

# Family Ministry at UUCB

## The Birth of the Binghamton Model



by Ann Kadlecek

UUCB Transitional Director of Lifespan Faith Development 2016-2018

## Introduction

Family ministry is not a new idea for Unitarian Universalists – religious educators in particular have been aware of the limitations of Sunday School, and the ways in which we fail to serve our young people, for decades.<sup>1</sup> Now, however, we’re seeing increasing interest in exploring family ministry in our congregations; possibly because, more and more, we’re discovering that the Sunday School model is not just limiting – for some of us, it is becoming impossible.

That was our experience in Binghamton. But what do we do when the old way isn’t working and the new way is still experimental? How do we decide where we’re going, and how best to get there, while simultaneously serving our children, youth and families?

This paper is about our process between fall 2016 and spring 2018. Neither the process nor the “Binghamton Model” is a blueprint for any other congregation, but I hope others will find something useful in our experience.

Before we get into the details, I’d like to lift up a couple of aspects of the work:

1. The standard advice about making big changes in a congregation is to “go slow.” A religious educator in a new position (including an interim position) is invariably advised to change as little as possible, and to make any changes very slowly. We ignored all that advice. We made big changes very quickly, beginning almost as soon as I set foot in Binghamton. We had to - the old way was no longer possible. Others may not have to move this quickly. My perspective, however, is that a big intentional leap may be a more effective option for congregational movement toward family ministry, because of the sheer number of moving parts, the culture shift that is needed, and the connections linking everything that happens in the congregation.

Congregations that I see taking a “go slow” approach seem to get stuck early in the process, perhaps renaming their RE committee and adding a family-friendly program or two, but not able to move on from there. Family ministry, however, requires a change in the congregation’s understanding of its role with respect to families, the role of parents in their children’s religious education, who worship is for, and what “inclusive” means throughout congregational life. This is a big congregational project, a little like constructing a new building. And just as a slow,

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Sweeney, The Death of Sunday School and the Future of Faith Formation, June 1017, [https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/the\\_death\\_of\\_sunday\\_school\\_and\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_faith\\_formation\\_ksweeney\\_june2017.pdf](https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/the_death_of_sunday_school_and_the_future_of_faith_formation_ksweeney_june2017.pdf)

tentative approach in funding and planning building construction is unlikely to succeed, such an approach to big congregational transformation may not always be the most effective for achieving change or maintaining it in the face of systemic pressures to return to the old ways. Rapid change was the right approach for this congregation, at this moment.

2. Our schedule was dictated by a non-negotiable two-year endpoint – by that time, we needed to have a new religious educator with a new job description and a volunteer structure to support a new approach to faith development. To maintain that schedule, I sometimes chose to be more actively involved than is generally considered advisable. I think that was the right decision for us. An early task that I see for any religious educator considering such a big change is to assess how much staff involvement/oversight/direction is appropriate for you.

3. The “Binghamton Model” is new. I’m excited about its possibilities, and I think there are other congregations where something like this might work well. Please feel free to take as much or as little as you like, and adapt in ways that work for you. That said, I would not recommend attempting to jump into the model without doing the discernment that led up to it, including clarity about the need for such a big change. This was, for us, significant movement toward a radical shift in classroom programming, worship, parent roles and support, and the culture of the congregation. I cannot imagine it succeeding without intentional, congregation-wide discernment and experimentation.

4. My experience is that this kind of transition can only succeed if the minister is wholeheartedly engaged in the process. Family ministry makes changes to worship and Sunday mornings, as well as how the minister and staff use their time. Rev Douglas Taylor, the minister in Binghamton, embraced the goals of the work, and was a visible presence in (and advocate for) the process. He maintained his leadership role in decisions about what Sunday morning looks like for everyone, how and when worship takes place, and what tasks are considered indispensable, while bringing a willingness to experiment and change even long-standing traditions. For us, I think this kind of ministerial involvement was essential for the transitional process.

## Summary

Between 2016 and 2018, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Binghamton (UUCB) shifted from a traditional Sunday School for children and youth to a new approach to faith development. In this new model, some traditional classes remain, along with many new elements and significant steps in the culture shift toward family ministry. Both the religious educator position and the volunteer structure have been redesigned.

While many congregations are finding that Sunday School no longer meets their needs, UUCB's new model (sometimes referred to as the "Binghamton Model" or the "Binghamton Experiment") is different from other experimental approaches, especially in the design of the religious educator position. Ongoing adjustment is expected, but the early signs are promising - generating new and innovative ways to meet congregants' faith development needs.

