supports upon which we had previously depended. For many members of our community, it is not a sharp, shocking moment that we must process, but a "gradual realization that the community no longer exists [in the same way] as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared."[87]

Kai Erikson wrote *Everything in its Path* after spending hundreds of hours with former residents of Buffalo Creek West Virginia, in the aftermath of a 1972 mudslide that displaced four

[85] Elizabeth Boase, "Fragmented Voices: Collective Identity and Traumatization in Lamentations." Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth, ed, Boase *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016). 63
[86] Ibid. 63
[87] Erikson, 153-154.

thousand of the town's five thousand inhabitants. Erikson was a sociologist, hired to provide expert testimony for a lawsuit against the coal company that contributed to the mudslide. Interspersed throughout the text are excerpts from his interviews with Buffalo Creek residents, often taking up more than half the page. By telling the story with a focus "on the particularities of the locale, the history of the people involved, and the contours of the event itself…the task normally performed by dramatists or historians,"[88] Erikson invited readers to imagine the Buffalo Creek Flood as an immediate event, impacting people they have come to know as neighbors.

The foundational mass-trauma event of my generation is the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. I was in high school. Many of my peers who joined the armed forces after the attacks served in what we now know as the first years of the "Global War of Terror." Much of my adult life has been shaped by that event: registering for the draft as a conscientious objector, getting involved in the peace movement through the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Binghamton, joining the Peace Corps after college, moving back to Baltimore and meeting my spouse while a Shriver Peaceworker Fellow in Baltimore. Twenty years of experiences set in motion by an early fall morning.

In those twenty years, the most acclaimed piece of art reflecting on the attacks in New York and Washington DC is a story set in Canada. *Come From Away* is an improbable nominee of the Tony Award for best musical. The story goes that the creators of the musical traveled to Gander, Newfoundland in 2011, to collect stories on the tenth anniversary of September 11. In the days after the attack, while the United States airspace was closed, Gander and the surrounding towns hosted over 7,000 passengers and crew who were diverted to Gander airport.

[88] Erikson, 246.

Over three weeks, the musical's composers interviewed residents of Gander, eventually setting the stories they heard to music.[89]

The show is performed by a small cast on a minimalist set. Each actor plays multiple roles, often singing directly to the audience recounting the events in Gander. It is a play that requires imagination on the part of the audience, and that takes compassion as its theme. When I saw it in Omaha a few years ago, I was brought to tears by the story's capacity to take a horrific event and to turn it into a celebration of humanity at our best. In telling individual stories, *Come from Away* invites us into an act of creation through imagination: what if, instead of the seed of twenty years of war, we remembered this as an event that calls us to our highest and best selves?

For all the footnotes, theories of sociology, and theological debates in Unitarian Universalism, this is the burning coal at the heart of this project: the hope that in telling and hearing the stories of this complicated time we will remember to recognize each other's humanity. In the dance between each of our stories and the collective story we tell as community, we might find grace.

[89] "The Story of Come from Away," Come From Away | Official Site, accessed October 21, 2022, https://comefromaway.com/story.php.

Project Narrative

Antecedents

In the midst of a liminal season, with significant communal trauma, how do we tell and hear our stories? Jeffrey Alexander's model for communal trauma is primarily descriptive, rather than proscriptive. What tools can we use, as a community, to start to understand the nature of the pain experienced during the pandemic, who in the congregation was affected, and the relationships between the individual victims and the broader community? This is not a new question. As early as May 2021, I was thinking about these questions of communal trauma and memorializing the COVID-19 pandemic in worship:

> In this moment of reestablishing our communities, it is not hard to imagine how the trauma of the last year might be compounded by a difference in the lived experiences we have each had. The question then, of how to remember, how to memorialize, is vital to the future of our community.[90]

At the close of that 2021 service, participants were invited to write a memory or image from the year that we were out of our building on a blue paper droplet. This droplet represented both lament and our annual tradition of mingling waters at the start of a new congregational year. The participation rate for this first attempt was low, and it was largely overtaken by events as the building closed a second time in response to the Delta and Omicron variants. The question of memory, and the tension between individual and collective experiences of the pandemic stayed with me.

It was in this context that I attended the July 2022 UCL Board of Trustees meeting. This was the Board's second meeting back in person, and our Board President decided to forgo the

[90] Oscar Sinclair, "Stories of Exile," Unitarian Church of Lincoln, May 23, 2022. Note, this service was developed as part of a D.Min course at Wesley Theological Seminary, DM-L602.

usual open-ended check in to start the meeting. Instead, she asked the Board to split up into pairs to ask each other "what have you learned about yourself during the pandemic?" We then regathered and shared with the larger group. The results were extraordinary. Members of the Board were more disclosive than I anticipated. The gathered group heard firsthand the diversity of experiences in the room, from members that experienced the pandemic as a net positive, to people who experienced it as the worst two years of their lives. Members of the Board described it as cathartic, and I left the meeting wondering how we could scale up that experience for the whole congregation.

Two weeks earlier, I had written a final paper for DM-L605 that described a possible project for documenting the congregation's experience during these years:

> During the pandemic, the Unitarian Church of Lincoln marked its 150th anniversary. Because the congregation had been in search in 2017 after a contentious interim period, the community had already done recent work in telling its communal story. We have told the triumphant stories, of long ministries and the founding of the Nebraska ACLU, and hard stories of financial crises and difficult partings. The hard work of storytelling from 2017-19 was to see those stories as part of a whole, each informing who we are now as a community. We tested the myths that the congregation held about itself (a beacon of liberal thought in a conservative state) against the reality of history ('coincidentally' moving to a segregated neighborhood in 1961) to come to an understanding of a complex community, rather than a caricature.
>
> The theological challenge in this season is finding a way to integrate the disparate individual stories of the last three years into the collective story of the community. How will the congregation tell the story of the pandemic of 2020 when it celebrates its 200th anniversary? How will we understand the pandemic's impact on our collective identity, when the impact on individual identity varied so much? How will we understand trauma, both individual and collective, as a part of our identity as a community that informs our next steps?[91]

The July paper laid out a three-step process of sharing stories from the pandemic:

1) modifying our ingathering liturgy in September to launch the project,

[91] Oscar Sinclair, Final Paper for DM-L605: The Tone of Church Leadership, July 5, 2022.

2) collecting stories in one on one and small group settings over September and October, before
3) sharing representative stories with the congregation at an event in late October.

The D.Min project proposal that I developed kept these basic pieces intact, removing the group reflection component from part 2, and adding a more structured interview format to develop a narrative research project. [92]

Development

The central component of the project was one-on-one interviews *between members of the congregation.* A more conventional approach to oral history would be to conduct interviews with a trained interviewer. The problem that the project was designed to address, however, was a problem of disconnection within the congregation. The primary purpose was pastoral: helping the congregation to understand and engage with each other in the aftermath of the communal trauma of the last three years.

The methodology largely flowed from this core component. If members were going to interview each other without me present, we needed a way to record those conversations. Because our members' comfort level with technology varies significantly, that method of recording had to be easy to teach and to use. I experimented with several methods, including a recording booth I would set up for each conversation, direct recording with smartphones, and an app developed by Story Corps to record oral histories. I eventually settled on purchasing four

[92] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research : A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011). 106, 159.

small dictation recorders (fig.1), with prominent ‘Record’ and ‘Stop’ buttons. This decision prioritized ease of use and consistency of audio quality over flexibility or budget.

Figure 3. Sony ICD-UX570 Voice Recorder

The other tool I settled on early in the process was Rev.com, a paid transcription service, to produce rough automated transcripts of the interview recordings. An initial goal of 80 participants meant that help with transcription was necessary to process all the information the project collected over two months. Rev’s algorithm provided the initial transcript, which I then edited and refined while listening to each interview.

Because participants were not necessarily skilled open-ended interviewers, I developed an initial list of five questions for participants to ask each other in a structured interview format:

- When you tell the story of the pandemic, where do you start?
- What were the first few weeks of the pandemic like for you?
- What is one image from the last three years that has stuck with you?
- What role did the Unitarian Church of Lincoln play during the pandemic?
- What is something you have learned about yourself during the pandemic?

These interview questions were attached to the directions for operating the recorder. I bundled the directions and recorder with an informed consent form, welcome letter, and notebook for any written reflections into a plastic 8x11 container to make four portable recording stations (Fig. 2). The material for these recording stations is included in Appendix **A.**

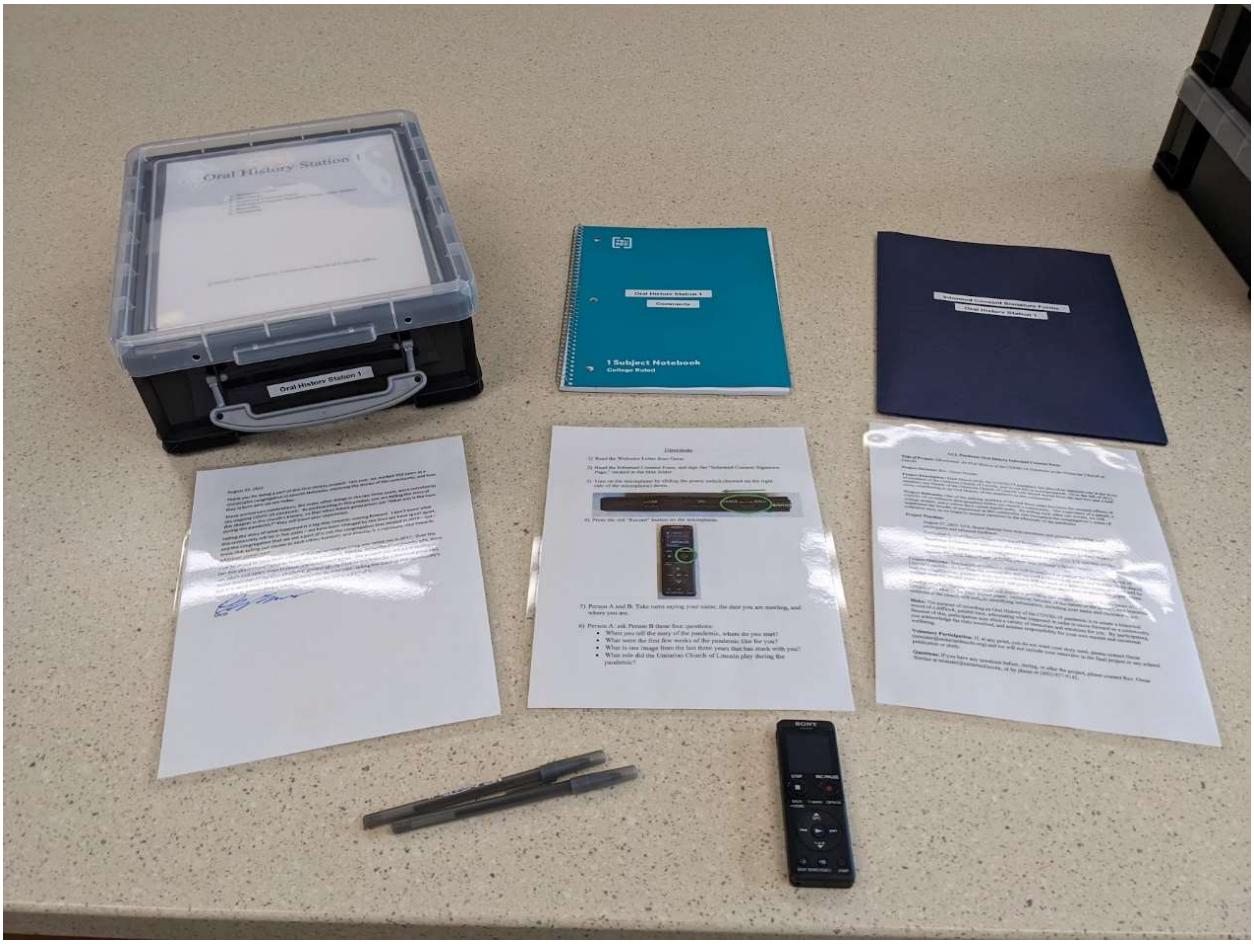
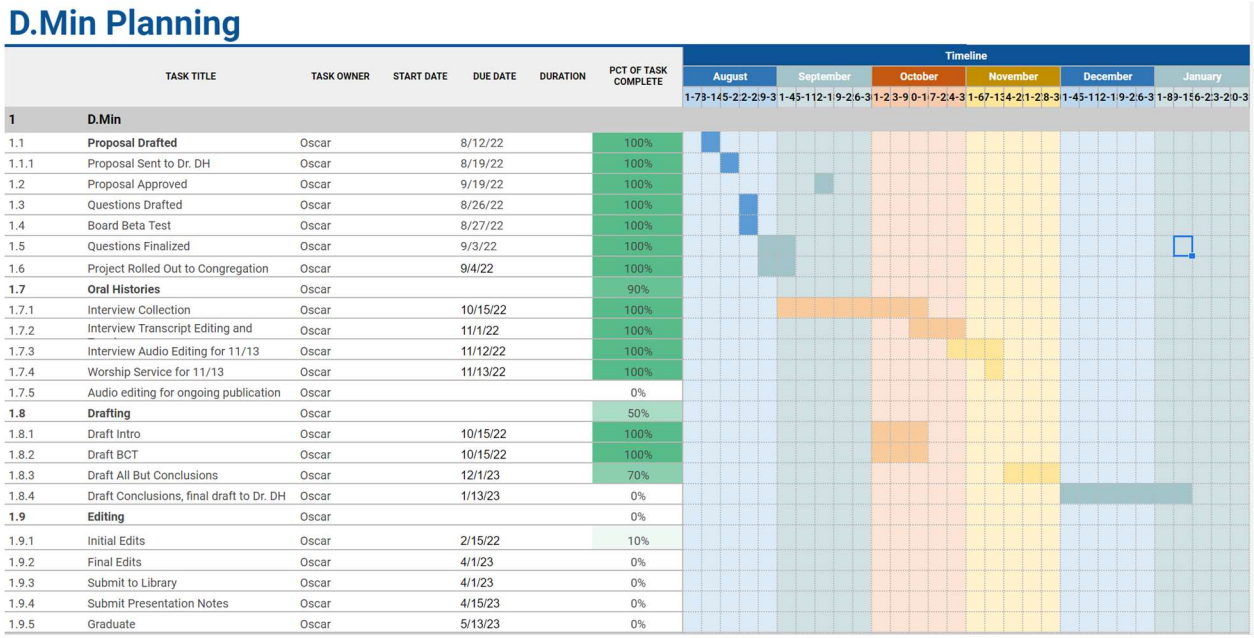


Figure 4. Oral History Recording Station

One of the unanticipated skills needed for pandemic ministry in congregations was video and audio editing. The final component of my project, sharing the stories back to the congregation in their own words, would have been impossible without some experience in audio editing. In planning for the project, I refamiliarized myself with audio editing software, and started thinking about what additional tools I would need in the editing stage.

The last piece of the development and planning stage of the project was to create a Gantt chart with the different components that I would work on over the course of nine months. Because two very different processes (writing and data collection) happened in parallel, with a hard deadline of my upcoming sabbatical in January 2023, developing a clear project timeline was crucial.



