

BUUF Music Report 2017-2018

We don't have any kind of official committee or staff person in charge of music at BUUF. Our piano accompanist, Candace Onweller, is under contract with the Board.

So I write this at Lisa's request, and ask for the understanding that I do not have the whole picture. This is but a snapshot from my point of view.

Historically I have been involved with music at BUUF as an accompanist, choir member, choir leader, soloist, vocal ensemble member, and at one point paid Music Director. My current position is simply as a long-time member with interest in music.

Sometime in the fall of 2017 many of us noted a sudden uptick in the amount of musical talent in our midst. We wanted to encourage people to participate, but we had no committee or staff member to direct activities. In a brief informal meeting we talked about a collaborative effort, with an e-mail list set up for communication among musicians.

We also encouraged Jim and Sunday Services committee to give musicians as much time as possible to plan and practice.

Jim McConnell continued to choose hymns for congregational singing, and invited folks on the list to comment or make suggestions. He also made frequent requests for what we are calling "special music," a piece performed by a soloist or ensemble. Musicians jumped in when we could. For a while we tried to meet every Sunday morning at 9:30 but weren't able to keep that up consistently.

Whenever one of us had a piece of vocal music in mind, I'd send out an email asking whether people wanted to work on that piece together. Harvey Johnson, Nan Lundeen, Candace Onweller and Julie Williams were regularly volunteering to work on choral numbers.

I think our best "choir" moment was the struggle we had with the complexities of "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock. With Candace playing piano, underpinning our vocal efforts, we did our best, and were rewarded with our guest speaker tying in with the notion that historically, the Civil Rights movement would not have existed without the efforts of Ella Baker and other women in the movement. So the song was entirely appropriate and our efforts were appreciated.

In the Spring, Joanne Krettek approached me with the idea that we had young singers in our group, and since two of them were already in the community choir All God's Children, could we have a kids choir at BUUF? I jumped in, and we did have kids sing one Sunday morning, and again at the Cabaret. It was fun, and didn't sound bad for a fledgling attempt. Since then I haven't been able to give this project as much time as I'd like to.

Those are the things that we did.

Recommendations:

Candace is highly talented and dedicated, and vastly underpaid and underappreciated. Whatever happens with the grand music proposal, I'd like to recommend two things be done regardless:

1. That Candace be given a raise this year and that we work toward paying her a fair and appropriate wage.

2. That the piano be maintained/fixed as soon as humanly possible. We are letting a multi-thousand-dollar piece of equipment deteriorate without proper maintenance.

Here are some further thoughts on music and worship arts.

In May, I went with Jim McConnell, Harvey Johnson and Katharine Lion to a workshop on multigenerational worship led by Rev. Erika Hewett. Jim paid for registration, Harvey used hotel points so we could stay overnight, and Katharine and I pitched in with food and gas money. The workshop was tremendous and gave us all ideas for how we could not only “tune up” Sunday services but design them to be more mindful and meaningful. So far we’ve implemented a few ideas, but the feeling that many of us are on the same page is priceless in my opinion. I’m hoping we can all do more with that now that we have seen and heard and felt what is possible in the space of an hour on a morning when we are all gathered to be together.

One of those things that I feel is a huge improvement is that we now have given ourselves permission to ask people to hold applause, especially after a reading or piece of music that begs for contemplative silence.

Sometimes a Sunday service “pulls together” or “works,” and it seems to be that serendipity occurs even when we have a number of voices speaking on the topic. Certainly, that happens. However, if we do it well, what you don’t see are the quick conferences musicians and speakers may have with one another just before the service to try to stitch those pieces nicely together.

One Sunday I asked Candace if she would start the next hymn immediately after a special-music number. She had an even better suggestion that she start playing piano toward the end of the ensemble song, so that there was a smooth and seamless transition between the two items. On May 27, I had planned to sing a strident feminist anthem, but as I listened to the moving and gentle poem Janice read just before the special music, I found the juxtaposition potentially jarring, and begin to think of how that transition would work. When I began to sing I began in a much lighter mode, and let the song build up a bit rather than coming in rock-and-rolling as I normally would. I hope that helped.

Now, I’ve got years of experience in ritual and ceremony, much of it focused on the Sunday morning experience. But that doesn’t make me an expert, or any more talented than anyone else. These skills can be learned. If we want to be more than a speakers club, I believe we need to give much thought to what our message is and how we present it. High quality Sunday morning services can put us in the right kind of space to deepen relationships and understanding, and lead the way for the rest of the experience our members and guests have at Berrien UU Fellowship.

Peace,

Gretchen Ohmann
musician
BUUF member since 1984