## The Context

Binghamton is a city in upstate New York, with a population of 45,000. Economically, the area continues to struggle with the loss of large employers, including IBM, in the 1990's. As a result, the population is now about half of what it was in the 1950's. Population continues to decline gradually, especially among younger people. Major employers are Binghamton University and the three local hospitals.

UUCB was originally a Universalist church, founded in 1835. The congregation built its current building in the 1950's. It is located within the city of Binghamton, about a mile from downtown in the comparatively affluent, and predominantly white, west side. The church draws mainly from the city and town of Binghamton, and surrounding suburbs.

Membership has been stable in recent years, currently about 225 members, with 170 pledging units and an annual budget (2018-19) of \$325,000. This past year, there were 77 registered children and youth – many were infrequent attendees, and a few left during the year, and the average 2017-18 attendance on Sunday mornings with classes was 22.

In addition to the faith development transition work described here, the congregation has also been preparing for a capital campaign to renovate the building, which currently shows the signs

of significant deferred maintenance. I was hired in 2016 as the full-time religious educator; previously the position was ¾ time. The full-time minister has been with the congregation for 15 years, and the Board of Trustees provides church leadership. Other staff are a 20 hr/week office administrator, a 13 hr/week music director, a 10 hr/week membership coordinator, and custodian (up to 15 hr/week).

### **UUCB's Faith Development History**

UUCB has a history of a thriving traditional Sunday School program. Classes for children and youth were held during the worship services at 9:30 and 11:15, and included a Spirit Play program, children's social action projects, a large youth group, middle school OWL, and Coming-of-Age for 8<sup>th</sup> graders. There have been the typical 5-6 multigenerational services each year, with a mix of children's chapels and times for all ages during the Sept-May church year. Most volunteers were parents, but many were not, and the religious education staff has been dedicated and skilled, overseeing a high quality program.



Worship services generally followed a traditional Protestant order of service, except for the multigenerational services, which featured a story or play woven through the service and a short reflection instead of a sermon, and omitted joys and sorrows. The designated multigenerational services and times for all ages were, for the most part, the only times when children attended worship services. Soul Matters themes were followed for about 2 services each month. Most small groups did not use Soul Matters materials, and the themes were not otherwise incorporated into congregational life.

The Children & Youth Program Committee functioned as a sounding board for the religious educator, providing input into curriculum and classroom issues, volunteering as teachers and in supporting roles, and taking the lead on some social events.

About 5 years ago, the DRE position became lifespan, and the religious educator became the Director of Lifespan Faith Development (DLFD). After this change, the DLFD paid attention to adult programming, while still focusing mainly on programs for children. This change did not have an impact on the frequency or type of multigenerational worship or programming.

Around 2012 or 2013, the program began to experience the first signs of a larger change. It was gradual, and difficult to see from within. No one was doing anything wrong, but registrations started to go down, children were attending less frequently, volunteers were becoming harder to find, and had less time to commit (and less predictable schedules) and were increasingly stretched thin. Over the next couple of years, as UUCB staff and core volunteers made heroic efforts to maintain the existing programming, these trends continued.

By the summer of 2016, as class sizes decreased further, sufficient volunteers could no longer be found. Some of the people who had been carrying significant volunteer responsibilities were backing away completely, burned out.

UUCB was at a tipping point – it was not possible to continue doing things as they had been done. This was an adaptive challenge, and was not going to be resolved by any of the common technical fixes, such as hiring new staff, changing the curricula, having more parties or enhancing recruitment efforts. UUCB was experiencing the impact of changes in the outside world, including demographic changes, family changes, and changes in priorities and children's schedules.<sup>2</sup> A decline in the number of children in the wider Binghamton community may have exacerbated the impact on this congregation.

The new reality for UUCB was that people were not volunteering in the way that they used to, and parents were not bringing their children the way they used to. The needs of the families had changed and we were no longer meeting those needs. The families were not going to conform to the expectations of previous generations; instead, to remain relevant, our faith development programming had to change.

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<sup>2</sup> For more about these wider changes, see Karen Bellavance-Grace, Full Week Faith: How Times Have Changed, <https://fullweekfaith.weebly.com/how-times-have-changed.html> and Kim Sweeney, The Death of Sunday School and the Future of Faith Formation, June 1017, [https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/the\\_death\\_of\\_sunday\\_school\\_and\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_faith\\_formation\\_ksweeney\\_june2017.pdf](https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/the_death_of_sunday_school_and_the_future_of_faith_formation_ksweeney_june2017.pdf)

## **The Transition Part 1 (2016-17 church year)**

### **Fall 2016**

The goal for September through December was to maintain as much familiar programming as possible, while beginning discussions in the congregation about the reasons for change, getting initial input, and planning some experiments.