D.Min Planning

	TASK TITLE	TASK OWNER	START DATE	DUE DATE	DURATION	PCT OF TASK COMPLETE
1	**D.Min**					
1.1	**Proposal Drafted**	Oscar		8/12/22		100%
1.1.1	Proposal Sent to Dr. DH	Oscar		8/19/22		100%
1.2	Proposal Approved	Oscar		9/19/22		100%
1.3	Questions Drafted	Oscar		8/26/22		100%
1.4	Board Beta Test	Oscar		8/27/22		100%
1.5	Questions Finalized	Oscar		9/3/22		100%
1.6	Project Rolled Out to Congregation	Oscar		9/4/22		100%
1.7	**Oral Histories**	Oscar				90%
1.7.1	Interview Collection	Oscar		10/15/22		100%
1.7.2	Interview Transcript Editing and	Oscar		11/1/22		100%
1.7.3	Interview Audio Editing for 11/13	Oscar		11/12/22		100%
1.7.4	Worship Service for 11/13	Oscar		11/13/22		100%
1.7.5	Audio editing for ongoing publication	Oscar				0%
1.8	**Drafting**	Oscar				50%
1.8.1	Draft Intro	Oscar		10/15/22		100%
1.8.2	Draft BCT	Oscar		10/15/22		100%
1.8.3	Draft All But Conclusions	Oscar		12/1/23		70%
1.8.4	Draft Conclusions, final draft to Dr. DH	Oscar		1/13/23		0%
1.9	**Editing**	Oscar				0%
1.9.1	Initial Edits	Oscar		2/15/22		10%
1.9.2	Final Edits	Oscar		4/1/23		0%
1.9.3	Submit to Library	Oscar		4/1/23		0%
1.9.4	Submit Presentation Notes	Oscar		4/15/23		0%
1.9.5	Graduate	Oscar		5/13/23		0%

Timeline: August, September, October, November, December, January

Figure 5: Oral History Project Gantt Chart

Funding

Early on, it was clear that there would be costs associated with this project. Because the D.Min degree is beyond the scope of my job description, and because the congregation has been in a difficult financial position over the last year, funding the project through UCL's programmatic budget was not an option. The largest anticipated expense was transcription costs: when the program launched, the transcription service charged by the minute (they have since moved to a monthly subscription model). The initial budget was $600, enough to cover 20 hours of transcription, and the cost of two additional recording stations. In September, I raised the

needed funds through a crowdfunding campaign on Faithify.com, a platform set up by the Unitarian Universalist Association for supporting innovative ideas outside of traditional funding channels.[93]

Beta Test

In late August, before introducing the project to the whole congregation, I introduced it to the Board of Trustees as part of their annual summer retreat. I asked the fourteen members present to participate, recording one-on-one interviews and then reflecting on the experience in a focus group immediately following the interviews. The overall feedback was positive. One attendee, who had begun skeptical of the project, reported afterwards

> *I just wanted to say that it was an, it was a wonderful experience doing it. And like I'm a complete convert to this being a very productive thing to do. Cause like, it's just interesting to talk about the pandemic with somebody who's not heard the story of my pandemic. And I found that a very positive experience.* [94]

Three other changes to the eventual methodology come out of feedback from that focus group. First, I added an additional question to the interview directions, "What did you struggle with most?" Several members of the first focus group expressed surprise at how positive their conversation was, even as they had hard experiences during the pandemic that they wanted to talk about. They felt like there was not enough explicit prompting in the initial five questions to express what was difficult about the pandemic.

Second, while most of the attendees at the Board retreat were in person, there were two remote participants, who both stayed home for health reasons. We set them up to do an interview over Zoom with each other, and they strongly encouraged me to make that option more available

[93] Oscar Sinclair, "Pandemic Oral History Project," Faithify.org (Unitarian Universalist Association, September 1, 2022), https://www.faithify.org/campaign/117/oralhistory.
[94] Beta Test Focus Group, Audio Recorded August 27, 2022

to members of the congregation who are still uncomfortable being in group settings at the church. By the time I introduced the project to the congregation two weeks later, I developed a set of directions for people who wanted to participate over Zoom. I also offered to bring a recording box to the front door of anyone who wanted to record at home with a family member rather than coming to the church. While we did not any Zoom participants after the Board retreat, four interviews took place at a member's home.

The third change was not prompted by feedback in the focus group, but by a pattern I noticed while editing the transcripts of the first seven interviews. This project was conceived of primarily as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to the associated upheaval of the last several years. Members of the congregation have been deeply involved in racial justice, including throughout 2020 and 2021. I was surprised when none of the initial batch of interviews touched on this aspect of the pandemic time. In response, and in conversation with Dr. Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, I changed the questions to primarily reference "the last three years" rather than "the COVID-19 pandemic," in hopes of prompting more varied reflections. The final question list following the beta test with the Board was:

- When you tell the story of the last three years, where do you start?
- What were the first few weeks of the pandemic like for you?
- What is one image from the last three years that has stuck with you?
- What role did the Unitarian Church of Lincoln play during the pandemic?
- What did you struggle with most during the last three years?
- What is something you have learned about yourself during the pandemic?

Congregational Rollout

The 2022-23 UCL congregational year began with our ingathering service on September 4. Like many congregations, we include a version of the Unitarian Universalist water communion in that service each year. The water communion ritual varies from year to year and across congregations, but its central element is mingling water from many sources into a common vessel. In so doing, Unitarian Universalists recognize that the community we form is the sum of the experiences we all bring to it, inseparable as the water we pour together. The thematic overlap between this ritual and an oral history project using individual stories as a means for healing from communal trauma is significant. As part of the service, we played a six-minute compilation of audio from the interviews that Board members had recorded two weeks earlier, before inviting the congregation to participate in the project. Using similar language to a newsletter article that was sent to the congregation a few days earlier, I linked the invitation to the liminal context of the congregation:

> The theologian Walter Brueggemann writes about how faith progresses from orientation, to disorientation, to a new orientation: how traumatic or difficult events fundamentally disorient us, leading us to lament and confusion before eventually coming out the other side different than when we started. The river does not reach the sea in the same way it begins – it has to evaporate before falling as rain on the other side of the desert – that time as vapor, up in the clouds passing over the desert, is what Rev. Susan Frederick Grey called this liminal time, the transition between what has been and what might yet be. So, while this congregational year will look more 'normal' than the two that have proceeded it, it is still liminal time…While we have been responding to the pandemic, the trauma of the last few years goes well beyond it. Parallel to the pandemic, we've also been reckoning with the legacy of white supremacy, both in our country after the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and in our own congregation through the Beloved Conversations program. Unlike the pandemic, this is not work that suddenly started in early 2020, but our engagement with it has deepened in the last three years.
>
> The project that came out of this wondering is deceptively simple: find a way for this community to hear each other's stories. If you've listened to Story Corps on NPR, you probably know what comes next. The project that we are

> launching today works like this: Over the next few weeks, after service, you've invited to sit down with one other congregant after service. It could be someone you know well, it could be a complete stranger. There's a voice recorder, like this one, in the box, as well as a list of six questions to ask each other.
>
> We'll record these stories and archive them here at the church: both the ones of triumph over adversary, and the ones of loss and isolation. The stories of pandemic, and stories of protest. Stories of loss, and stories of hope. And then, in November, we'll share those stories in a worship service, as part of an Oral History of the pandemic years at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln.[95]

Immediately following the worship service, and for the next six Sundays, we had four recording stations available during coffee hour. Members, friends, and visitors were invited to take a recording box and interview each other in one of the smaller rooms in the church, often our library or middle school classroom. Each Sunday before leaving church I would upload all the audio we had recorded to the transcription service, then go home and edit it before we started recording the next batch.

Congregational engagement in the project was slower than I hoped at the beginning. When writing the project proposal, I proposed using snowball sampling, asking members to self-select into the project, and then encourage their networks to participate in it. Using this method ten members participated in the first week. I guest preached at a neighboring church on September 11 and returned to find that no members or friends of the congregation had recorded interviews. Two volunteers and I became more proactive in recruiting participants after that, circulating at coffee hour after worship services with a recording box in hand, asking members if they were interested in participating. After we started the more proactive strategy, we consistently had 12-15 new participants each week.

[95] Oscar Sinclair, Water Communion 2022, September 4, 2022.

September Third Thursday Event

The nadir of participation was a supplemental event related to the oral history project, held on September 15. Since 2018, UCL has held a monthly "Third Thursday" worship series, alternating between music driven worship with a full band and smaller scale experimental events. While we were out of the building, these services morphed into weekly Zoom-based vespers services, before transitioning back to a monthly series in the fall of 2021. These services usually draw between 15-40 people, either in person or online. September was an off month for the band, while they rehearsed for a joint music service with the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha in early October. Rather than put together a formal worship service, I developed and publicized a conversation about the theological grounding of this project – material that became the basis for Chapter 2 of this document. Four people attended, including my spouse. While it was a small group, the conversation the ensued was rich as we tried to make sense of the empty sanctuary around us. Two observations stand out from that night:

> *I also wonder if I wonder if there's a hesitance to come back because it was so disruptive when we, when the pandemic hit and we stopped and I think there's an avoidance of that. So if you don't come back, you don't have to deal with that again.*
>
> *[I think] the reason you only have four of us here is because I think there's resistance to the topic. I think a lot of people just don't want to think about it. Yeah. The topic, the whole pandemic or the whole last three years, because when you bring it up with folks they [can] be ambivalent about going back to the trauma.*[96]

On the drive home from the event, my wife, Stacie, suggested a more proactive approach to recruitment, which we started the following Sunday. The theology piece eventually made it onto the UCL's YouTube channel as a weekly video update, where it has just over 80 views as of

[96] Focus Group, Recorded September 15, 2022.

this writing.[97] I spent much of early October writing what became Chapter 2, engaging the underlying questions of sociology and theology as we continued to collect interviews on Sunday and during the week.

For the remainder of the project, I intentionally used multiple communication channels for recruitment, including direct recruiting in person and by email, Facebook posts, video updates, newsletter columns, and announcement slides in UCL's gallery. Following the interviews, I asked participants what communication tool was most impactful in convincing them to participate. While a plurality (38 percent) of respondents said direct recruitment, there was no clear preferred method of communication.

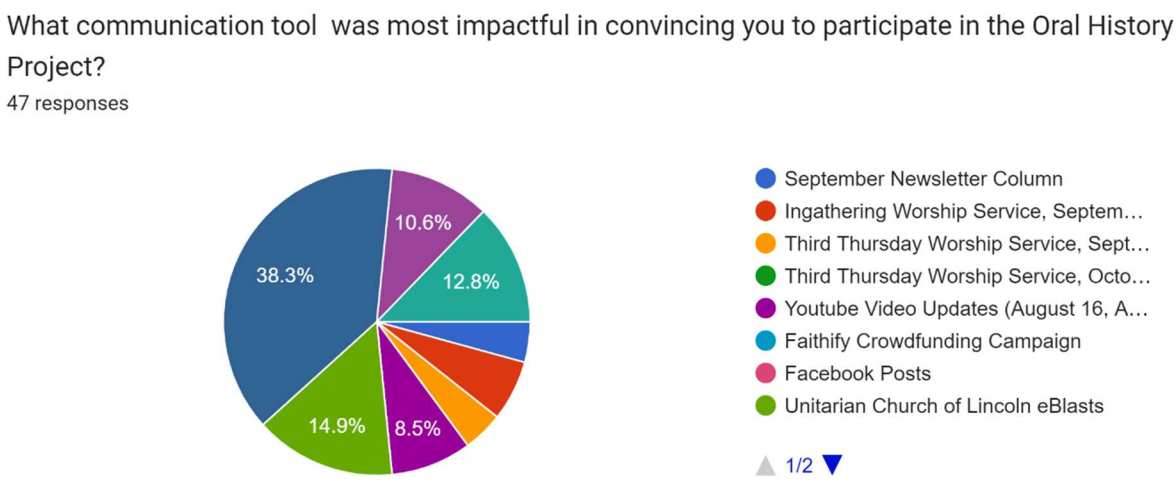


Figure 6. Post-Interview Questionnaire Question 6

Wrapping Up Congregational Participation

By October 9, we had 67 total participants, and were aiming to finish recording interviews by October 22. On October 11, I directly emailed 78 members of the congregation

[97] Oscar Sinclair, Video Update, September 20, 2022. https://youtu.be/w7qjry5WR6A

who I had identified as likely participants, who had not yet engaged with the project. The email asked them to considered participating, either on Sunday October 16, or at two times I set aside during the following Wednesday morning and Thursday afternoon through evening.

One of the constant pieces of feedback, from the Board retreat onward, was from members who wanted to know the questions in advance, so that they could prepare what they wanted to say. For the much of the recording period I pushed back on this; I believed that reading from prepared notes would diminish the engagement between members that the project was an attempt to foster. In this last push for participants, I decided to include the questions, reasoning that it was better to have more participation with diminished individual engagement than to have those individuals not engage with the project at all. To my surprise, very little changed in the responses from this later group. One participant later reflected in a focus group:

> *I wrote down a list of things that I thought about what my answers would be, and it's not really, it didn't turn out to be what I actually said at the minute. It was more [pause] low than that. It was good for me to be able to talk like that with a friend. A friend that I knew was listening.*[98]

By the time we finished recording interviews on October 23, 91 members and friends of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln had participated. Seven participants recorded multiple interviews, often serving as a partner for someone participating for the first time. Most interviews had two participants, but seven interviews had a third participant, when an odd number of people expressed interest in recording at the same time. The recordings range in length from five minutes to eighty minutes, with most taking between 15-20 minutes. At the end of the recording period, each participant received a questionnaire following up on their

[98] Focus Group, December 9, 2022.

experience with the project. Chapter 4, below, highlights themes from the interviews. The results of the survey are discussed, along with the other results of the project, in Chapter 5.

Sharing Back to the Congregation

The third major component of the project was to share the stories from the one-on-one interviews back to the congregation. There were several steps to this: first, I collected the transcripts of all the interviews for eventual storage in the church archives along with the audio recorded over the course of this project. This fall, a copy of the transcripts is available in the church gallery, on the historic altar from UCL's previous building in downtown Lincoln.

Second, I began to edit the audio into 3-5 minute thematic pieces for the worship service on November 13. At that worship service, I spoke very little, introducing six pieces of audio, each containing 4-10 voices from the congregation. The audio pieces built on each other: the first was a series of vignettes from the interview process, the second was a short selection of four people expressing overwhelm or trauma. This was followed by a longer piece on the different experiences members had during COVID, ranging from traumatic to a blessing. The fourth and fifth pieces took up Alexander's description of the nature of the victim and the nature of the pain, before the service ended with participants' reflections on the positive role the church played in their lives over the last several years.

To give readers a sense of how this sounded, this is the transcript for the third audio piece, describing the varied experiences members had of the pandemic. I am quoting it at length here because producing this six-minute audio clip and having the whole congregation hear it, is the clearest response to the adaptive challenge of fatigue and disconnection described in this project:

Speaker 1 (00:02):

Honestly it's probably something akin to survivor's guilt, because my life got easier during the whole thing.

Speaker 2 (00:10):

I lost 10 events in that space of three years, and so it feels like I was forced to retire.

Speaker 3 (00:22):

I will always look back on this as the best three years of my life. Yeah. So I know it was, I sometimes sort of feel guilty that I know this has been a really hard time for some people, but for me it was sort of a blessing. Cause right when my parents needed my attention, I could give it to them a hundred percent. And so the fact that they couldn't go out much, well, we didn't need to. It was sort of a blessing.

Speaker 4 (00:53):

I was certain I was gonna die. I did not think I was gonna live for the pandemic. I have asthma. And I thought, Well, I'm gonna die, l'll see how long I can hold on. And that was my pervasive thought at first. Then I got better.

