

## 40 Years of Ministry

Anniversaries are like birthdays, they provide a time to pause and celebrate life unfolding. We get to reflect on how we started, how far we've come and dream and vision about where we'd like to be in the future. And like birthdays, we get greetings from others.

**Reverend David McClure** sent this: My wife, Donna and I came to Lehigh Valley in 1993 upon the encouragement of Rev. Max Lafser. I was accepted and did indeed accept appointment as minister after experiencing the energy, the love, and the inspiration of this amazing congregation.

That beautiful little building in Emmaus became our spiritual home and our place to celebrate the power of the Christ within! It became very obvious to us from the beginning that this was a ministry that had a mission, a dream, and a legacy to become a powerful force for good in the LV community and beyond.

The warmth and encouragement of the people still stays with us to this day. As you celebrate 40 years of dedicated devotion to the Unity message, you are led by a radiant light, Rev. Joy Wyler! May you continue to be blessed for the next 40 years and beyond! Thank you for enhancing our lives through the gift of your love and encouragement.

**Reverend Judi Venturini** reflected on the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: That year unfolded, every month another leader from our past came and shared. Every month we celebrated our history! Every month healing occurred as well. We began with Alice and David Miller. To the best of my memory, we included Rev Yves LaFontant, Rev. Ann Marie Accacio, Rev. Bill Fischer; Rev. David McClure and his wife Donna; Rev. Rachel Ritz; Rev. Connie Foreback; and Rev. Max Lafser. Each of these Unity leaders added to the richness of this journey, to Unity of Lehigh Valley's history and the celebration of our 25th anniversary.

In September, we had a big celebration and rededication of Unity of Lehigh Valley as a ministry. This was followed by a huge potluck dinner hosted by Jann and Charlie Seem—and about 70 people attended this beautiful gathering. Fifteen years have passed and now Unity of Lehigh Valley is celebrating its 40th Anniversary! I shower everyone with Love, Light and wishes for something great to occur. 40 metaphysically represents a firm foundation. Rejoice in every experience—no matter how it felt or appeared—they all contribute to who Unity of Lehigh Valley is today. You have a strong foundation of Wisdom for New Beginnings!

**And Reverend Rachel Sue Ritz** sent this: I began my second life when I found ULV in 1989! Like many, I joined the healing/loving community when my life was in crisis. I cried at Sunday services. I was finally “HOME”! I devoured Unity teachings. I dedicated myself to giving back to ULV by serving on nearly all of ULV’s teams. I was startled when I “heard” the call to ministry, one that would not be fulfilled until I had healed my issues & completed a divorce. During that time I became an LUT. After Rev. David McClure left ULV, I was blessed to be the co-spiritual leader alongside Alice Anne Miller until Rev. Jim Fisher was hired. I was Jim’s platform assistant until I left for Unity Village to attend seminary. Between here and there I met Alan. We got married at ULV. Thank you, Spirit, for ULV. I owe ULV everything! Happy 40th anniversary!

**Jim Blake, the CEO at Unity Headquarters** also sent a greeting: What an honor it is to congratulate you on your 40th Anniversary. We rejoice with you as you celebrate 40 years of living, learning, praying, and growing together! Many things have changed during the past 40 years, but one thing is clearly constant—the light of Spirit shines brightly in and through your spiritual community.

It’s often heard in Unity that “You are the light of the world.” How true these words are for Unity of Lehigh Valley. As you let your lights shine, both individually and collectively, you touch the hearts of people in your lives and community and this light radiates outward in an ever-widening circle of light and love that shines around the world. Thank you for all of the good works you do.

We love you, we bless you, and we appreciate you. We behold the Christ in each of you as we hold you in loving, faith-filled prayer on your special day. And we know that your beloved community will continue to bless and lift the hearts of others for years to come.

Unity of Lehigh Valley is blessed! And we know that today we are not celebrating a building or even the personalities that have stood at the front of the room—we are celebrating individuals who come together to **become** spiritual community. I’d like to invite those who remember the first days of meetings with Alice Anne, even before we became an official Unity ministry, to stand or wave your hand. You have seen the changes and been the pioneers to carve out a place for ULV in the community. Now, please stand or wave your hand if you remember attending ULV in the 80’s. Probably during the tenure of Yves LaFontant. Now please stand if you came in the 90’s. Max Lafser, David McClure, Jim Fisher and others may have been leaders.

Now please stand if you began the new millennia here in the early 2000's.  
Now please stand if I am the only minister you have known here at ULV.  
One last group I'd like to acknowledge. Those who have been born into Unity-  
our future beginning with a foundation in Oneness. Spiritual community is  
all of us—bringing all of our history, our diversity, our insight, inspiration and  
love together to shine our light into the Lehigh Valley.