We decided not to continue classes at the 9:30 service, and staffed classes at the 11:15 service with all of the available volunteers. Since most teachers are in the classroom for only part of the year, this meant that – as of January – there would not be enough volunteers to fully staff classes. It did, however, give us four more months to figure out another plan. We updated a couple of curricula, but maintained the previous format as much as possible for consistency. We did not make changes to worship or other programming during the fall.

By October, there were ongoing discussions – first with leadership and parents, and then with committees and the wider congregation. I shared information about the societal issues that are having an impact on today's families and their relationship with churches, the impact that we were seeing and the possible opportunities for connection, faith development and service to the world if we do faith development differently. And I shared other models for religious education and Sunday mornings, soliciting input about what we might want to try.

A key point for discussion was the fact that the changes we make to faith development were not going to be limited to the RE classroom wing. They were going to be experienced throughout the congregation, including in the worship service. This runs contrary to the understanding that most people bring to this work, as the Sunday School model is the only way of doing church that most congregants have ever encountered. This conversation has been ongoing since fall 2016, and continues.

The minister and I then planned a series of Sunday morning experiments with worship and programming, to begin in January. Publicity began late in December, and included the appended brochure.

**January – June 2017**

***“Faith Development and the Sunday Morning Experience”***

“Faith Development and the Sunday Morning Experience” was an intentional four-month experiment that explored a variety of formats for whole congregation worship and programming. Two Sundays a month were traditional, with classes for children and youth during the 11:15 worship service. The service on those days followed the usual format and was intended for adults (although children were welcome to stay if they wish). The other Sundays were experimental, and did not include age-separated classes for children. The youth group continued to meet on most Sundays.

Sunday mornings with experimental worship generally included some all-ages programming, either linked to the congregation’s monthly theme, or with a social action focus. Such programming was either embedded within the worship experience or held after the service.

Children’s classes maintained the previous format, but took place only twice a month and the content was linked to the monthly theme. This demonstrated the feasibility of theme-based children’s programming. We also learned that simply linking classroom content to the themes is not sufficient to connect learning across the generations. A wider use of themes throughout congregational life will be needed to pursue that goal.

One experiment was the creation of a family space in the sanctuary. A pew was removed, replaced with a rug, a small table and quiet activities. The hope was that children would play quietly there while also engaging with the service, with a parent in the adjacent pew.

During this time, the experimental and traditional Sundays were publicized with the brochure, pulpit announcements and sermons, town hall meetings, parent meetings, discussions with Board and committees, and personal outreach to families. Listening sessions were also held to facilitate feedback, and a survey was used to gather feedback about the family space.





## **Results**

There were several key learnings from these experiments:

1. Congregants appreciated social action opportunities on Sunday mornings.
2. Congregants did not want more multigenerational worship services in the traditional story-based format.
3. The family space drew strong, and mixed, reactions. There were some parents, as well as people who attend without children, who appreciated the space, and about an equal number who found it annoying. There were times when a group of children was noisy, and because of limited adjacent pew space, parents had a hard time sitting close enough to interact quietly with their children.

After a one-month trial period, we brought the pew back. A good follow-up experiment would be to try multiple small spaces (this is now possible, since the pews have been replaced with chairs). If each space only has room for 1 or 2 children, there won't be a large group playing together, and parents will be close by.

4. Our "First Sunday" format (described below) was the most popular and (from a worship leader perspective) the most effective and feasible for use on a regular basis. We have used this format on the first Sunday of every month (Oct-May) since this experiment.

JOIN US FOR ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●  
**FIRST SUNDAYS**

### ***First Sundays***

On the first Sunday of each month, we offer one whole-congregation worship service at 10am, followed by workshops for all ages at 11:15. There are no classes on First Sundays.

The service is for all ages, but does not follow the usual story-based multigenerational service format. Instead, a full length (or nearly so) sermon is provided, but is divided into two or three pieces. There is greater use of story and/or music, and often an interactive piece (an activity or an object to support reflection that is taken home). An interactive order of service is provided for children, as well as pipe cleaners for anyone who wants something to do with their hands.

After the service, and before coffee hour, there are typically 4 or 5 different workshops. At least one (and often more, have a social action focus. At least two (generally more) are appropriate for all ages; one is adult-specific.