Speaker 5 (01:09):

It took me a while to really realize that as serious it was. Because like I said, being out in the living out in the country and not being around people all the time and being retired and not having to go into a job it didn't really seem different than any other time of life until the place I go exercise stopped. When I couldn't go there,

Speaker 6 (01:44):

It was probably the most loneliest part of my life worse than being in jail. And I know that <laugh>, but it was or has been a struggle for me. I like to be around people and the lack of people around me was depressing.

Speaker 7 (02:11):

I was at home all the time. I got to be in my craft cave the whole time. So as long as I was in my little bubble, everything was okay. I got to be with my pets. I got to have new surroundings. I got to wear fun jammy pants to work. As long as I was inside, it was okay. It was just when I had to go outside and do things like groceries for my dad, where it was kind of heart palpitating, kind of nerve-wracking, scary.

Speaker 8 (02:42):

It's the creation of the chasm, the expansion of the chasm that ultimately, not forced, but encouraged me to learn about myself and to get started on the path and

to get moving so that I had any motivation at all. Because with, I think without the pandemic, I would be a much more boring, much more stagnant person right now.

Speaker 9 (03:10):

A happy time was when Craig and I legally married and my two oldest children died of COVID 19 at the beginning of the pandemic. And so for me, the last three years have been just tsunamis of emotion, huge waves of grief, sorrow, resentment, anger come rushing over me and nearly drown me. And then they recede. And it was a time of change when the pence raged the land and we were in seclusion. I truly felt like a prisoner. It's a nice prison, but still it was a prison, could not get out, could not attend my children's funerals. And there is something basically wrong about your children preceding you in death. I mean, when your parents die, you become an orphan regardless of your age. If your spouse dies, you're a widow or a widower, and if your children die, you're just devastated.

Speaker 10 (04:54):

Like I wasn't happy, but I was okay. But it was just like, I didn't really look at myself and stuff, but COVID forced me to look inward and actually focus on myself as opposed to just doing school, just doing work and just putting all of myself into those things and stuff. I still do that, but now I also let myself think about me and what I am and who I am and stuff. So it's really weird because everybody was always, COVID was so hard and is so hard and so many people died and there's that trauma from it. But at the same time, I became happier during COVID, which is weird to admit to people. And I hate that idea because people lost their loved ones and entire families have died. But I've been blessed in which growth, I became happier and I grew as a person and I'm a lot more confident in myself and a lot happier where I am. I'm not just okay anymore and I am no longer willing to be just okay.[99]

As part of the worship service, participants were asked to answer a brief survey at the start and end of the service. This survey contained two primary questions, answered on a scale from 1-5:

- "I understand what other members of the community went through during the pandemic."
- "Other members of the community understand what I went through during the pandemic."

[99] Unitarian Church of Lincoln, November 13, 2022 Worship Service.

Forty-five attendees responded to both surveys. The survey at the end of the worship service also asked respondents to sign up for a focus group to discuss the project and its impact. The results of both the survey and focus groups are described in Chapter 5.

As of the November 13 service, the project as imagined over the summer is now largely concluded. We collected over 400 pages of transcripts from over 20 hours of audio recordings. Themes from the interviews are described in Chapter 5, and I am thinking about how best to share additional material with the congregation following my return from sabbatical in June 2023. Before then, there are opportunities to develop this project as a model for other congregations responding to collective trauma, including but not limited to COVID-19. While on sabbatical I will be working with two Unitarian congregations that have expressed interest in this project: one large congregation on the East Coast of the United States, and one small English congregation. Based on the participation of three demographically and geographically dissimilar congregations, I plan to develop a proposal to present this project as a model at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in June 2023.

A Note on Theology and Practice

The method of this project reflects its underlying theology. I began with the necessity of lament, what Walter Brueggemann calls an act of bold faith, "because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is, and not in a pretend way."[100] If we, as religious institutions, reject lament as a reflection of lived experience, we give up our relevance to the daily lives of people in our community. We are called to speak to the whole of our experience, both the heights and the depths. Many people in our churches and the broader community experienced COVID-19 as a traumatic event; and finding a way to honestly reflect that reality in our congregations was the seed out of which the methodology grew.

This project evolved as a *narrative* project in response to a communally traumatic event, because narrative is a necessary step to healing from trauma. In a focus group after the project had concluded, one of the participants observed that

> *...I think this really underscores how important this work is, because talking about things is how you process things. And that kind of talking is how we'll recover. I think.*[101]

In Judith Herman's work, telling the story of a traumatic event is a primary step in recovery. The tension between the necessity of telling the story and the desire to forget is the 'central dialectic' in healing after trauma.[102] This tension was present in the project, particularly in our struggles to recruit participants early on. As one member reflected:

> *I think a lot of people just don't want to think about it. The topic, the whole pandemic, or the whole last three years, because when you bring it up with folks they [can] be ambivalent about going back to the trauma.*[103]

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[100] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984). 52.
[101] Participant 85, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[102] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 1992). 1.
[103] Focus Group, Recorded September 15, 2022.

I observed the tension between disclosure and forgetting in my pastoral ministry at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln over the years of the pandemic. Members would describe terrible events one day in office, before moving forward in congregational life with little acknowledgement of what they went through. At the same time, I started to observe behaviors in the congregation that felt out of place: misdirected anger, lack of institutional energy, difficulty with communication. Assuming a connection between the unspoken laments and this institutional *ennui*, I designed a project to surface the stories that I was hearing individually, but that were rarely heard by the whole congregation. Shared narratives are a common form of communal identity formation and strengthening, and by telling these stories I hoped to strengthen the bonds among members of the congregation.[104]

As described in Chapter 3, one of the animating theological tensions in Unitarian Universalism is between individualism and interconnectedness. We are a historically liberal faith with a heavy emphasis on individual story and discovery, expressed through collective covenants. A narrative project must reflect this tension. This can happen in different ways. The Commission on Institutional Change process, also described in Chapter 3, drew on testimony from over 1,100 people – including serving clergy members – to develop five "avatars" for its final report, narratives that were representative of the testimony the commission received, but not identifiable. By using these avatars, the commission told the story of the whole Unitarian Universalist community through individual narratives.

Those avatars were necessary, because the imperative for the commission was to tell hard truths. Creating composite stories allowed the composites to say things that an individual cannot without risking professional consequences. Saying "I left my last ministry after sustained,

[104] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

racialized comments" carries risk in a small denomination. But if an avatar says the same thing, readers can see the truth of the story without connecting it to a specific minister and congregation.

The avatar process took stories that had been peripheral, individual stories and moved them to the center of *our* story as an Association. Responding to COVID-19 in Lincoln, we had a similar conceptual problem: There were stories on the periphery of the congregation (the member who lost two sons, the parents who dropped out of church attendance while just trying to hold it together, folks who lost their jobs), but those stories were rarely heard by the whole congregation, much less understood as part of *our* collective story as a community.

The important difference between the congregation and the commission on institutional change was in the consequence of telling those stories. Stories about the effect of the pandemic do not come with the same professional or reputational risk as stories of institutional racism, so the creation of composite avatars was unnecessary. Instead, we were focused on building connection between members of the congregation that had spent significant time apart and outside of our physical space.

Rebuilding congregational connections became the core of the interview methodology: rather than depend on an expert interviewer to gather stories from the congregation, the project was designed for members of the congregation to share with each other. While sharing one's story is a project that emphasizes the individual, it was always done in the context of another member of the community.

This is the most novel methodology used in the project, but it is grounded in the practice of Unitarian Universalism. In this tradition, we are fundamentally interconnected, and our communities are covenantal, free associations of individuals and congregations co-creating a

shared institution. This project reflects that tradition: individuals sharing their stories with each other, as a means to form voluntary community. Importantly, I participated in the project, along with my spouse. Ministers in our tradition are not set apart from the covenantal community, but are a part of it. The role of 'participant-observer' is more than methodology, it is a primary theological position of Unitarian Universalist clergy vis-a-vis the congregations they serve.

The stories, laments, and positive experiences we gathered as part of the project did not stay between the two people who interviewed each other. Sharing the collected stories back to the congregation was grounded in Jeffrey Alexander's work on communal trauma. Communities move through traumatic events by articulating who was harmed, how they were harmed, and what their relationship to the broader community is.[105] By gathering on Sunday, and sharing audio from the interviews, the congregation heard firsthand who was affected and how, and did so in the context of a regularly scheduled community gathering. Individual stories of what I or you went through became a story about what *we* went through.

The remaining Chapters describe some of the stories we gathered from the congregation, and the impact of this project. That work is distinct from a strict qualitative analysis of interviews, because it is grounded in Unitarian Universalist theology and practice: members interviewed each other, the author participated, and the end goal was not scholarly but pastoral. If this was a successful project it is because of the effect it had on the congregation's healing, rather than the quantity or quality of information gathered.

[105] Jeffrey C Alexander, *Trauma a Social Theory* (Cambridge Malden Polity, 2015).

Interview Themes

Between August 27 and October 23, 2022, 91 members and friends interviewed each other as part of the oral history project at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln. These interviews generated twenty hours of audio, which I converted into approximately 400 pages of edited transcript. Most interviews were between two people, but seven interviews had three participants. A lengthy qualitative analysis of the interviews is beyond the scope of the current project, but there are four frequent narrative themes that suggest common experiences of the pandemic in the congregation: ambivalence about the pandemic's impact; fear, particularly among medically fragile members; surprisingly positive experiences of the last three years; and struggling families, particularly among parents with young children and grandparents missing their grandchildren.

Ambivalence about the Pandemic's Impact

Following the final interview, I emailed all participants a questionnaire asking about their experience with the project. As part of the questionnaire, participants were asked how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their lives on a scale of 1-5, 1 being 'very negatively' and 5 being 'very positively.' While more participants reported negative impacts than positive impacts, a plurality of participants responded with a '3.' One participant clarified: "Regarding the pandemic's impact on my life, I chose the middle option, not because there was no impact, but because there were both positive and negative impacts and I can't say one outweighed the other."[106]

[106] Post Interview Questionnaire, Q13, Respondent 39.

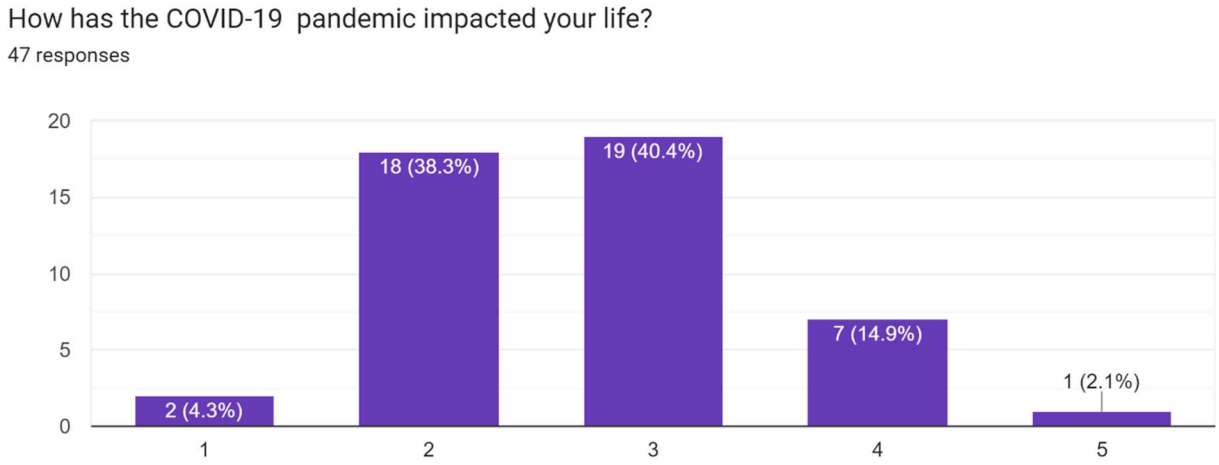


Figure 7. Post Interview Questionnaire Question 1. 1 = Very Negatively, 5=Very Positively.

In many of the interviews, participants expressed similar ambivalence:

> *I got to be in my craft cave the whole time, you know? So as long as I was in my little bubble, everything was okay. You know, I got to be with my pets, I got to have new surroundings. I got to wear fun jammy pants to work, you know, it was, you know, as long as I was inside, it was okay. It was just when I had to go outside and do things like groceries for my dad, where it was kind of heart palpitating, kind of nerve-wracking scary.*[107]
>
> *I think that the overwhelming thing I realize is how privileged I am because COVID was not a tremendously difficult time for me. And I realized that that was certainly not the case for maybe even most people and we have never gotten COVID and we were able to get the B the shots and the boosters. And, you know, the worst happened was that we had to cancel some tr travel that we had planned, but, you know, I mean, that's piddly.*[108]
>
> *I don't think I struggled. I was not ill and nobody that I knew closely was. The news was horrible to read. All the elderly people, of which I am one <laugh> that were in the hospital dying, I mean by the boatloads. I was fortunate not to know any of them personally, but that was kind of a struggle to think, do we have to stay in for the rest of our lives? <laugh>? Yeah. I don't have that many. I'm 84 years old. How many years do I have left to stay in?*[109]

[107] Participant 63, Oral Interview, Recorded October 2, 2022
[108] Participant 30, Oral Interview, Recorded September 18, 2022
[109] Participant 82, Oral Interview, Recorded October 10, 2022

Other members and friends described the pandemic as having little impact on their lives:

> *Being retired, I don't, I didn't, I wasn't really affected that much. Yeah. And if I'd been working, teaching it would've been much, much more difficult.*[110]
>
> *It wasn't difficult. The pandemic was not difficult. It was nothing. I mean, it was just keeping hands clean and wearing a mask. It was no big deal.*[111]
>
> *To tell you the truth, it was really more or less pretty well life as normal. And I think a lot of that is because I, I didn't have to worry about going to a job. I didn't have children at home. I kind of was off in my own little, our own little world <laugh> and I kept going to the grocery store, but was real careful when I went. So it was probably different in a lot of ways than a lot of people that didn't have that same situation.*[112]
>
> *I don't think I did struggle very much because I think I embraced my introvert side and since I live alone and the contact we had was, you know, pretty isolated and even then protected. I started walking every day for several miles and I just, I don't think I had a big traumatic experience.*[113]

Medically Fragile Participants

While the plurality of respondents to the post-interview questionnaire responded that the pandemic had a mixed or neutral impact on their lives, 43 percent of respondents reported an overall negative impact. Within this group, a common story was worry based on either their own preexisting medical conditions, or those of a close family member.

