

enterprise

YOLO COUNTY NEWS



The Rev. Beth Banks of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis addresses a crowd of about 35 people Thursday in front of Rep. John Garamendi's office in downtown Davis. Wayne Tilcock/Enterprise file photo

Features

UU minister draws a wider circle

By **Kathy Robertson**

The Rev. Beth Banks wanted a job at a church with character, a sense of community and willingness to try new things.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis wanted a minister with administrative skill, a strong pastoral presence and the ability to share ministry and be actively engaged in social justice work.

The minister and the congregation have been pretty much in sync for two decades. That's unusual. Ministerial tenure averages five- to seven-years in churches nationwide, although there are other local standouts. Mary Lynn Tobin, a former pastor at Davis Community Church, was there for 24 years. Rabbi Greg Wolfe has been at Bet Haverim for 25.

"I was willing to risk. They were willing to risk," Banks said of her congregation in a recent interview. "I came here thinking I would stay. I was thinking generations. Marriages to celebrations of life."

A quirky, red-haired minister with an exuberant style, Banks gives time generously to individuals while building broader engagement with the Davis community as a whole.

The congregation will celebrate her tenure via Zoom on Oct. 4. An initial celebration of her arrival in May 2000 was put off last spring due to the pandemic. Contact office@uudavis.org for a link to the party.

Gender equity, green sanctuary and support for immigrants

Church roots go back to 1954, when a group of liberal-minded parents with children at Davis Parent Nursery School

met to talk about how to provide meaningful religious education for their kids.

Hired in 2000, Banks is the church's fifth minister. UUCD is located on Patwin Road in West Davis on property considered the boondocks when it was purchased in 1963.

Among the highlights during her tenure, the church:

- * Became certified in 2003 as a congregation that publicly welcomes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities;
- * Earned green sanctuary designation in 2006 from the Unitarian Universalist Association
- * Supported marriage equality for same-sex couples in 2007;
- * Opened a new social hall in 2012;
- * Joined the Davis Interfaith Rotating Winter Shelter program for the homeless in 2014;
- * Became the first church in Davis to erect a Black Lives Matter banner on church grounds in 2016, and
- * Voted in 2017 to become a sanctuary church committed to making Yolo County a safe community for undocumented immigrants.

"Beth turned out to be a perfect fit," said Jeannette Robertson, a member of the search committee that hired Banks. She's social and warm — and came into the church with a lot of new program ideas, Robertson added.

The church is not the same as it was 20 years ago.

Banks took charge of administration, added staff, roused more volunteers and expanded the music program but still takes time to focus on individual needs and voices.

She "tends to so many with such grace," said current board president Claudia Uts-Smith. But that takes juggling, she added. "Rev. Beth never makes me feel rushed. She's 100 percent with me, even though she must be spinning plates."

Music, mentoring and pastoral care

Music is a big part of her life and her worship services.

"She knows how to make the music flow and enhance the service," said Liz Young, a longtime member who served as the first choirmaster.

A former chaplain at Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY, Banks gets the congregation to its feet to sing hymns in rounds. "Music relaxes the mind, opens the body and moves our emotions," she says.

UUCD has a popular internship program and Banks is known as a strong mentor. "Beth sees our congregation as a teaching congregation — and that goes well in a college town," said Robin Datel, a longtime member active in social justice issues.

Interns have time at the pulpit and are expected to grow a campus ministry at UC Davis. Banks also trains members of the congregation to share their own stories as worship associates and invites guest speakers to the fold.

"Beth is creative, likes to share ideas, look at new trends and talk about best practices — and that is really fun," said the Rev. Morgan McLean, a second minister hired in 2016 who focuses on congregational life.

Pastoral care — addressing the internal, emotional and spiritual needs of the congregation — is a key part of the job.

Banks has an uncanny ability to listen to what's said during memorial services and sum up a life in ways that resonate with families and friends.

"It's like fruit picking," said Pat Moore-Pickett, another longtime member. "She touches each peach ... and you wind up feeling like you have a harvest."

Social justice takes off

The church's sanctuary work focuses on direct response to requests for action from the immigrant community and its allies.

Highlights range from a rally to support a Davis resident detained by ICE to community training programs for immigrant rights and cooking projects with undocumented students at UC Davis. Church members allied in support of DACA and wrote comments critical of Draconian new restrictions on asylum.

"Beth has a genuine commitment to social justice. She integrates this into church life and has confidence in lay leaders willing to do the work, said Stefan Harvey, former chair of the Immigration Justice Committee at UUCD.

One thing that hasn't changed much over the years is church membership (now at 260), although steady is good in today's world, where church membership is dropping nationally. That's a struggle, as well as efforts to diversify the mix.

Validation of those already in the fold makes a difference.

Last winter, Banks organized a Chinese New Year's celebration at the church. Guests made dumplings, a traditional Chinese activity.

"It was so affirming to have that occasion held at church," said Alexandra Lee-Jobe, a member who helped lead the effort to put a Black Lives Matter sign on church grounds. "People came who had never come to church before."

These internal actions and Banks's work with a handful of like-minded ministers have built a more progressive interfaith community in town, fellow clergy say.

"(UUCD) is always five steps ahead of us," said Rabbi Wolfe from Bet Haverim, "but there's great fellowship among all of us and great support."

— *Kathy Robertson, a former Davis enterprise reporter, is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis.*

0 Comments Sort by Oldest ▾



Add a comment...

 Facebook Comments Plugin

Printed in the September 20, 2020 edition on page A1 |

Tags: [A1](#), [PRINTED](#)

Published on September 19, 2020 | Last Modified on September 19, 2020 at 8:24 pm

Subscribe to our free Morning Edition newsletter

CalMatters