Recent workshop topics have included:

- Hunger Banquet
- Gratitude practice
- Making blankets for people who are homeless
- Yoga and Mindfulness for Young People
- Understanding Microaggressions
- Collage
- Families talk about Race
- Making bag lunches for women served by the YWCA (recurring)
- Good Grief! (Responding to and supporting others experiencing loss)
- Easter baskets for children served by a local soup kitchen
- De-escalation



### ***Preparing for 2017-18 Transitional Work***

By the spring of 2017, we had some ideas for doing Sunday mornings differently, but more intentional transitional work was needed to explore family needs and how best to meet them. A complicating factor was the impending reduction in religious educator hours (from full time to  $\frac{3}{4}$  time) for budgetary reasons. The Board decided to maintain full time hours (using a one-time alternate funding source) for one more year to allow the completion of transitional work and to facilitate the staff change.

To prepare, we first revised the religious educator job description to reflect the transitional nature of the coming year. The new one-year contract was essentially an interim contract, and the job title became Transitional Director of Lifespan Faith Development (T-DLFD).

We also set up the Faith Development Transition Team, which was charged with working with the T-DLFD and Minister to:

- Create, facilitate and monitor the transition process;
- Explain and interpret the process to the congregation; and
- Promote and help create opportunities for the congregation to be engaged in the transitional work.

The team included a chair with decades of religious education experience and strong organizational skills, a board member, a parent, someone very involved in adult programs, and a well-respected congregant with skill in facilitating visioning work.

## The Transition Part 2 (2017-18 church year)

### August – December 2017 “Faith Development: The Next Generation”

The fall of 2017 was a time of further experimentation, visioning, determining a direction for faith development, and creating the staff position and volunteer structure to support movement in that direction.

*Experimentation and Fall Programming.* Sunday morning programming during the fall of 2017 consisted of First Sundays, the usual multigenerational services, and traditional services with age-separated classes on the remaining Sundays (about twice a month). Attendance at those classes continued to be low, and staffing was at the limit of available volunteer time.

The experimentation during this fall had a broader focus than Sunday mornings. Here, we explored at-home faith development and parent support. We began a parent small group that met in the evenings with childcare provided, and was religious educator-facilitated. Readings and discussion focused on chapters of *Tending the Flame* by Michelle Richards. We also set up a family library that offered books to support Unitarian Universalist parenting, as well as children’s books.



The main tool for at-home faith development was a weekly email, the *Faith Development Connection*. I created this weekly email, and sent it out on Monday mornings. Each email provided resources connected to the monthly theme – where possible, the resources related to the theme of the upcoming worship service. This email did not contain classroom, logistical or scheduling information – it only provided at-home resources for exploring the theme. Most resources targeted adults, but some (especially the stories and chalice lightings) were intended

for all ages. Links to all of the Faith Development Connections for the 2017-18 church year are available on the UUCB website.<sup>3</sup>



UUCB Faith Development Connection

WELCOME

The parent group was small (typically 4-5 participants at each monthly meeting), but was a valuable entry point for new parents, and provided support for participants. The library was used and appreciated by about half a dozen families. And the email was read by 75-100 people each week; readership did not decline over time – in fact, some of the highest readership was seen at the end of the year. Feedback was consistently positive, and came from a cross-section of the church community. This resource was clearly meeting a congregational need.

*Visioning and a New Direction.* In September and October, we facilitated formal faith development visioning work. A visioning event in world café format was held in October, as well as surveys, parent meetings and conversations, class input and information/feedback sessions for the whole congregation. Specific take-aways from this work identified a desire for:

- Non-Sunday ways to engage (by taking faith home and out into the world)
- More social action
- Less volunteering
- Parent education & support
- Multigenerational community

The faith development vision statement that came out of this work reads:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://uubinghamton.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/UUCB-Faith-Development-Connection-2017-18.pdf>

## UUCB Faith Development Vision

November 2017

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is transformational, for us as individuals and in the wider world. We offer opportunities and encouragement for people of all ages to develop and live into this faith, within and beyond the church walls. This includes:

- individual, small group and whole-congregation opportunities for:
  - lifelong personal growth and development of a Unitarian Universalist identity,
  - encouraging rethinking of beliefs, and
  - supporting the individual pursuit of a challenging, meaningful and inspirational path;
- opportunities for social action as a faith community;
- support for parents as religious educators for their children; and
- an inclusive, covenantal community that accepts and supports people of all ages, as they are.

Following this work, movement toward family ministry was identified as the best fit with family needs and congregational goals.

### What is Family Ministry?

Family Ministry is an approach to faith development that recognizes that:

- Faith development happens throughout our lives, at all ages and wherever we are
- Parents, grandparents and caregivers are the primary religious educators for their children, and
- Ours is an intentional community of all ages.

Family Ministry seeks to meet people where they are and include families of all kinds – as families – in the life of the congregation.