> *I was so terrified of getting my family sick. So I wasn't going to visit them and I mean, even masking and going to visit them because before the vaccine was available, it just felt it, everything felt like DEFCON five level risk.*[114]
>
> *I have a spouse who, you know, was very high risk especially in the early times of COVID when there was no vaccine available and we were all just, you know, kind of using our cloth masks. And then they were saying, Well, look, cloth masks aren't really gonna work very well, so you probably need to get N95 masks and all this. And I was just trying to kind of keep him safe. And so that was hard.*[115]
>
> *I mean, it was, it was probably the most loneliest part of my life worse than being in jail. And I know about that <laugh>, but it was or has been a struggle for me…*

[110] Participant 50, Oral Interview, Recorded September 25, 2022
[111] Participant 32, Oral Interview, Recorded September 18, 2022
[112] Participant 12, Oral Interview, Recorded August 27, 2022
[113] Participant 21, Oral Interview, Recorded September 4, 2022
[114] Participant 1, Oral Interview, Recorded August 27, 2022
[115] Participant 55, Oral Interview, Recorded October 1, 2022

I was pretty scared. I believe I was, you know, because I'm, I followed within that parameters of you know, cuz I had cancer three times and I've had heart attack, you know, I was, I, I had went, ran through the gambit of health issues, so I was scared that, you know, just anybody could come over and sneeze on me and I could, you know, cuz I, I have really bad breathing, so I knew if I'd gotten anything with flu related it would be very, very hard on me.[116]

I was trying to keep my students together and calm and things like that, but then, you know, with my health and hearing that this new virus was coming through, I just, I spent a lot of time thinking I was gonna die <laugh>. and just sort of being very, very, very afraid.[117]

I remember my daughter and my mom ate at Easter dinner at the table, but I was on the couch on the other side of the room. But we were trying to have Easter with her and just have time with her and it just always felt like Russian roulette every single time.[118]

I was certain I was gonna die. I did not think I was gonna live through the pandemic. I have asthma and I thought, Well, I'm gonna die, I'll just see how long I can hold on.[119]

This is also a place where the personal and professional overlap in my own story. In 2012, following treatment for Hodgkin's Lymphoma, I was diagnosed with Common Variable Immunodeficiency, a disorder of the immune system characterized by the body's inability to produce antibodies. I have weekly infusions of immunoglobulin and was candid while interviewing with UCL in 2017 that this is part of my life and ministry. I have to be conscious of infection on a daily basis. While this had an impact on my experience, it was mostly confined to the first months of the pandemic. By mid-2020, researchers had largely determined that the immune disorder that I have was not correlated to an increased risk of death or serious disease from COVID-19. It did, however, show up in an exchange during one of the post-project focus groups:

[116] Participant 59, Oral Interview, Recorded October 2, 2022
[117] Participant 85, Oral Interview, Recorded October 16, 2022
[118] Participant 89, Oral Interview, Recorded October 20, 2022
[119] Participant 64, Oral Interview, Recorded October 9, 2022

WH: Something I would like to see. But it is, it's not within my purview to do it. I wonder about if you would ever be able to speak on the tension between handling the pandemic as a person and handling the pandemic as a minister. And I think that's a big ask right now, but someday, someday, I would be curious to understand what that was like for you.

OS: <affirmative>

LB: I felt like your obsession, I mean that's how I looked at it, your obsession with the Tuesday reports on the COVID numbers-

OS: Oh sure

LB: I thought 'Oscar is really scared. He really doesn't want to get it. And I halfway thought you'd already had. But I do think it kept us safer, it did. But was it more personal that kept you so?

OS: No, no. That will be an enduring memory of the pandemic, Pat Lopez's voice on Tuesday afternoons [the director of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department, who held weekly press conferences from 2020-2022], but no. For me, I was looking at a lot of my colleagues and we were all trying to figure out what to do. And I said pretty early on, I don't think I'm the best person to make these decisions. What is the best source of local information about what is happening in Lancaster County?

At the height of the pandemic, I was regularly sharing information from the county health department's weekly briefings. While I was doing that to have a consistent, expert source of information, it was perceived by at least some of the congregation as connected to my own health status. Finding out as part of this focus group that this was perceived as fear, rather than deference to experts, was disconcerting.

Pandemic as Positive

Seventeen percent of respondents in the post-interview questionnaire said that the pandemic had a positive impact on their lives. While I could not discern an overall trend in these stories, they were powerful: one friend of the congregation moved to Lincoln to care for aging parents, who both passed away during the pandemic (not from COVID). In the interview, after describing both parents dying at home, while they were present, they said

> *I will always look back on this as like the best three years of my life… Cause right when my parents needed my attention, I could give it to them a hundred percent.*[120]

Several participants described the years of the pandemic as a time of profound self-discovery related to their own identity:

> *COVID forced me to like look inward and actually focus on myself as opposed to just, just doing school, just doing work and just putting all of myself into those things and stuff. I still do that, but like now I also let myself think about me in what I am and who I am and stuff.*[121]

> *I've learned everything I know about myself because of the pandemic. I did not consider myself a full human until the pandemic hit. I was a child. I'm still a child, but one who has begun the journey of self-realization. I've learned, I mean, I had already had an inkling of my gender before the pandemic hit, but I learned even more about that during the pandemic. I learned, I learned about the limits of my tolerances. I learned about the, the limits of my love and how to expand those limits. I learned about, I learned about what is truly an interest of mine and what has been driven into me by habit. Hmm. I learned about what my real goals in this existence are, versus again, what has been pounded into me by habit. I've learned, I've learned to better recognize the boundary between where I start and where my culture and my society ends within my person and everything… I think without the pandemic, I would be a much more boring, much more stagnant person right now than I currently am.*[122]

Many of the participants who experienced the pandemic positively also expressed guilt or ambivalence about that:

> *So I know it was, Yeah. I sometimes sort of feel guilty that I know this has been a really hard time for some people, but for me it was sort of a blessing.*[123]

> *So it's really weird because everybody was always like COVID was so hard and is so hard. And like so many people died and there's that trauma from it. But at the same time, like I became happier during COVID, which is weird to admit to people.*[124]

[120] Participant 72, Oral Interview, Recorded October 16, 2022
[121] Participant 42, Oral Interview, Recorded September 25, 2022
[122] Participant 67, Oral Interview, Recorded October 9, 2022
[123] Participant 72, Oral Interview, Recorded October 16, 2022
[124] Participant 42, Oral Interview, Recorded September 25, 2022

Honestly, it's probably something akin to survivor's guilt, because my life got easier during the whole thing…[125]

[I struggle with] guilt that it was a pretty easy time for me… I am kind of a Hobbit. I love reading and doing puzzles and being at home. So for me, I struggled with: this is such a cosmic, deadly shattering event for much of the world. And I was kind of cozy inside petting my dog.[126]

Parents and Grandparents

When I started this project, I expected to see a strong generational split: anecdotally, many parents of young children in the congregation have expressed that they have been struggling in the last three years, while many retired members of the congregation have been ambivalent. The pandemic did not affect them as much, and they have mostly gone about their lives (described above). Parents, on the other hand, did record stories of significant struggle:

I struggled with not knowing the best ways to keep you kids safe. And so I was always doing the very best I could, but I wasn't always sure if it was enough or the right thing. And I'm so thankful now that we're through it and you guys are healthy and strong. It turns out we did make a lot of good choices. Uh, but I was always worried about it every day. That's what I would wake up worrying about.[127]

We weren't homeschooling her like so many parents did. We had it relatively easy and even relatively, even with the relative ease, it felt at times like I was just failing.[128]

It was just a lot. It had been all a lot… And then on the right after that, my mom dying and she [my daughter] was in pieces emotionally and struggling with so many things. And I felt like, how am I gonna, It was so hard to find someone, a therapist, to find the help she needed and to stay on top of her physical health with her type one diabetes. And it was all just so heavy and I couldn't, it was just awful all the time. And it was really just surviving through it just, I mean, I'm thankful for my small little teaching online routines that kind of kept me moving through things. But the loneliness was just vast, It was absolutely just, oh, so hard. So hard.[129]

[125] Participant 84, Oral Interview, Recorded October 20, 2022
[126] Participant 46, Oral Interview, Recorded September 25, 2022
[127] Participant 19, Oral Interview, Recorded September 4, 2022
[128] Participant 25, Oral Interview, Recorded September 15, 2022
[129] Participant 89, Oral Interview, Recorded October 20, 2022

This is an area where my position as participant-observer is important. The second quotation of the preceding series is from my wife Stacie. Our daughter Ailish was three years old at the start of the pandemic, and much of our experience of COVID-19, outside of our work, was informed by our identity as parents. While Ailish has emerged from the last three years as a inquisitive, assertive child who thrives in social situations, I often worried about the effect the pandemic would have on her. From concrete worries every time my daughter had a fever, to broader concerns about the effect of her staying home for a year in a formative time, our experience of the pandemic is inseparable from our experience as parents. From October 2020-April 2021, we lived with my parents as an extended family unit of five. Each of the four adults took a daily two-hour childcare shift while the other three worked, and it was only through this help that Stacie and I were able to maintain our full time jobs. Having that support quickly at hand when we most needed it meant that we did not struggle in the same way as many parents, but it was still a challenging period for us as a family.

This pattern broke down with the experience of grandparents in the congregation. Multiple participants told stories of missing their children and grandchildren: sitting outside a hospital while their grandson had surgery, missing their adult daughter's wedding, not seeing the children in their family for months at a time. These were some of the most affecting stories I listened to over the course of transcribing. Two stories stand out; for both, I had to take off my headphones and take a walk before returning to editing:

> *I was afraid to have contact with my son who works in the hospital and I thought, well, if anybody gets it, it's gonna be him. And how can I be around my son and grandson? And daughter-in-law it, it was, it was scary… And I also remember the first time that I saw my grandson after not seeing him for, you know, weeks or months or whatever it was. And I decided, well, I could go be with him outside*

mm-hmm <affirmative> and he was so excited to see me, and then he didn't want me to leave, "but Grammy, I need you, don't leave," you know?[130]

…by then we knew, so nobody wanted to say 'let's cancel the girls' birthday.' So I wasn't gonna say it, but everybody in the family was kind of thinking, should we, shouldn't we. And then we got the call from my daughter and she said, I just think [pause] we didn't say cancel. We said postpone. Because I remember telling the girls, Oh, it'll be their mom telling them, We'll celebrate maybe your next half birthday. And it was, what, two years, two and a half years before we did. [pause] But I have no idea why I get emotional about this. [131]

What does not come through in transcript form is the long pauses in these stories as participants gathered themselves. I have known and loved this midwestern congregation for half a decade, and the tension between heartbreak and midwestern stoicism is strong.

Role of the Church

While not a theme per se, one of the questions participants asked each other was "what role did the Unitarian Church of Lincoln play over the last three years." It was gratifying to hear that the role most often attributed to the church was as a source of stability:

It certainly played a big role in maintaining some sense of continuity stability… even though it was a different form and we weren't going to church, it still was similar church service to what we'd been experiencing.[132]

The UU did keep me kind of grounded.[133]

For me, it was a connection point. Just being able to watch the YouTube services to hear that message of community and connection and hope. And then I taught several of the Zoom Sunday school sessions for the K five students. And it was so wonderful to be able to still connect with those children of our church and share stories and songs together. So definitely a connection place. And then I guess, a respite from the craziness of being a teacher and a parent and just to overwhelm and just to realize that I wasn't alone. Yeah. I guess cuz otherwise the worry is just overwhelming.[134]

It [UCL] played a bigger role than I expected. It was an anchor for me or a source of constant stability. But I mean, looked forward to Sundays and I would

[130] Participant 47, Oral Interview, Recorded September 25, 2022
[131] Participant 83, Oral Interview, Recorded October 20, 2022
[132] Participant 9, Oral Interview, Recorded September 18, 2022
[133] Participant 38, Oral Interview, Recorded October 16, 2022
[134] Participant 7, Oral Interview, Recorded August 27, 2022

> *get up there in the office and turn it on and sing like an idiot <laugh> because the words were up on the screen and nobody could hear how bad I sing. And it was a rock, I think.*[135]

The staff and volunteers at the church worked countless hours, described in Chapter 1, to maintain the congregation and meet the needs of our members and friends in the midst of upheaval in the world. As we closed out the project, we began to hear more about what the church, and doing an oral history, meant to our people.

[135] Participant 83, Oral Interview, Recorded October 20, 2022

Impact

Measuring an intervention's impact on an adaptive challenge or a system in a liminal period is challenging. Most of the potential impacts are long-term, and in the meantime the leader or cause of change is as likely to be identified as the problem as the solution.[136] In the case of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, a final answer to whether this project helped the congregation to heal from communal trauma and reconnect with each other will take several years to develop. The long-term nature of the impacts also makes measuring them difficult: the years between intervention and impact will have additional interventions and programs that also effect the congregation, and any positive or negative long term outcome will be the result of many programs beyond this one. The nature of congregational life eliminates the possibility of a control group or null hypothesis: we can compare UCL to other similar Unitarian Universalist congregations, but none of them are perfectly similar, and each are experimenting with their own responses to similar adaptive challenges.

Knowing those limits, we can try to measure some level of short-term result from the intervention described in the preceding Chapters. In questionnaires and focus groups, members of the congregation describe this project as increasing their feeling of connection to each other and the church community and their feelings of being understood, both by themselves and others. Participants are able to accurately use, unprompted, concepts from the project. And several participants in the focus groups and post-interview questionnaires expressed gratitude for the project. While the long-term durability of these effects is impossible to know, they suggest that this project may have positive long term effects on the congregation.

[136] Susan Beaumont, How to Lead in a Liminal Season, 141.

This Chapter draws on three documents to describe the impact of the project: the post-interview questionnaire sent to participants in the oral history interviews, the pre and post-worship survey from November 13, and recordings from the two post-project focus groups in which 18 members participated.

Connection

One of the first questions we asked of participants was about their sense of connection to the person they recorded with and the congregation as a whole. In both Jeffrey Alexander's model of communal trauma recovery, and Unitarian Universalist theology, the work of integrating individual and collective experience is vital. In Alexander's model, this is the work of defining the relationship between the victims and broader community into a collective identity.[137] In UU theology, integrating individual worth, dignity, and narrative into an interconnected whole is a critical theological task, described in Chapter 2.

In the post-interview questionnaire, participants in the Oral History project expressed greater connection as a result of participating in the project.[138]

[137] Jeffrey C Alexander, *Trauma a Social Theory* (Cambridge Malden Polity, 2015). 18
[138] This would be a stronger result had I found a way to administer a pre-test to participants, but given the nature of recruitment, the priority was on simplicity and ease of use for participants.