You may recall a couple years ago we had a holiday service titled Christmas  
Past, Present and Future. David Miller shared some of his memories of the  
early years of ULV. I found some notes that Alice Miller had for the 25<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary service and I thought it would be interesting to share some of  
them. She begins by saying, "ULV is the direct result of a call that David and I  
and several other people, specifically Maxine and Bill Ference, heard in our  
hearts 25 years ago. Our prayer was simply to be obedient to that call." She  
reflects on a time of challenge after the end of Reverend Yves tenure and  
maybe during or after Reverend Max Lafser. She says, "We were asking the  
same questions then that we are today: Who are we? What are we called to  
be? Who are we called to serve?" Alice then references the parable of the  
growing seed set out in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark: "The kingdom of God is as if  
someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night  
and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The  
earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the  
head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because  
the harvest has come."

You can choose many metaphors for ministry and see how they work. At 40  
years we have to acknowledge that ministry is often longer than one season. In  
the Wednesday email I used Ecclesiastes: For everything there is a season,  
and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to  
die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and  
a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep,  
and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw  
away stones, and a time to gather stones together. The longer you are a part  
of community, the more seasons you participate in. The planting and birthing  
and dancing give way to harvest and mourning and throwing away what needs  
to be cleared out. There is nothing wrong with any purpose or any season.  
One season is not superior to the other and it is the entire process continually  
unfolding that is needed for a dynamic ministry.

One thing I do know for sure is that ministry is a great balancing of the tension between stability and growth. They are not opposites to me but different aspects of spiritual maturity when they are balanced.

Stability alone can become stagnation and death. Growth alone can become erratic and energy draining. In the balance of spiritual maturity we remain grounded in our Truth and open to seeing how new ideas and new techniques might further our goals. Without giving up our foundation, we let go of outdated beliefs and embrace a new way of seeing Truth.

Forty years ago we didn't worry about a website. Forty years ago Bethlehem Steel was still in business. Forty years ago we typed out a newsletter and copied and mailed it as a primary way of communicating with our congregation. Forty years ago and even fifteen years ago, at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the answers to Alice Anne's ministry questions are not the same as answers appropriate for today.

Who are we remains Unity of Lehigh Valley. Yet the faces of ULV reflect a growing diversity in age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, abilities and religious backgrounds. What are we called to be might be a shifting answer. Unity has traditionally been a place of spiritual education and spiritual practice. I don't think we give that up. More and more I hear people come and say we are a sanctuary. We are an oasis of peace and a welcoming community of love in a sometimes divisive and difficult world. I also see us becoming a community leader. We don't need to wait for others to catch up. We were one of the first church supporters of the LGBT Bradbury Sullivan Center. We held peace meditations during the last presidential elections. Quietly we lead by example. Who are we called to serve is hopefully expanding. Traditionally Unity has served those who found us. Like a hermitage in the woods, it was very helpful once you got there. I'd like to think that with technology tools, updating our language and examples, and staying current with what is going on in the world, we can reach more of those who need us and who are looking for a spiritual home. I'd like people to find us **before** they retire or have more time to read books or are not raising families. I found Unity in my 20's and I am grateful. I'd like Unity to reach more 20-somethings and more 70-somethings and everyone in between. I love the idea of generations born into Unity. I'd like Unity to be a resource for people in ways we have not been in the past and I'm not even sure what that looks like yet.

But that is the exciting thing about 40 years of ministry—we are celebrating the beginning of what is next as much as we are celebrating what we have done so far. We are celebrating the harvest of seeds planted long ago, seedlings sprouting unknown within our midst and seeds yet to find fertile ground.

I want to do a little survey. How many of you actually try some of the spiritual practices we explore here on Sunday or in classes or workshops? How many of you find those spiritual practices make life better—more peaceful, richer, more fulfilling? How many of you use spiritual practices at work or with your family? How many of you think our spiritual life is not meant to be separate from our daily life and get surprised at how that keeps working out?

I am confident the next 40 years will be just as frustrating and fulfilling; just as trying and transformational as the last 40 years. I also bring to mind Paul's letter to the Philippians: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion." As one project is completed, another springs up. As one season ends, another begins. The dynamic nature of ministry is ongoing. I am grateful to have been a part of this spiritual community for the last ten years. I remain curious about how Spirit continues to reveal work for us to do, both within our community and out in the world.

Blessing means to stir up the activity of God. So it seems more than appropriate that today we bless our church and dedicate it once again to the work of Spirit. We'll use the Blessing written by James Dillet Freeman. I invite you to join me—Let's begin together, then I'll speak a verse, then we'll do one together.

All: This is God's house. May we who come here not only find out about God, but find God.

May there be beauty in this place, but especially may it be a place where men and women become aware of the beauty in themselves.

All: May this be a place of worship. May this be a place of instruction. May this be a place of singing. May this be a place of prayer.

But for us who worship and take instruction and sing and pray, may this always be a place of inner stillness, where we may listen and hear when God speaks.

All: May whoever ministers here minister in love. May whoever teaches here teach truth. May whoever serves here serve pleasantly.

May everyone come into this house in expectation and go with thanksgiving, and may anyone who comes needing help go feeling blest.

All: May this be such a house that Jesus Christ – or any stranger, even one of the least – would feel in it that He was with friends.

AMEN