Family ministry is not just about families with children, but the family ministry model recognizes that families with children need significant attention. Family ministry may look quite different

in different congregations, but congregations moving in this direction typically place greater emphasis on:

- Whole-congregation worship
- Social action and social justice for all ages
- Parent support and education
- At-home resources
- Whole-congregation social and educational events
- Worship and education at times other than Sunday mornings

### ***The Binghamton Model – Staffing and Volunteer Structure for Family Ministry at UUCB***

The Binghamton Model was created late in 2017 to move toward family ministry and better meet the expressed needs of UUCB families, working within the limits of available volunteer and staff time. The two key pieces of this model are (a) the religious educator job description, which is grounded in goals and priorities, rather than specific tasks, and (b) the Family Ministry Team, which brings a different focus to volunteer roles and serves as an ongoing discernment tool around priorities.

### ***UUCB Director of Family Ministry (DFM)***

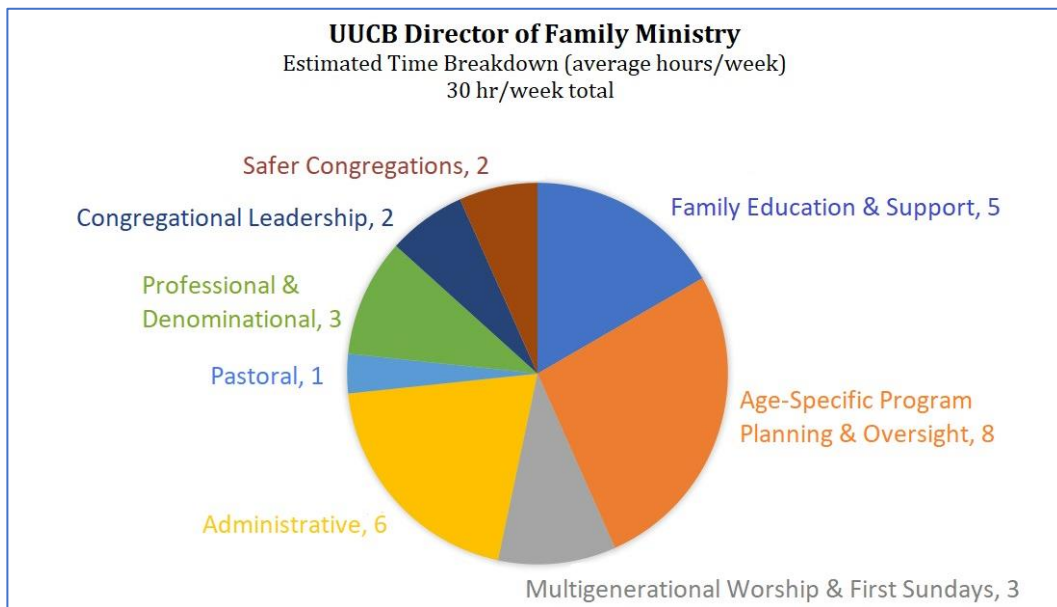
The mission-focused job description begins:

We envision the Director of Family Ministry (DFM) as a leader who will partner with our Minister and Family Ministry Team to create meaningful, innovative opportunities for faith development for all ages. ... It is expected that the DFM will use no more than half of their work time to maintain traditional Sunday morning programming, the remaining time to be spent on supporting faith development for families in other ways. We recognize that volunteer partnership with the DFM is critical ... (emphasis added)

This job description departs from traditional DRE job descriptions in clearly stating that Sunday morning programming is not the first priority. The religious educator is expected to do what they can to support Sunday programming, with the time and volunteer resources available, while devoting at least as much time to providing other kinds of faith development opportunities.

Another key departure from traditional job descriptions is the collaborative language – the DFM serves in partnership with volunteers to support faith development. There are, of course, some areas where the DFM brings particular expertise (*e.g.*, safer congregations guidelines, anti-racism programming, administration, curriculum resources, UU theology and worship, pedagogy) and that expertise should carry considerable weight. But faith development programming is expected to be the product of a partnership – the DFM is not expected to provide a full family ministry-grounded program by themselves.

The job description contains a visual to illustrate priorities and anticipated time usage:



Although the number of hours the DFM is will be expected to devote to each task is specified, the level of volunteer support available will be a major factor in determining how much the DFM can accomplish while keeping within these time constraints. There is also an understanding that this time estimate was the best approximation as of December 2017, and that the minister and DFM will need to make readjustments throughout the coming year.

## ***UUCB Family Ministry Team***

The former Children & Youth Program (CYP) Committee was designed with a narrow focus on age-specific Sunday morning programming, social action and social events. This was appropriate for the traditional Sunday School model, but family ministry requires a focus on the experience of children, youth and families throughout the life of the congregation. To bring about this shift, the Family Ministry Team was created.