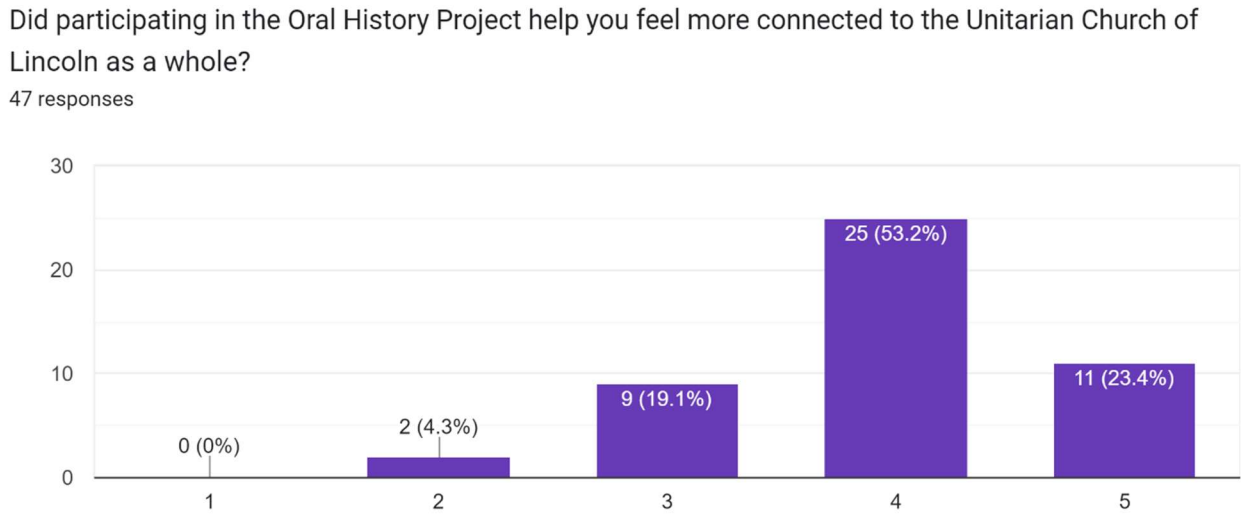


Figure 8

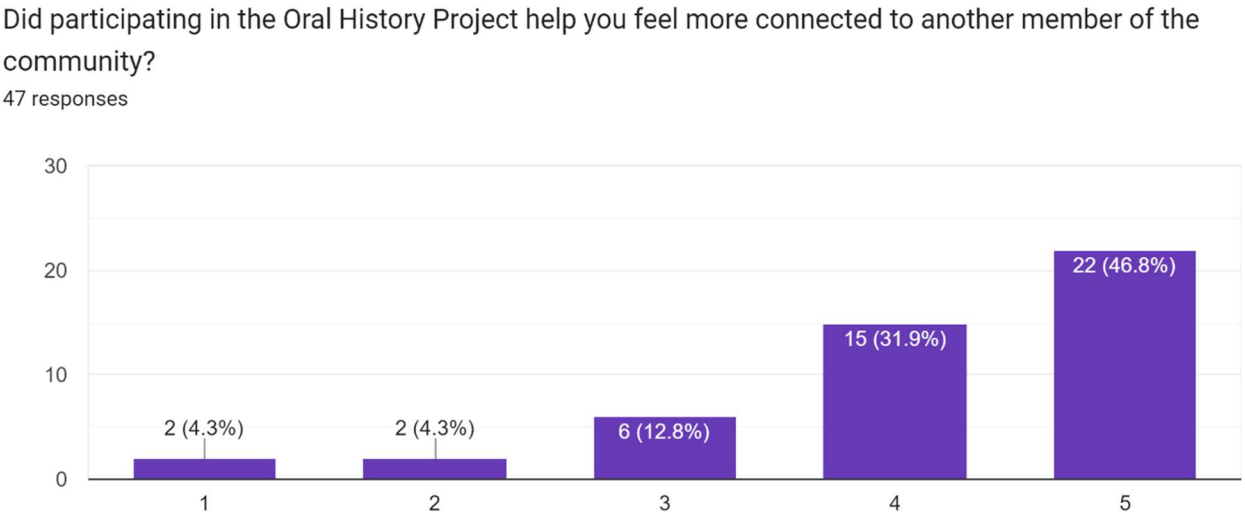


Figure 9

Following the project, this sense of connection with other members of the congregation was a dominant theme among the two focus groups.

> *It was when [a member] was talking about [their spouse with a chronic medical condition], I did not know why she had had a relapse that it was due to a COVID shot. I just knew that she had had a real, almost back to where she was when she*

first got ill. And that was pretty bad. So that was like, oh wow. That gives me a better perspective on what they've been going through.[139]

A lot has happened that we haven't really been able to acknowledge with each other, and this has been a powerful way to start that process.[140]

I think the Sunday sermon really brought that home to me. I was one of the, I think less affected people didn't have to worry about a job and had a nice place to stay and had Linda with me and electronic connections. And I had lots of advantages in dealing with it. And it was listening to some of the harder cases at the sermon time, I made me realize just how easy I'd had it and maybe I'd underappreciated how much other people suffered with it.[141]

For me, it was a really powerful reconnection with a lot of people in this church who I've seen, but always on Zoom and been a strange couple years. But there was really an immediacy to hearing those stories. I'll remember that for a long time.[142]

I think from listening to the service that Oscar gave with the excerpts from some of the recordings, what struck me was the sense of loss that some members had experienced that I was not aware of, that I was very saddened by. I didn't realize some people had gone through such deep loss.[143]

I didn't have those kinds of experiences and don't know people who did for the most part. But I find there are people here in my church community who are having those experiences, not just people I read about in the newspaper.[144]

For me, it was a way to share we weren't isolated from people that we Zoomed regularly with individuals, but we weren't able to share with community. And so for me, the project was sharing with the community, hearing from them and being able to share what our experiences were. It's a way of becoming close.[145]

More Understood

In Alexander's model, connection is dependent on understanding. The community must have a shared sense of who was harmed, and what the nature of the harm was. In our November 13 worship service, we surveyed attendees both before and after they heard recordings from the

[139] Participant 35, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[140] Participant 41, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[141] Participant 48, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[142] Participant 40, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[143] Participant 22, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022
[144] Participant 52, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022
[145] Participant 27, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022

interviews. Compared to their initial responses, following the service attendees were more likely to say that they understood what other members of the community experienced during the pandemic, and they were much more likely to say that they felt understood, themselves.

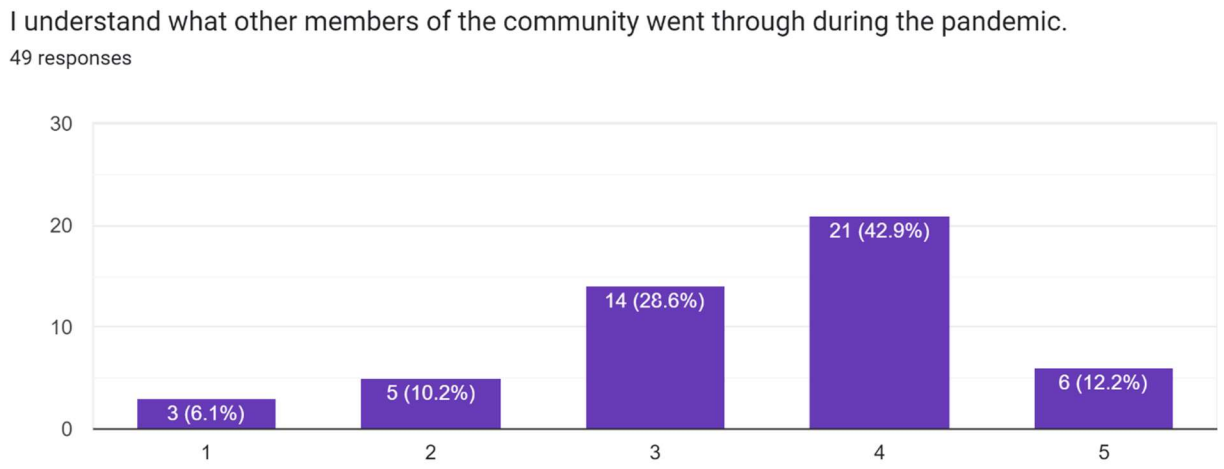


Figure 10: Pre-Worship Survey Question 1, November 13

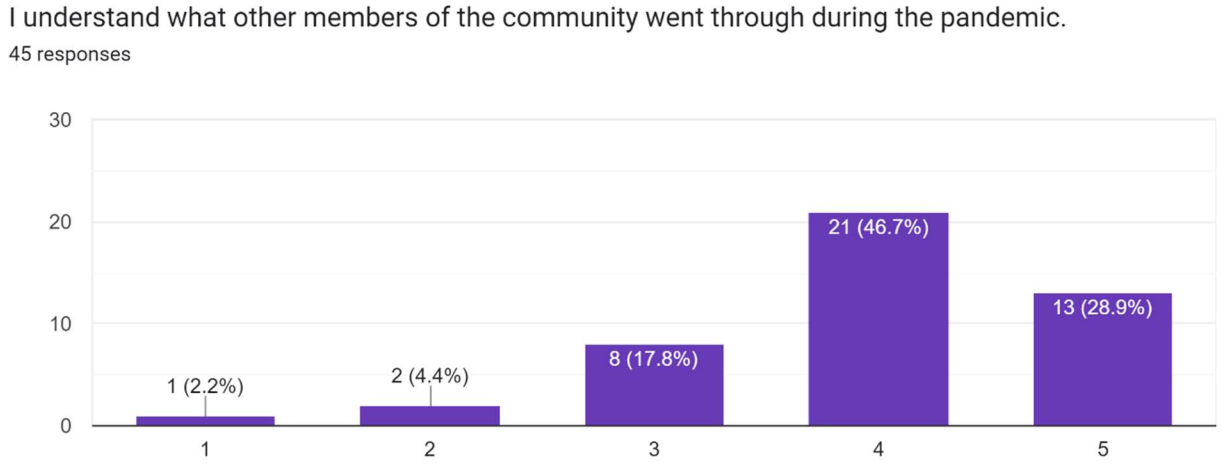


Figure 11: Post-Worship Survey Question 1, November 13

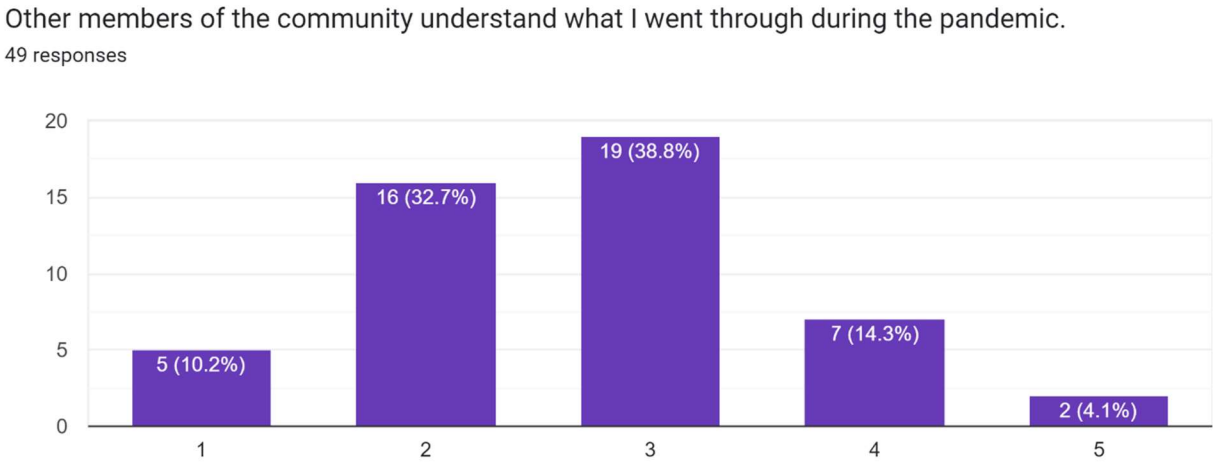


Figure 12: Pre-Worship Survey Question 2, November 13

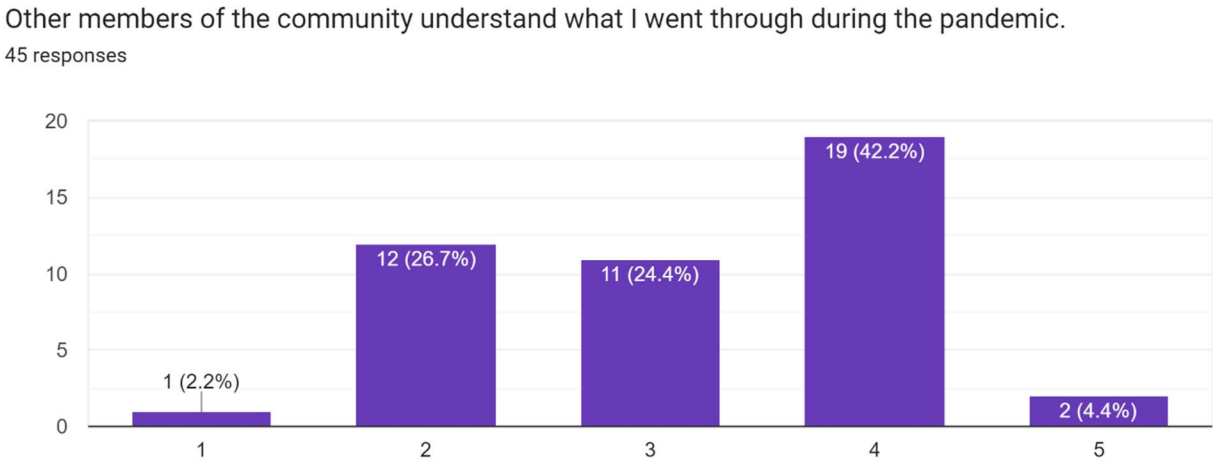


Figure 13: Post-Worship Survey Question 2, November 13

In the focus groups following the project, participants often remarked that they were glad to have the opportunity to share with another person, and to reflect on the experience they had been through:

So I think you didn't realize, we don't realize the depth of it until you're looking at it retrospectively.[146]

I really, I just wanted to say I felt flattered or relieved to have somebody ask, how are you doing? How did it go? How did it affect? You mean between friends? We can ask that sometimes we remember to do that when we're not hurting so bad that we don't wanna take on somebody else's burden.[147]

It was growing community through self-reflection. The way I was raised is bad stuff happens, you gotta just keep going. You don't look back, you stumble, you just keep going. Don't look at what tripped you up. And so all through COVID, I was forcing myself to look forward… And so sitting down and going through that and actually thinking about how it impacted me was really strange, but nice.[148]

I thought the interviews were an interesting experience as well because that was really the first time I had been called upon to verbalize the whole experience.[149]

Repeated Concepts

One of the ways I judge my success in teaching is how much the concepts I have been talking about show up unprompted from members of the congregation. During the focus groups, this happened often. Members reflected back concepts of collective trauma:

I had not thought about COVID in terms of being a traumatic event that we faced. It's a world traumatic event, and I think about global warming, and I think that's gonna be a world traumatic event or if it isn't already. So to frame it that way maybe helps us understand where we are as a congregation now, which mean I, I think where we are right now is we desperately need reconnection. And this project was a good way to facilitate some of that where we were talking with each other about what happened at an important time that we really weren't talking about very much when it was going on.[150]

But also the George Floyd incident and all of those things that people hadn't really had a chance to process individually, and now we're having trouble processing. And how we didn't really know how that process works very well. And so we're sort of learning as we go on the idea that we are all traumatized. Even if you didn't have COVID been racially profiled, even if you were in this sort of

[146] Participant 23, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[147] Participant 29, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022
[148] Participant 42, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[149] Participant 22, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022
[150] Participant 41, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022

isolated bubble where you were, okay, you're not okay <affirmative> because everyone around you is not okay.[151]

Narrative as Healing:

I think this really underscores how important this work is, because talking about things is how you process things. And that kind of talking is how we'll recover. I think.[152]

I found that thinking back on, it sort of made me realize how traumatic the whole experience was. Not just for us individually perhaps, but for the country as a whole. And it's almost as though it didn't exist. Now I think what we tend to do is repress trauma anyway and move on. And so it took me back to, and how important it was to go back to it and remember from a position where, I guess a relative safety <laugh>, what happened and how we responded and all of that.[153]

Liminal Time:

It's that weird place where we know we're not gonna get back to what was, but we don't know what's how to go. We don't know how to get to what normal is. Now <laugh> as normal is all new.[154]

Multiple experiences of the pandemic:

I enjoyed very much listening to the voices, some of which I recognized talking about the way that pandemic affected them. And I was a little surprised and maybe encouraged that there were so many different ways of viewing it, of reacting to it, feeling the effect of the pandemic, that not everybody felt the degree of loss that I might have felt in the way I felt it. And that other people are finding different ways to cope.[155]

Oral History as model for other communal experiences:

We've had this shared experience of COVID looked at it intensely. We've listened to each other's stories. We know that we acknowledge that's part of the process. How do we move this learning onto helping our community deal with the other

[151] Participant 23, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[152] Participant 85, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[153] Participant 26, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022
[154] Participant 23, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[155] Participant 29, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022

traumas that are going on. I don't know, it's just an idea of how to use this as a springboard into more work that might be helpful to us.[156]

Expressions of Gratitude

Focus group participants also expressed that this was a successful project that helped the congregation in the ways it was intended to. More than a D.Min project, this project grew to be a pastoral gift to the congregation, and it was gratifying to hear that reflected in this feedback.

I felt a lot of very complex feelings during it and it made me feel closer to the church listening to what other people were saying because you don't normally hear what's in actually genuinely in people's hearts when you just have coffee with them or you sit next to them in the pews or something like that. But when you hear them answering those questions, I felt like I grew closer to everybody else.[157]

It never occurred to me that Oscar's PhD or doctorate program would benefit me directly. But I found that as people have said, hearing those voices and reading their responses has been really significant. And I felt directly touched by that.[158]

Well, as a writer who hopes people read what they write. I hate to say this, but I think the project came together for me with greater impact during your service. Hearing the voices Yes. Made me go back to the written word, but I don't think it would've been, the experience wouldn't have been as profound had I not heard the voices in a collective community format. Right. That was powerful. Powerful. And I could hear another one. It's hearing those voices from the past and the recent past who and some love, it's quite an experience.[159]

From the data we are able to observe now, this is a highly successful project, with participants expressing the material in their own words, as well as expressing increased levels of connection with each other and the congregation as a whole. They are enthusiastic about another congregation working on a similar project. Any other effects will be longer term than the boundaries of this current project.

[156] Participant 41, Focus Group, Recorded December 3, 2022
[157] Participant 42, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022
[158] Participant 31, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022
[159] Participant 27, Focus Group, Recorded December 9, 2022

Afterward

This Oral History Project existed as a formal part of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln's programming for less than five months, from August to December 2022. While the formal activities themselves were brief, it has been the project of years to bring the idea to the surface. On March 15, 2020, when we announced that UCL's building was closed effective the following day, I spoke of history as a source of consolation: the church has been through the Spanish flu, depression, crop failures, misconduct, and two world wars, and it remains a strong and vital community. I told the congregation that this latest pandemic would be difficult, but who are we to break faith with the Lincoln Unitarians who have come before us? From the first days, the question of how we would endure felt tied to how we would remember this time.

I heard a joke when I was interviewing for the ministry in Lincoln: once there was a man from Nebraska who loved his wife so much that one time, he almost told her. Nebraska is a place of deep, considered understatement. The people of this congregation taken as a whole are not prone to exaggeration, or to dwelling on either the wounds or triumphs of the past. But it is also a place of great warmth and connection, often unspoken but present just below the surface. More than once I have visited a congregant just after a loved one has died and heard simply "I loved them very much. I miss them." These seven words might come at the end of a half hour conversation about the care and feeding of Phlox, but they are as heartfelt as any demonstration of grief. If Judith Herman writes that the central dialectic in recovering from trauma is the conflict between memory and forgetting, we might add a third dialectic pole in Nebraska: midwestern reserve.

I was not sure when we began this project how the congregation would respond. I believed that it would be good for the individuals who participated and the congregation as a

whole, but I worried that the level of self-disclosure and vulnerability it required would be prohibitive, especially after so many of us had spent years in isolation. I am so grateful and proud of the members of UCL for rising to the level of participation they showed. This congregation's self-description in the mission statement ends "who show up," and this project, like so many others, became a showcase for showing up. We will not know the full effect of recording oral histories in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic for years. I am confident, however, that we are more connected as a congregation and community now than when we began, and are better equipped to understand what happened, and in doing so move forward as a church.

Recording an oral history of the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to heal from communal trauma and build collective identity began as a D.Min project, but in the implementation the project became as pastoral as it was academic. Trauma is not simply a condition to be understood and dissected in an academic setting, healed through a series of aseptic steps, rigorously followed. Healing from trauma requires empathy, bringing stories from the margins to the center, and recognizing shared humanity. Jeffrey Alexander's work is descriptive, laying out some of the characteristics of communities responding to a collectively traumatic experience. I hope what we have built in Lincoln is a proscriptive model for healing; not *the* way to respond to communal trauma in houses of worship, but *a* way to balance individual and collective stories as a way to heal together.

This project was also unexpectedly personal. While leading it, I began to realize how much I have been grappling with the (externally caused) failure of much of what we began in the first three years of my ministry in Lincoln, as well as the accumulated stresses of decision making and leadership during the pandemic. As we talked about trauma, I began to see my own

behavior through the lens of this project: how it was not coincidental that one of my first impulses after returning to the church building was to rearrange my office, or how quickly minor frustrations in the spring of 2022 felt like the major crises of 2018. Understanding those reactions as part of a system-wide trauma response helped to put meaning to them, and to differentiate the reactions from my sense of ministry. “What it all meant” is a question for a sermon, not a D.Min paper, but having a clearer sense of what it all *was* has been a necessary step to begin to write that sermon. By speaking our laments, we begin the process of healing.

While writing about lament, Walter Brueggemann described the pivot from disorientation to new orientation. Lament is necessary, but not the end of the story: most laments end in trust, and while the world after lament does not return to what it was, it becomes something new and wonderful. This is the last lesson of this oral history: it is not the end. UCL is not returning to the church as it was in 2019, but it is becoming something new. As lament turns to hope, we look to what comes next.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Materials

Interview Station Inventory:

1. Welcome Letter
2. Directions
3. Informed Consent Form
4. Informed Consent Signature Form (blue folder)
5. Recorder
6. Notebook

Welcome Letter:

August 22, 2022
Thank you for being a part of this Oral History project! Last year, we marked 150 years as a Universalist congregation in Lincoln Nebraska, exploring the stories of this community, and how they inform who we are today.

Those anniversary celebrations, like many other things in the last three years, were curtailed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. By participating in this project, you are telling the story of this chapter in the church's history, so that when future generations ask "What was it like here during the pandemic?" they will know your experience.

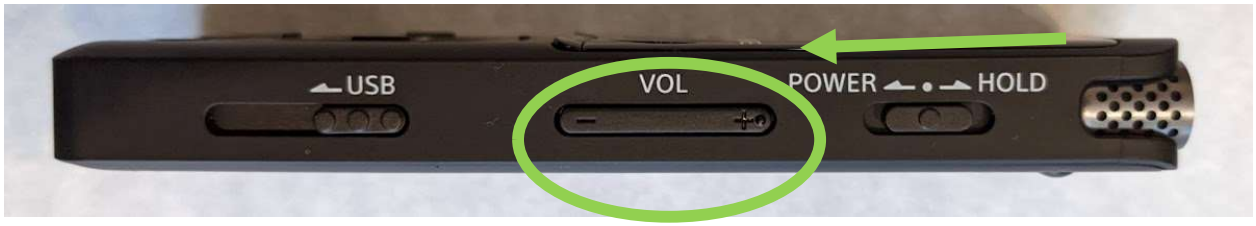
Telling the story of what happened is a big step towards moving forward. I don't know what this community will be in five years – we have been changed by the time we have spent apart, and the congregation that we are a part of is not the congregation that existed in 2019 – but I know that telling our stories to each other, honestly and directly, is a necessary step towards whatever comes next.

I am so proud to have been a part of this congregation since you called me in 2017. Over the last five years I have come to know you as a resilient, flexible, committed community who show up, again and again, even in these unprecedented times. The project you are participating in today grew out of my own pandemic project (going back to seminary for a Doctoral program), but it is work that I am passionate about for its own sake: telling the story of this community's response in extraordinary times. Thank you for being a part of it,

Oscar

Directions

1) Read the Welcome Letter from Oscar
2) Read the Informed Consent Form, and sign the "Informed Consent Signature Page," located in the blue folder.
3) Turn on the microphone by sliding the power switch (located on the right side of the microphone) down, towards the 'vol' buttons.



4) Press the red "Record" button on the microphone.

5) Person A and B: Take turns saying your name, the date you are meeting, and where you are.

6) Person A: ask Person B these six questions:
   - When you tell the story of the last three years, where do you start?
   - What were the first few weeks of the pandemic like for you?
   - What is one image from the last three years that has stuck with you?
   - What role did the Unitarian Church of Lincoln play during the pandemic?
   - What did you struggle with most during the last three years?
   - What is something you have learned about yourself during the pandemic?

-Please turn the page-

7) Person B: ask Person A the same six questions.
    - When you tell the story of the last three years, where do you start?
    - What were the first few weeks of the pandemic like for you?
    - What is one image from the last three years that has stuck with you?
    - What role did the Unitarian Church of Lincoln play during the pandemic?
    - What did you struggle with most during the last three years?
    - What is something you have learned about yourself during the pandemic?

8) Press the "Stop" button on the microphone.

9) If you have not already, fill out the consent form and place it in the blue folder next to the microphone.

10) Add any additional comments in the notebook labeled "Comments"

UCL Pandemic Oral History Informed Consent Form

Title of Project: *Disoriented: An Oral History of the COVID-19 Pandemic at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln*

Project Director: Rev. Oscar Sinclair

Project Description: Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has played an outsized role in the lives of members of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, and in our life as a congregation. Over the fall of 2022, members and friends of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln will record stories from the last two and a half years, contributing to an Oral History of the pandemic in this community.

Project Rationale: One of the striking qualities of the last three years has been the unequal effects of COVID-19 on different demographics within our church's community. The experience of a parent, a college student, and a retiree have varied significantly. By telling each other our stories, we will understand the breadth of experience in this community and strengthen the congregation's sense of collective story as we begin to reorient ourselves in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Project Timeline:

August 27, 2022: UCL Board Retreat beta tests questions and process, providing early participants and informal feedback.

September 4: Oral History Project introduced to congregation at Ingathering service.

September 4-October 16: Interviews take place, providing the material for Oral History

November 13: Initial results of Oral History presented as part of UCL's worship service

January 13, 2023: Initial Draft of D.Min paper sent to Oscar's faculty reader

Project Outcome: Transcripts of collected stories will be archived as part of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln's records. Audio from the participants will be used to develop an audio oral history, to be shared with the congregation. Excerpts from stories collected will be used in a published paper, and you will be notified once the project paper is published and given information about how to access the paper online.

Confidentiality: Sharing experiences and stories is crucial to this project and paper. Participants will be identified by alias in the final project paper. However, because of the nature of the project, oral histories archived at the church will include identifying information, including your name and recorded voice.

Risks: The purpose of recording an Oral History of the COVID-19 pandemic is to create a historical record of a difficult, painful time, articulating what happened in order to move forward as a community. Because of this, participation may elicit a variety of memories and emotions for you. By participating, you acknowledge the risks involved, and assume responsibility for your own mental and emotional wellbeing.

Voluntary Participation: If, at any point, you do not want your story used, please contact Oscar (minister@unitarianlincoln.org) and we will not include your interview in the final project or any related publication or study.

Questions: If you have any questions before, during, or after the project, please contact Rev. Oscar Sinclair at minister@unitarianlincoln.org, or by phone at (402) 937-9145.

Informed Consent Signature Page

We have read the attached "UCL Pandemic Oral History Informed Consent" information, and voluntarily consent to be a participants in this project.

_____
Participant A Printed Name

_____ _____
Participant A Signature Date

_____
Participant B Printed Name

_____ _____
Participant B Signature Date

Appendix B: List of Participants

Linda	Ager
John	Atkieson
Dana	Atteberry
Heidi Jo	Bartlett
Erica	Birky Rios
Liz	Bonney-Heermann
Mandy	Bonney-Heermann
Leona	Braziel
Linda	Brown
Jan	Buffum
Kelsy	Burke
Robert	Burns
Emily	Cameron Shattil
Bill	Carpenter
Marcia	Cederdahl
Trey	Coley
Janine	Copple
Gerri	Cotter
Christine	Davis
Kimberley	Debus
Denise	Dickeson
Karen	Dienstbier
Michele	Dobzewitcz
Frank	Edler
Alex	Enersen
Julie	Enersen
Shelly	Fowler
Roger	Geery
Alysa	Haack
Priscilla	Handy
Judy	Hart
Karen	Heafer
Harry	Heafer
Jean	Helms
Rachel	Herpel
Wendy	Hestermann
Arden	Hill
Heather	Hillhouse
Kay	Hoff
Martha	Horvay
Linn	Howard
Craig	Imig
Tim	Johnson
Jackie	Kehl
Judy	Kelly
Marilyn	Kortum
Chelsea	Krafka
Logan	Krafka
Joanne	Lanning
Steve	Larrick
Andie	Larson
John	Lozier
Jacob	Lozier
Sylvie	Lozier
Jeffrey	Lusk
Mary Ann	Meisner
Meg	Mering
Jesse	Metcalf
Amy	Miller
Barbara	Pearson
Peg	Pelter
JoEllen	Polzien
Jamie	Radcliffe
Dorothy	Ramsey
Mark	Schiffler
Becky	Seth
Stacie	Sinclair
Oscar	Sinclair
Jason	Slaughter
Burt	Smith
Mary	Sommermeyer
Allison	Starr
Monica	Starr
Mary Kay	Stillwell
Lori	Straatmann
Penny	Urweiler
Melody	Vaccaro
Henry	Vaccaro
Red	Vela Rayet
Pam	Wakeman
Orvis	Wall
Sheila	Wall
Mark	Weddleton
Sydney	Weddleton
Evelyn	Weymouth
BJ	Wheeler
Jack	Wilson
Schuyler	Windham
Tom	Winter
Alan	Worth
Sandra	Zieg
Kim	Zieman

Appendix C: Worship Scripts

Note: This appendix contains the working scripts from UCL Sunday morning worship, included here as primary source documents of the project. As working scripts, please excuse any typos or conventions for spoken, rather than written, communication.

September 4: Water Communion and Project Kickoff

Greeting from SFG

Opening Words

Come, let us enter this space of hope and community.
Come, let us enter this space with our sorrows, our joys, our passion and compassion.
Come. let us enter this space with the stories of our ancestors, for their strength and wisdom beats in our hearts.
Come into this space, present to the beloved companions who move beside us.
Come into this space, mindful that together we are building a future for other generations.
Come: come into this space and let us worship.

Katie Romano Griffin (now starting her first year as senior minister at All Souls Unitarian in Indianapolis)

Molly Housh Gordon

Here We Have Gathered (Choir)

Welcome and Land Acknowledgement

Welcome to the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, where we aspire to be a loving community, uniting reason with spiritual exploration, to transform ourselves and the world. My name is the Rev. Oscar Sinclair, it is a pleasure to be with you this morning. The faith that we proclaim from this pulpit begins with this: all are beloved. No matter who you are, where you are on life's journey, or where you are going, you are welcome this morning. All means all, no exceptions.

We say that we are about the work of transformation, transforming ourselves and the world. It is our hope, our expectation, that we each change from our experience here, and that as we work to change the world around us, we might find our community changed. Labor day is the first Sunday of fall, but it is also, perhaps, the last Sunday of summer. Over the summer, we engaged in and eight week process of deepening our understanding and relationship with the native history and people of this place where we gather. At the end of that process, we developed this statement: a first draft, that will change and evolve even as we change and evolve.

Beloved Community, we gather today to acknowledge the land and the peoples that have called this place home for hundreds of years. The Otoe-Missouria, the Omaha, Ponca, Kansa, and Pawnee have lived here at one time. Many others have visited in order to collect salt at the local salt basin. "Niskíthe," by which this area continues to be known, is the Omaha word for salt water. We thank them all for their good care of this sacred ground.