In the Family Ministry Team, each volunteer attends to a specific aspect of congregational life, referred to as a portfolio. The person who holds a portfolio is not expected to do all the work in that area, or to maintain past practices and activities. They are expected to pay attention to that aspect, and to form collaborations with others in the congregation and the DFM to support the faith development of children, youth and families through procedures, activities and programs that are within the scope of their portfolio.

The Family Ministry Team is not a committee. This is a real, and significant, distinction. The Team meets infrequently (about 3 times a year) to stay connected to work in other areas and to get input on ideas. Team members do not recruit each other as helpers – the DFM will often serve in a consulting or collaborative role, and support for a Team member’s initiative is drawn from the wider congregation. It is hoped that eventually each Team member will have a small group of volunteers who regularly support them in their work.

There are many possible portfolios that could be held by a member of the Family Ministry Team (for a listing of initial portfolios, see the Family Ministry Team brochure, appended). The expectation was that the Team will function as an ongoing discernment tool – portfolios that have a Team member attending to them (and that attract willing volunteers to do the work) are assumed to be a high priority for the congregation. If a position is not filled, or volunteers cannot be found, that area is assumed to be a low priority, and that work does not get done. The DFM is not responsible for making up the difference.



Unitarian Universalist  
Congregation of Binghamton

*Family Ministry  
Team*





## **January - May 2018 Putting it into Practice**

During the last few months of the formal transition period, ongoing successful programming was continued, including First Sundays, the Faith Development Connection, the family library and the parent group. Early and late elementary classes were combined, due to low attendance and limited teacher availability. We created Spirit Play hybrid model for theme-based, multi-age classes based on a Spirit Play story and including both Spirit Play activities and related activities intended for older children. This model worked well for children and teachers and looks promising for future use.


The Children & Youth Program Committee was disbanded, and the Family Ministry Team was populated with six members, holding the following portfolios:

- Welcome & Connection
- Sunday Classes – early elementary / Spirit Play
- At-home Faith Development
- Youth
- Administrative Support
- Social Action

As mentioned before, unfilled portfolios are assumed to be a low priority for the congregation, and the DFM is not expected to do extra work in those areas.

The Family Ministry Team immediately began innovative work, with some exciting collaborations:

*The Growing Minds Story Hour* was a series of five Friday evening story and activity sessions. It was initially conceived as an outreach opportunity, with both in-house and community-wide promotion. Sessions were led by one Team member, with another overseeing publicity and hospitality, and 10 other volunteers from the congregation providing support for the sessions. The role of the religious educator was to support the planning, and activity and story selection, and to provide additional support on some evenings. The average attendance was 12 children, with more than half from the wider community, and several from families who were new to



**Come and join us for ...**

## Growing Minds: Friday Story Hour

*Storytelling and crafts for children 3-7 years old and coffee and tea for their families.*


*Our nature-themed stories are told in an engaging, hands-on style grounded in the teachings of Maria Montessori.*

**Dates: Five Fridays**  
April 20, 27  
May 4, 11, 18

**Time: 6:30—7:30 PM**

Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
183 Riverside Drive, Binghamton  
Next to Lourdes Hospital — Park behind the building, main entrance is in back.

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Congregation of Binghamton

For more information contact:  
office@uubinghamton.org

the church this year, but had not been attending classes. As an outreach program, and an entry point for new families, this was highly successful.

Other projects for the Team so far include:

- a Hunger Banquet, which was a collaboration involving the Team member holding the Social Action Portfolio, the First Sunday Workshop Planning Group, the Social Action HUUB and other volunteers,
- the creation of a youth-led social action team,
- increased attention to youth in worship, and
- administrative support for the religious educator, allowing staff time to be directed toward other faith development programming.

During this time, there was also a successful search for the new Director of Family Ministry.

### **Looking Forward – A Few Thoughts**

So far, the Family Ministry Team seems to be working as intended, although some portfolios are not yet filled, including Social Events, Worship and First Sundays. Efforts to recruit for those positions continue, but this may be an example of the Team's function as an ongoing discernment tool. I expect continued pressure from the system to revert to functioning as a committee; some vigilance by Team members and church leadership will probably be needed to maintain this new model.

Continuing movement in this direction will also require ongoing attention to communication about the big picture, as well as new opportunities. Congregational involvement was significant during the transition process, but the understanding of family ministry and what it means for the congregation varies.

Another area that warrants particular attention at this stage is inclusion, especially in worship, but also in the work of the congregation. This might mean changing committee structures – perhaps some version of the Team model might be appropriate elsewhere. In worship, being truly inclusive may mean further changes to the traditional order of service, and it may mean changing some expectations to allow younger people (children, youth and adults) to be full

participants. This is now a topic for conversation, and it seems ready for further experimentation.