We also take this opportunity to reject the Doctrine of Discovery that paved the way for the degradation of Native inhabitants and the unlawful appropriation of the land. We recognize that we continue to benefit from these past actions. While we cannot change the past, we are committed to right relationship with our Native neighbors.

Indigenous peoples of many nations make their home in Lincoln today. We value their contribution to our community's vitality and diversity. These are not idle words; our commitment is to action. We pledge to show up in support of local and national policies, programs, and measures that demand redress for lands taken, that offer justice for harm committed, and that seek to promote self-determination and equity for all peoples.

All Ages Chalice Lighting

We light this chalice to celebrate unitarian universalism –

we are a church of open minds –

we are a church of loving hearts –

we are a church of helping hands –

together we care for our earth and work for justice and peace in our world

Opening Hymn: Coming Home, Carolyn McDade

Time for all Ages

Joys and Sorrows

Hymn: 123 Spirit of Life

Introduction of Liz BH

Offering

Choir 2: The Water Remembers

Video: Oral History Beta Test

Reflection:

There's a Sufi folktale about a river flowing to the sea. The river is drawn to the ocean: it has a sense of where it is going. The path from the headwaters in the mountains down to the ocean is not an easy one: at times it passes through peaceful meadows, at times the river has to carve through rock to form deep canyons. But all is well, the story goes, until the river comes to the desert. Here, the river cannot continue as it has. The only way through is to let go, to evaporate and become one with the wind, before falling as rain on the other side of the desert.

This is the third ingathering we have held during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maybe you remember them. In September of 2020, we were starting what we knew was going to be our first full year of online church. We had an online congregational retreat, with educational events, social opportunities, a game night – and a modified water communion, on Zoom, that kicked off the congregational year.

Last year, we had begun the summer on a high note: we returned to our building in April, and with vaccines available, we spent the summer of 2021 imagining a kind of return to normalcy in the fall: before the Delta, and the Omicron variants forced us to rethink our perhaps overly optimistic reentry plans. We spent much of last year with masks on, asking the congregation to stay home at the height of the variant driven waves.

As we gather again this fall, The role of the pandemic in shaping congregational life is changing: with all of our members and children now able to be vaccinated, and our multiplatform systems well established, we can be more flexible in response to changing case rates. Rather than closing our building again, we will depend on each family to decide how they want to engage, whether through in person events, online options, or some combination.

The theologian Walter Brueggemann talks about how faith progresses from orientation, to disorientation, to a new orientation: how traumatic or difficult events fundamentally disorient us, leading us to lament and confusion before eventually coming out the other side different than when we started. The river does not reach the sea in the same way it begins- it has to evaporate before falling as rain on the other side of the desert – that time as vapor, up in the clouds passing over the desert, is what Rev. Susan Frederick Grey called this liminal time, the transition between what has been and what might yet be. So, while this congregational year will look more 'normal' than the two that have proceeded it, it is still liminal time. It is not realistic to believe that we are going back to the Unitarian Church of Lincoln as it existed in September 2019: we have been changed, collectively and individually by the events of the last three years.

Each fall, as we gather for a new congregational year, we mark this coming together by pouring water into a single vessel. This is, as Unitarian Universalism goes, a relatively established and beloved ritual. It started in the early 1980s, as part of the feminist movement in Unitarian Universalism that was closely related to the development of our current seven principles.[160] The ritual is simple: each participant brings water to the service, pouring it into a central vessel. The theme of that first service was "Coming Home: like rivers to the sea."

Over the years it has become part of our ingathering service: as we join together in community, we bring each of our individual experiences to the whole: we gather as individuals, but also as an interconnected whole. In a few minutes I'll invite you up to pour water into this central bowl, but I want to take a moment to talk about one other way we are sharing our stories with each other this fall.

One of the ways I have spent the last three years in by working my way through a Doctorate of Ministry program in Church Leadership, at Wesley Theological Seminary. It has been an opportunity, over the course of the pandemic, to regularly check in with interfaith colleagues around the country, and to engage with literature and research around theology (re-engaging with Brueggemann) and how congregations change. After two years of coursework, I am spending this year writing my thesis, and anticipate graduating in May.

A D.Min degree is a professional degree; rather than purely academic research, the thesis is an opportunity to develop a project at the congregation you serve, and then reflect on its impact. As I've been putting together the proposal for my project this summer, I've been reflecting on the last several years of congregational life: how so many of us are articulating a feeling of disconnection from each other and our institutions.

I suspect that at least some of this comes from the nature of the last several years: The experience of the pandemic was universal in its impact and deeply personal in its lived experience. Just in our community, our young families and elderly homebound folks have both suffered, but in very different ways. While we have been responding to the pandemic, the trauma of the last few years goes well beyond it. Parallel to the pandemic, we've also been reckoning with the legacy of

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white supremacy, both in our country after the murder of George Floyd and Brionna Taylor, and in our own congregation through the Beloved Conversations program. Unlike the pandemic, this is not work that suddenly started in early 2020, but our engagement with it has deepened in the last three years.

The project that came out of this wondering is deceptively simple: find a way for this community to hear each other's stories. If you've listened to Story Corps on NPR, you probably know what comes next: The project that we are launching today works like this: Over the next few weeks, after service, you've invited to sit down with one other congregant after service. It could be someone you know well, it could be a complete stranger. There's a voice recorder, like this one, in the box, as well as a list of six questions to ask each other.

We'll record these stories and archive them here at the church: both the ones of triumph over adversary, and the ones of loss and isolation. The stories of pandemic, and stories of protest. Stories of loss, and stories of hope. And then, in November, we'll share those stories in a worship service, as part of an Oral History of the pandemic years at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln.

Walter Brueggemann writes that an important part of moving to a new orientation is articulating the disorientation: saying aloud what has happened. We do that not to dwell on what has happened, but to rebuild the foundation of our community for whatever comes next. Our experiences change us. Just as a river must become a cloud to pass over the desert, our community has changed, even as we continue on. By telling the stories of our years crossing the desert, we'll be better able to move towards where we are called.

I hope you will join us in that work.

Water Communion

As a first step, you're invited to come forward during this next piece of music and pour water into the bowl in front of the pulpit. Just like the women who participated in the first UU water service forty two years ago, we are marking a 'coming home' of a kind. Rather than joining water from all the places we've been, we gather today joining our stories, all the ones we've carried alone for these last years, into this community. This is the work of the church: please join us in it.

Music, invite folks forward.

Closing Hymn: As Tranquil Streams

In 1961, as the Unitarians and Universalists were merging to form something new, they sung together. The hymn, for that first year together, was "As tranquil streams that meet and merge." There's a line in it that feels important today: talking about the growing relationship between the Unitarians and Universalists, Marion Franklin Hamm wrote "A freedom that reveres the past/but trusts the dawning future more." We've talked about history this morning, but let's be clear about this: we tell the story of what has happened not to stay there, but so that we can face that dawning future together.

Please rise in body or in spirit, and join me in singing hymn number 145, As Tranquil Streams.

Closing Words

Okay, here's where I get to be a cruise director for a few moments. We are drawing this worship service to a close, but we have a lot of moving pieces about to start, that I hope you'll stay for.

First: in the gallery the membership umbrella is serving cookies and refreshments to welcome our new membership manager, Liz Bonney-Heermann.

Second: we are rolling out this oral history project. There are four stations across the church, in the Library, High School Room, Middle School Room, and 4/5 Room. Each room has a recording device and instruction in it, as well as a signup sheet on the door. We'll have at least two stations us the next six Sundays, but I'd encourage you to participate now. If you are watching online, or are here and have more questions, call or email me! I'd love to connect you with this work.

Last: Chelsea has a collaborative art project in the gallery.

November 13: From I to We

Ring Bell (Oscar) (invite to participate in survey)

Guest Music 1

Chalice Lighting

Welcome (Oscar)

Hymn 1: 1012 When I am Frightened

Story

Hymn 2: 18 What Wondrous Love is This

Joys and Sorrows (Oscar)

Hymn: 352 Find a Stillness

Share the Plate: Fresh Start

Offering

Guest Music 3

Sermon

I've been thinking a lot about history this year – what legacy we leave for those that come after us. This congregation called me – you called me – almost six years ago. When I started here in the summer of 2017, it was a hopeful moment. The congregation had an influx of members right after the 2016 election, you were back in this newly renovated building, and you called a young minister, raring to go after two years as a junior member on the staff team of a large congregation on Long Island. This was a church poised to take a leap forward, to grow in numbers and influence in the city, and that is the mandate you handed that young minister. Help us make the Unitarian Church of Lincoln a beacon. Let us grow this community together – your (healthy) ambition to make a mark will feed ours, and vice versa.

Five years and six months later, this congregation has fewer members than the day I started. We launched a second service in January 2020, after realizing that this sanctuary had been at capacity for decades – we're now at one service, with two thirds as many people here in person on Sunday morning as we had three years ago. We just sent out a letter to our members laying out the budget situation for 2023: a shortfall in our pledge income means staff cuts are a real possibility.

Some things have changed in positive ways: my first sermon here, in August 2017, was about the proposed eighth principle, committing Unitarian Universalism to the

work of antiracism: our Beloved Conversations team is bringing that to the congregation in the spring. Before I came here, I was involved in congregation based community organizing – in June 2017 I approached the national organizing network I was a part of about expanding to Nebraska. "Oh no," they said, "we're on defense everywhere, we cannot possibly take on a new state." On Thursday night the Unitarian Church of Lincoln became a charter member of Justice in Action, a network of 22 faith communities in Lancaster County, organizing to bring meaningful change to our city.

So it's been a mixed bag, these last half dozen years. And hanging over it all is the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, it has been the dominant force in the life of our congregation, determining how and when we worship together, the stresses on us as individuals, and the climate our church exists in. It is the dividing line, between the optimistic first few years of my ministry in Lincoln, and the disorientation of the last several years. As I've been trying to make sense of where we have ended up, collectively, this is the question that I keep coming back to: what happened to us during the pandemic? This is not a rhetorical question, or one that can be answered in generalities. What happened to each of us, in these three years? How did we end up here?

Over the last three months, we've tried to answer that question. 91 members and friends of this congregation have interviewed each other, on tape, about the pandemic. We've generated almost twenty hours of audio, and over 400 pages of transcript. Here's a snapshot of some of the vignettes we've captured in that process:

Speaker 1 (00:00):

What do you remember about when we first heard about COVID?[161]

Speaker 2 (00:07):

I remember you were kind of freaking out.

Speaker 3 (00:10):

It's so hard to just one image, but one image is, I remember President Trump saying that it would be over by Easter

Speaker 4 (00:21):

<laugh> and I saw the MRI on TV of the lung that was affected and it showed all the tissue where the carbon dioxide and the oxygen exchange in the lungs. I just said, This is bad.

Speaker 3 (00:40):

[161] Note: these are raw transcripts, not edited for publication

Also, images of all the signs of my neighborhood, cuz it was like, We will make it through this. There were signs like that. There was somebody in my neighborhood who had a sign that was counting the number of people who had COVID and had died. And so I think those sort of images will stick in my mind.

Speaker 5 (01:09):

For me, it was the pictures of on, I believe it was cnn. They were showing the nurses that were in the ICU units desperately trying to care for these patients. And they had these grooves that were almost bleeding in their faces because they were masking, double masking. They were gowned. It was exhausting work and they were trying everything they could, but it left them drained. And the pictures of, there's one where it's a nurse standing in a hallway, she's bent over with her hands on her knees, her face is all chewed up from the mask and you can just tell she has nothing left. She's drained.

Speaker 6 (02:02):

We had it relatively easy and even relatively, even with the relative ease, it felt at times I was just failing.

Speaker 1 (02:13):

We took pictures of the spider playing the piano and like a rhino lighting the chalice,

Speaker 7 (02:19):

Kelly Ross had printouts of sheets of paper, <laugh>, how do you get on Zoom? And she had done screenshots and circled in red.

Speaker 8 (02:29):

We traded a butternut squash for two rolls of toilet paper.

Speaker 9 (02:35):

These just flashes of different images. Sean, talking about Mount Sinai, set up a temporary hospital in Central Park.

Speaker 10 (02:48):

The pandemic in a very real, real way, put the question front and center, Is this worth dying for?

Speaker 11 (02:55):

I never thought I'd feel heroic as a door dash delivery person, but there were a few weeks in there when the kids were chalking on the sidewalk. <laugh>, thank you for delivering.

This morning we're going to listen to some of these stories. Why do this?

First, because I have too. One of my pandemic projects was to start (and apparently finish) a doctoral program, and collecting these stories was part of my thesis. It's right to be honest about this.

Second, because in collecting these stories, we serve the congregation's history. During the pandemic we celebrated out 150th anniversary as a congregation, and this is a way to record and answer the question for those who come after: what happened during those pandemic years?

Third, and most importantly, it helps us heal, and move forward.

The healing is not intuitive, admittedly. To heal, you first need to see a wound, and that's not obvious in this moment. Remember, I have spent two months listening to 92 of you describe what you struggled with from the pandemic – "I didn't struggle much" or "Others struggled more than I did" were a plurality of the answers. But listen to what else people said:

> *Speaker 1 (00:00):*
>
> *I get more tired more easily. I go out and do some errands and normally I'd be able to do that and do other things as well. And I come home sometimes and I'm just tired from doing what doesn't seem like a lot. And I'm not sure what that stems from exactly. I'm the same way.*
>
> *Speaker 2 (00:18):*
>
> *I sort of wanna say confused, but not really confused. Maybe just kind of lethargic.*
>
> *Speaker 3 (00:25):*
>
> *Just was more, It was just more, It always felt like more than I could even wrap my mind around.*
>
> *Speaker 4 (00:33):*
>
> *Isn't that funny? I actually forgot it in my mind. Cause I have put it so far behind me cause it hurt so much to have to end it that I couldn't even remember that until just now.*
>
> *Speaker 5 (00:46):*
>
> *I redecorated my office almost as soon as we came back into the building. I got rid of all the furniture that had been in there, rearranged where everything was. And it was only recently that I put together that almost as soon as I came back in, into that office down there, it's like I can't, two and a half years later. Right? I need different chairs in here. I need the desk in a different place. And I hadn't put*

together that. One of my last experiences with it, set up with the red chairs in a circle was this incredibly sad, sad, intense, frightening moment.

Trauma is a word that gets thrown around a lot in 2022. But it is an academic term, capturing a certain kind of experience and symptoms. Here's a definition, from Fischer and Riedesser, translated by Ruth Poser:

> …[Trauma is the] experience of a fundamental discrepancy between a threatening situation and an individual's possibilities for overcoming it. This experience is accompanied by feelings of helplessness, defenselessness, and abandonment and can permanently disrupt the person's understanding of self and the world.[162]

The lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic incorporates all of the elements of Fischer and Riedesser's definition of trauma. Many members who participated in the Oral History Project highlighted the discrepancy in scale between the worldwide threat, and the relatively uncertain, mundane responses available to them, from stocking up on toilet paper to sewing masks. In the aftermath, many of us articulate a disrupted sense of self, abandonment, and defenselessness expressed through fatigue. So I think it's possible to understand this experience as traumatic, at least to a group of our members. But one of the striking things about the last three years is that, while it was universal in it's impact (if effected all of us, in one way or another), it was deeply personal in *how* it impacted us.

Speaker 1 (00:02):

Honestly, it's probably something akin to survivor's guilt, because my life got easier during the whole thing.