The family ministry model would be supported and enhanced by wider use of the monthly themes throughout the life of the congregation. Themes can be a powerful tool for connecting congregants, including across generations – however, as we discovered, this requires more than just bringing the themes into the classroom. A next step might be to consider what additional activities, events, parent support and at-home resources might bring greater visibility and connection with the themes throughout the congregation.

Support for the DFM and ongoing adjustment to the position will be key to the success of this model. There will be lingering congregational expectations grounded in the traditional religious education model. Leadership support as some of those expectations are not met is critical. In addition, the minister and DFM will make continuing adjustments to DFM priorities and tasks, in view of circumstances in the congregation next year. Boundaries will also be important, both for the DFM and members of the Family Ministry Team, to ensure a reasonable workload for staff and volunteers, and to maintain the family ministry direction.

Finally, it is time to reconsider program assessment. Even in this transitional year, it is clear that faith development offerings reached more people, but that wasn't reflected in Sunday morning attendance figures. Classroom attendance is no longer an accurate measure of the quality or extent of the programming, the performance of the religious educator or the benefit to the community. As our understanding of faith development expands into the whole congregation and beyond, new approaches are needed to assess who is being served and which programming is genuinely meeting the needs of our families of all kinds.

## About the Author



Ann Kadlecek is a credentialed religious educator, who has served Westminster Unitarian Church (East Greenwich, RI; 2011-2016) and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Binghamton (Binghamton, NY; 2016-2018). Prior work in family ministry includes the *Living the Principles* collaboration with Rev. Ellen Quaadgras.<sup>4</sup> She is also a parent of two young adults, a former scientist and attorney, and a long-time volunteer in traditional Unitarian Universalist religious education programming. This fall she is entering Yale Divinity School as an aspirant for UU ministry. Contact Ann at [akad4112@gmail.com](mailto:akad4112@gmail.com).

## Appendices

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Ellen Quaadgras and Ann Kadlecek, 2015, <https://livingtheprinciplesuu.wordpress.com/>

## The UUCB Vision

"Our Congregation will become a beacon in the larger community, demonstrating our Unitarian Universalist values and principles through our actions. We will embrace a diversity of people, inspiring us all to think of the world in new ways. As we explore different perspectives and share our freedom to think and feel, we will work together with others for social and environmental justice. Celebrating our differences and the whole of life, we will foster personal and spiritual growth to help people become their best selves."

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While this 4-month experiment is intended to help us adapt to a changing world, it is also an opportunity to explore how we might live more fully into our vision.

What else might we try?



## How You Can Help

The changes we are exploring will have an impact on children, youth, families and everyone who participates in Sunday worship. The goal is to be able to plan for the future based on what we learn.

**You can help make this 4-month experiment a success by:**

- **Participating** in the different Sunday morning experiences;
- **Being curious and interested.** Some of what goes on may not appeal to you, but be sure to notice what inspires or challenges you; look for ideas and approaches that might have potential for you;
- **Providing direct feedback.** Useful feedback is a conversation that conveys your personal experience. Please share your thoughts directly with Ann Kadlecik (Director of Lifespan Faith Development), Rev. Douglas Taylor or Catherine Rosso (the focus group member involved with ongoing assessment).

You can email Ann at [dffd@uubinghamton.org](mailto:dffd@uubinghamton.org) to arrange a time to talk.

**We need to hear from you!**

## UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF BINGHAMTON



## *Our Sunday Experience*

Coming Soon in  
Faith Development  
and Worship

## What are we doing? An Overview

For 4 months (January through April), we are experimenting with some different approaches to children's programming Sunday worship. Many Sundays will be very familiar; others will look a little different.

During this time, there will be a mix of:

- **Multigenerational** (all-ages) worship services, using different formats;
- **Traditional** services and classes (preK, grades K-3 Spirit Play, grades 4-6 and grades 7&8 OWL); and
- **Alternative format**, on occasional Sundays, combining worship and educational programming or service opportunities for all.

Most classes for preK – grade 6 will follow the congregation's monthly theme so all ages can explore similar topics on Sunday morning. These themes are:

January – Listening  
February – Identity  
March – Risk / courage  
April – Transformation

## Why?

The goal is to adapt to ongoing changes in the congregation and the world.

These changes are complex and multi-faceted, but they show up here in very concrete ways, such as:

- **Decreasing volunteer time** - our children's programming continues to be based on a model that requires a larger number of committed volunteers than we now have;
- **Inconsistent attendance** for many children and teachers, due to changes in families and society - this presents challenges for continuity and community-building;
- **Changing goals** - Many parents are looking for multigenerational community and action for their children, not just age-segregated classroom experiences.