Speaker 2 (00:10):

I lost 10 events in that space of 10 of three years, and so it feels I was forced to retire.

Speaker 3 (00:22):

I will always look back on this as the best three years of my life. Yeah. So I know it was, I sometimes sort of feel guilty that I know this has been a really hard time for some people, but for me it was sort of a blessing, <affirmative>. Cause right when my parents needed my attention, <affirmative>, I could give it to them a hundred percent <affirmative>. That's incredible. And so the fact that they couldn't go out much <affirmative>, well, we didn't need to. Mm-hmm.

Speaker 2 (00:50):

[162] Gottfried Fischer and Peter Riedesser, *Lehrbuch der Psychotraumatologie,* 3rd ed. (Munich: Reinhardt, 2003), 82, 375. Quoted in Ruth Poser, "No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature as Response to Exile."

<affirmative>

Speaker 3 (00:51):

Sweet. It was sort of a blessing.

Speaker 4 (00:53):

<affirmative>, I was certain I was gonna die. I did not think I was gonna live for the pandemic. I have asthma. And I thought, Well, I'm gonna dial to see how long I can hold on. And that was my pervasive thought at first. Then I got better.

Speaker 5 (01:09):

It took me a while to really realize that as serious it was. Because like I said, being out in the living out in the country and not being around people all the time and being retired and not having to go into a job it didn't really seem different than any other time of life until the place I go exercise stopped. When I couldn't go there,

Speaker 2 (01:44):

It was probably the most loneliest part of my life worse than being in jail. And I know that <laugh>, but it was or has been a struggle for me. I like to be around people and the lack of people around me was depressing.

Speaker 6 (02:11):

I was at home all the time. I got to be in my craft cave the whole time. So as long as I was in my little bubble, everything was okay. I got to be with my pets. I got to have new surroundings. I got to wear fun jammy pants to work. As long as I was inside, it was okay. It was just when I had to go outside and do things like groceries for my dad, where it was kind of heart palpitating, kind of nerve-wracking, scary.

Speaker 7 (02:42):

It's the creation of the chasm, the expansion of the chasm that ultimately, not forced, but encouraged me to learn about myself and to get started on the path and to get moving so that I had any motivation at all. Because with, I think without the pandemic, I would be a much more boring, much more stagnant person. Right now,

Speaker 4 (03:10):

A happy time was when Craig and I legally married… and my two oldest children died of COVID 19 at the beginning of the pandemic. And so for me, the last three years have been just tsunamis of emotion, huge waves of grief, sorrow, resentment, anger come rushing over me and nearly drown me. And then they recede. And it was a time of change when the pestilence raged the land and we

were in seclusion. I truly felt like a prisoner. It's a nice prison, but still it was a prison, could not get out, could not attend my children's funerals. And there is something basically wrong about your children preceding you in death. I mean, when your parents die, you become an orphan regardless of your age. If your spouse dies, you're a widow or a widower, and if your children die, you're just devastated.

Speaker 9 (04:54):

Like I wasn't happy, but I was okay. But it was just like, I didn't really look at myself and stuff, but COVID forced me to look inward and actually focus on myself as opposed to just doing school, just doing work and just putting all of myself into those things and stuff. I still do that, but now I also let myself think about me and what I am and who I am and stuff. So it's really weird because everybody was always, COVID was so hard and is so hard and so many people died and there's that trauma from it. But at the same time, I became happier during COVID, which is weird to admit to people. And I hate that idea because people lost their loved ones and entire families have died. But I've been blessed in which growth, I became happier and I grew as a person and I'm a lot more confident in myself and a lot happier where I am. I'm not just okay anymore and I am no longer willing to be just okay.

So the range of effects on this community was vast. We have members who describe the pandemic years as the best of their lives, and others who were crushed by its effects.

There's been a lot written about trauma and healing, over the last several decades. We have language around individual trauma, as imperfect as it is. But there is another component of trauma that is less studied and understood: how it effects a community. In 1973, a mudslide destroyed about half the homes in the town of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia. In the aftermath, the sociologist Kai Erickson was hired to interview residents of Buffalo Creek, as part of a lawsuit related to the disaster. In his interviews, Erikson started to recognize that it wasn't just the people whose houses were washed away that were effected: it was the systems they lived in. A bowling league, where half the members had lost their homes, likely was exhibiting collective symptoms that looked a lot like a trauma response. Erikson coined the term communal trauma – recognizing that in natural disasters, it is not just individuals but the community as a whole that needs to heal.

Judith Herman writes in healing from trauma, "remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims."[163] Scott Alexander, writing about communal trauma, writes that there are several things that a community has to establish. The first three are

1) The nature of the victim

[163] Ibid. 1. Taken alone, this quote implies that the prior social order is a desirable state. In the broader context of Herman's feminist critique, it is about restoring broken connections between individuals.

2) The nature of the pain
3) The relationship between the victims and the broader community.

So let's start with the nature of the victims: who in our community was affected:

Speaker 1 (00:00):

We had a set of bad options. You could either choose to come back into the building, in which case you'd be at greater risk, maybe increasing risk for everybody, or you could keep everybody out of the building, in which case you'd be really continuing to wound these folks who were expressing deep isolation. And so it felt like whatever we did, we were gonna fall short of what we say were about

Speaker 2 (00:35):

Opportunities to be with family at critical junctures and stuff. Were so constrained and risky and stuff. And so I found ways to do it. I found ways to go down and quarantine in his basement cause he has a big house and they have a special circulatory system in their house. I felt like it was pretty safe to do it, but I took a hot plate and a bunch of groceries.

Speaker 3 (01:08):

The first time that I saw <laugh>, my grandson <affirmative>, after not seeing him for weeks or months or whatever it was. And I decided well, I could go be with him outside <affirmative>. And he was so excited to see me and then he didn't want me to. But Grammy, I need you. Don't leave. Aww. Anyway. Yeah, it's a big deal.

Speaker 4 (01:43):

I mean there's a story to our pandemic, which is at a point when everybody else was suddenly in much better shape. When I had been vaccinated. In fact, when I had been vaccinated twice, cuz I lied about having been vaccinated with j and j and got a two when case rates were weighed down, when we'd never heard the name Omicron. Wendy got vaccinated and had a huge relapse as a consequence. And that huge relapse has extended. I mean, she is now still not back to where she was in May of 2021.

Speaker 5 (02:34):

I worked at a plasma center and so we just worked anyways. We were considered, even during the lockdown, we were considered essential, special, essential. Thank you. <laugh>? Yes. I have the badge of essential worker.

Speaker 6 (02:53):

I suppose the danger of becoming a carrier, I guess, and spreading it to the vulnerable population I work with is probably my biggest stressor

Speaker 7 (03:10):

With my health. And hearing that this new virus was coming through, I spent a lot of time thinking I was gonna die <laugh> and just sort being very, very, very afraid.

Speaker 8 (03:24):

I'm a social person, I like to be around people. I like to get to know people. So having that not there anymore for a part at the time, that was hard for me.

So the range of people who was affected varied, from grandparents, to folks with chronic conditions, to extroverts, church staff, people trying to visit aging family. What was the nature of the pain that they experienced?

Speaker 1 (00:00):

We got the call from my daughter and she said, I just think we didn't say cancel. We said postpone. Because I remember telling the girls, Oh, it'll be their mom telling them, We'll celebrate maybe your next half birthday. And it was, what? Two, two years? Two and a half years before we did what? I have no idea why I get emotional about this.

Speaker 2 (00:34):

I had a good friend who actually died and I was with her in April of 2021. We went on a trip together during this little window of possibility and I asked her if she was vaccinated and she said no. And I said, Why? She was actually my navigator, my Medicare navigator, <affirmative> and a theater friend. And she said, Well, I have lung issues. And I thought, Isn't that the reason why you would get vaccinated? Anyway, life went on and in November I saw it on Facebook as how I heard about it. And then she was gone <affirmative>. So it was like where do you even put that kind of information? Right? And she wasn't a family member, but a good friend <affirmative>. But people who lost family members, I just can't imagine what they do with that. Hurt. Hurt

Speaker 4 (01:36):

Later on when the coffee hour was less attended and people were finding other ways or moving on, I was afraid that this church was, would kind of wither her way and that my place in the community here would go with it. That this place might not exist

It was so important to me is still important to me. But I felt a growing alienation detachment more. Detachment is more accurate, Not feeling like I was so used to spending time here in this building, and the building looked empty and foreign to me and had, most of my friends are right here, part of this community. Most of my friends are part of this community or come from this community, and I don't think I've lost them. I haven't seen them in a long time. And we may not be in the

same relationship when we come back to something more like full participation in this church.

Speaker 5 (03:24):

No more yoga classes, no more neo classes, no more in-person committee meetings. No more parties. We could no longer play cards with our friends. We could no longer go out to restaurants and have dinner with our friends. And those were things that both Ed and I really enjoyed doing, and especially Ed. He liked being with people and those were his major outlets. So it made just, the isolation I think was really hard,

Speaker 6 (04:05):

But the loneliness was just vast. It was absolutely just so hard. So hard.

The third part of healing as a community, after we've talked about the nature of the victim and the nature of the pain – who was hurt and how – is the *relationship*, between the victims and the broader community. Because there's this thing that happens, in trauma, right? Those folks had such a hard time, I feel bad for them, and say "there but for the grace of God go I." The challenge of understanding communal trauma, though, is seeing that it isn't *them.* It is us. All those voices that you've been hearing, that's all of us. And even if we ourselves weren't effected in a particular way, we are tied up in relationship with each other. We preach this every month at this church: we are interconnected in community. This whole thing, this whole oral history project, every email I've sent, every person I've pestered in coffee hour is, at its most basic, an attempt at collective compassion. What happened to us? All of this.

What comes next? There's a lot I don't know. I don't know how the pledging shortfall is going to resolve in the next few weeks. I don't know whether or how fast this church will grow after COVID. I don't know how to heal some of my personal wounds from this time, other than knowing that this is a very well timed sabbatical I'm about to take.

But I do know that these stories matter. And all of them – not just the twenty minutes that made it into this sermon, but the whole 400 pages of it, will be kept, Story Corps style, in this churches archives. There's a copy out in the gallery, on the old altar, if you want to look through it. And we'll keep drawing on these stories – next time in a service on January 1 about what we learned during the pandemic. And I know that this congregation will continue to be a special, special community, that I am proud to be a part of. One last set of stories:

Speaker 1 (00:00):

My instinct was to float away like a balloon from the whole world. Forget it. I'll just go bye bye world. I'll just be in my bubble. I don't know, mixing metaphors.

But the UU did keep me kind of grounded. <affirmative>. Chelsea kept saying, No, no, come back, Jake. Come back. Love the ears. And so it did serve that role.

Speaker 2 (00:25):

But I did really the Zoom and the YouTube and the contact we did have with the church that really did help

Speaker 3 (00:35):

Coming back in person and seeing everybody. I think I just cried through the whole service cuz it was just so sweet to be back among people that I don't really know that well or that, but I realized that like, oh, I had missed this and we are back together and that, that's really powerful.

Speaker 4 (00:55):

I think it really deepened my spirituality going through the pandemic and suffering

Speaker 5 (01:00):

Through that. I had at least twice, sometimes three times a week, there'd be church service by Zoom, there'd be my UU Connects group, there'd be my open circle group and sometimes right before the meeting I'd think, Oh, I don't really have anything to say and I'm not in a hundred percent feeling happy and chipper. Maybe I shouldn't inflict my bad mood on people. But then I'd go and it was such a good antidote to just being in my own head space

Speaker 4 (01:33):

cuz it's something I could count on to people. I love people I know.

Speaker 6 (01:37):

I just marvel at how well our church has adjusted to all this change and how people have stepped up and made adjustments. It's just been remarkable.

It is remarkable, and may it always be thus. One request: As Elizabeth plays this last hymn, please take out your cell phones, point it at the QR code above me, and take this last survey. This is the part that helps academically, but it also helps other congregations, for whom this might be a model for healing.

Thank you, and amen.

Closing Words (Oscar & Audio) (invite to participate in survey)

Guest Music 4

Appendix D: Surveys and Questionnaires

Post-Interview Questionnaire for Participants in UCL Oral History Project, Fall 2022

Thank you for participating in the Oral History Project! Over ninety members of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln recorded their stories from the pandemic. Those interviews will be archived at the church, and a summary of them will be shared with the congregation as part of the November 13 worship service.

This project was put together as part of my research for a Doctor of Ministry degree. As part of that research, I hope you will consider filling out this short questionnaire on the project and it's impact.

-Oscar

minister@unitarianlincoln.org Switch account

* Required

Email *

Your email

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your life? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Negatively	○	○	○	○	○	Very Positively

Do you have school aged children? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Are you retired? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

How often do you attend the Unitarian Church of Lincoln? *

- ○ Never
- ○ Once or twice a year
- ○ Once per month
- ○ Once every two or three weeks
- ○ Weekly

Do you feel like a part of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln Community? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never.	○	○	○	○	○	All of the time.

What communication tool was most impactful in convincing you to participate in the Oral History Project? *

- ○ September Newsletter Column
- ○ Ingathering Worship Service, September 4, 2022
- ○ Third Thursday Worship Service, September 15, 2022
- ○ Third Thursday Worship Service, October 20, 2022
- ○ Youtube Video Updates (August 16, August 23, September 13, September 20, October 11, October 14)
- ○ Faithify Crowdfunding Campaign
- ○ Facebook Posts
- ○ Unitarian Church of Lincoln eBlasts
- ○ Announcement Slides in Gallery
- ○ Direct Recruiting (Oscar and/or volunteers matching you in coffee hour)
- ○ Direct Email Outreach (Week of October 10)
- ○ Friends or family encouragement

How did you feel about the Oral History project **before** participating? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very disinterested	○	○	○	○	○	Very interested

How did you feel about the Oral History project **after** participating?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very disinterested	○	○	○	○	○	Very interested

Did participating in the Oral History Project help you feel more connected to **the Unitarian Church of Lincoln as a whole**? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	Very Much

Did participating in the Oral History Project help you feel more connected to **another member of the community**? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	Very Much

What worked well for you in this project?

Your answer

What did not work well in this project?

Your answer

What advice would you give other churches thinking about doing a similar project?

Your answer

Submit Page 1 of 1 Clear form

Pre-Worship Service Survey, November 13 2022

For Rev. Sinclair's Oral History Project, Fall 2022

minister@unitarianlincoln.org Switch account

* Required

Email *

Your email

I understand what other members of the community went through during the pandemic. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	Very Much

Other members of the community understand what I went through during the pandemic. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not At All	○	○	○	○	○	Very Much

I have school aged children.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I am retired.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

How often do you attend worship services at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln?

- ○ Once or twice a year
- ○ Once per month
- ○ Once every two or three weeks
- ○ Weekly

Submit Page 1 of 1 Clear form

Post-Worship Service Survey, November 13 2022

For Rev. Sinclair's Oral History Project, Fall 2022

minister@unitarianlincoln.org Switch account

* Required

Email *

Your email

I understand what other members of the community went through during the pandemic. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	Very Much

Other members of the community understand what I went through during the pandemic. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not At All	○	○	○	○	○	Very Much

I am interested in participating in a focus group to discuss this oral history project at the following time:

- ○ Saturday December 3, 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM
- ○ Thursday December 8, 7:00 PM - 8:00 PM
- ○ Not available/interested

Submit Page 1 of 1 Clear form

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