Congregations are taking different approaches to working with these realities – our experiment is intended to help us explore possible ways forward for UUCB.

Then, in May, we'll assess and make a plan for next year.

## What are we doing? Some Details

Jan 1: No RE classes, children are invited to join the worship service for all ages at 11:15am.

Jan 8: Regular classes and youth group at 11:15

Jan 15: All-ages services at 9:30 and 11:15

Jan 22: Regular classes and youth group at 11:15

Jan 29: One extended, alternate-format service at 10am

For February through April, each month will include:

- one multigenerational service;
- two traditional Sundays;
- one Sunday that may have a social justice focus - the plans are evolving, and the details will depend in part on our assessment of the Sundays in January.

**Watch the eblast and Beacon for updated scheduling information for February - April**

## Portfolios (cont.)

**Youth Ministry:** Provide youth group, service, educational and regional youth experiences, as well as connection to the larger congregation. (partner with DFM)

**All-Ages Education:** Plan and support theme-based, congregation-wide educational events and opportunities. (partner with DFM and Minister)

**Parent Support:** Plan and lead parent group(s), identify parent/caregiver needs and partner with others to meet those needs. (partner with DFM)

**Mobilization:** Motivate and equip members to engage their passions and gifts through volunteer ministry, within the church and in the wider community. (partner with LDR and Minister)

Other portfolios are possible, as there is interest.



Family ministry at UUCB depends on volunteers who hold and support these portfolios. Your staff is here to partner with you, but needs you to make these things happen.

**How will you get involved?**

## How to Get Involved

**Join the Family Ministry Team** – This means holding a portfolio – which one calls to you? The Team sets its own meeting schedule, probably about 3 times a year. Otherwise, the work is done on your own schedule.

**Support a Portfolio Holder** – Once someone is holding a portfolio, they will need people to help. Agreeing to help in one or more areas is a great way to support Family Ministry at UUCB with a lower level of responsibility.



**Questions? or to Volunteer** – contact a member of the Transition Team:

Debby Herman  
Pat Kissick  
Stan Masters

**Or your Transitional Director of Lifespan Faith Development:**

Ann Kadlecek [DLFD@uubinghamton.org](mailto:DLFD@uubinghamton.org)



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Unitarian Universalist  
Congregation of Binghamton

*Family Ministry  
Team*



## Family Ministry Is ...

an approach to faith development that recognizes that parents, grandparents and caregivers are the primary religious educators for their children, and our is an intentional community of all ages.



### Family Ministry includes families throughout congregational life

Our congregation seeks to provide opportunities and resources for practicing our faith *as families*, in the congregation and at home. Here, people of all ages worship together, learn together, serve together, and connect. At-home resources and opportunities for action in the community bring our faith into our daily lives and foster connection with each other and the world.



## The Family Ministry Team

is an integral part of the Family Ministry model at UUCB.

The **Family Ministry Team** is a group of volunteers who each focus on an area of interest, partnering with others to:

- create inclusive opportunities for faith development, worship, service, support and connection for families of all kinds
- review ongoing activities and advocate for inclusion of families, as families
- provide parent/caregiver support, education and resources

**The Family Ministry Team works closely with other volunteers and the Director of Family Ministry (DFM).**



## Team Structure

Each Team member holds a portfolio, and has primary responsibility for work in that area. Team members do **not** do all the work.

The ongoing focus of Family Ministry at UUCB will be determined by the portfolio-holders. **The work of unfilled portfolios will not get done.**

Team members are asked to hold their portfolio for two years.

## Portfolios

The portfolios we envision now are:

**Welcome and Connection:** Ensure that new families are warmly welcomed and enthusiastically connected with the congregation, and provide followup as needed. (partner with DFM, Minister and Membership Committee)

**Sunday Morning Classes for Children:** Provide curriculum and materials, and administration assistance for traditional Sunday School classes, for preK – Grade 8. (partner with DFM)

**“First Sunday” Workshops:** Plan and support workshops (partner with DFM)

**Social Action:** Plan and support social action opportunities that include children, youth and families. (partner with Social Action HUUB and DFM)

**At-Home Faith:** Support at-home spiritual practices, routines, and engagement in our Unitarian Universalist faith through the week. (partner with DFM)

**Volunteer Recruitment:** Recruit class teachers and Team portfolio-holders as needed (partner with the DFM)

**Social Events:** Plan and oversee 3 all-ages, non-Sunday social events per year.

**Worship:** Support young people in Sunday worship services, plan and support worship for children & youth, and non-Sunday worship for all. (partner with minister, Worship Committee and DFM) [over]