

Reflections on the Challenges, Opportunities, and Learnings of the Past Year

An interview with UCBMA Director, the Rev. Elena Larssen

The Rev. Elena Larssen became the new Minister for Volunteer Engagement for the United Church of Christ in May 2021, following eight years of service as Senior Minister of First Congregational Church of Long Beach, California. She also serves Vice President of the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance (UCBMA).



How would you describe your role at the UCBMA?

I have served as a UCBMA director since 2010 and was asked to join the board at the time of the formation of Next Generation Leadership Initiative (NGLI). I've been engaged in strategic planning, the capital campaign, extensive leadership development and program evaluation, and have served on the NGLI Steering and Selection Committee. One of the most important projects is being simply true to my place in the church, as one of the relatively small demographic population of clergy in their 40s.

How would you describe the importance of the work of UCBMA in the broader context of the UCC?

UCBMA has roots back in the formation of denominations. To gather congregations is partly motivated by the need to cultivate and nurture a 'learned clergy,' as it's so important to our historical tradition as Protestants. It's not just a hunch but a fact that healthy vibrant leadership is essential to a thriving national denomination. UCBMA has been the curious and caring partner to clergy; we look for the challenges and try to address them, and we always remember that church professionals – clergy, musicians, educators, administrators – need love and advocacy to keep up their important work.'

How did UCBMA adapt its work to the pandemic?

We jumped to online meetings like so many others.

Our staff did a wonderful job of responding to those in crisis. Not every situation can be fixed in a crisis, but the wider church could call on UCBMA's ministries to be a part of the solution.

How did COVID impact your ministry as a local church pastor? As a spouse and parent?

My local church ministry was completely impacted by the COVID shutdown, and by the important issues of social justice that surged to global awareness in this time. I have never felt more useful as a pastor. My people truly needed our online worship and were speaking and stepping up to be a part of church life online. Spirituality and social justice were alive in us, even at a distance.

But I also was never more drained. There was no way to balance parenting, work life, and the needs of a world in crisis. Balance was just another unrealistic expectation. I was shocked to watch as the long-range impacts of the shut down on working people – especially moms and particularly moms of color – rolled out in real time. Fortunately, my husband is a feminist and managed much of the schooling for our little boy. Without that, I might have been one of the millions of moms who had no viable choice but to quit her job.

What opportunities have been created by the pandemic?

The church has learned that it can adapt to changing circumstances and succeed. It is hard work, and there are no guarantees. What works one day may fail another; what is wise one day may be foolish the next. The old saying of "meet the people of where they are" was applied to the online universe, so that we finally showed up for people "where they were," feeling trapped at home, fearful and angry and alone.



And our congregations – and our talented clergy – showed that the radical welcome of the United Church of Christ looks pretty good on camera.

This is the time to embrace the prophetic voice of the church and broadcast it online. The skills of our clergy and the voices of our churches should be heard more widely than the platform of a Sunday morning, and we have known that for a long time. It's wonderful to know that the internet is full of sermons by my colleagues that cry out for racial justice and the healing of the planet. When a teen like Darnella Frazier can change the world by refusing to turn her camera phone away from the murder of George Floyd, we know that screens are tools for justice.

For me the jump online was swift and powerful. The first Sunday of the shut-down, March 15, 2020, we were preparing to go live with our slapped-together tech set up and I got a text message. It was the adult daughter of one our most beloved matriarchs. She had not been able to come to church physically in almost four years. That morning, the text message read that she was watching on her iPad. That was all I needed to be converted to the justice work of online ministry.

The opportunity of online ministry created a new path for us to be with the people.

How are you handling a major career move, geographical relocation, etc., during this time?

I am so excited to join the national staff. Throughout my ministry, my goal has always been to develop leaders and create cultures of values-driven leadership. As the new Minister for Volunteer Engagement, I'll be directing the historic, national leadership programs for volunteers. Volunteers are leaders who connect the energy of the church with the needs of the world, just for the love of service. It's a phenomenal force.

The pandemic invited everyone to consider change, and our little family is handling a big transition. But it's brought spiritual lessons about trusting the process and letting people help us – not that this is easy or comfortable. I also remember what the (former Minnesota Conference Minister) the Rev. Dr. Karen Smith Sellers taught me: the extent to which I can manage myself is the extent to which I can handle challenges beyond myself. Meaning, that stress or worries can't undermine me from persisting to do what is right and timely; instead if I can let the Spirit calm my frustrations, then I can rise to the occasion instead of acting from stress instead of strength.

For me, that lesson comes up again and again, inviting me to center myself, remember I belong to God, and to rely on that strength from God to be patient and kind through the challenges.

We also swim a lot! I made a goal to become a lap swimmer after 40, and while I won't be winning any medals anytime soon, I am a swimmer! A jump in the pool is a minor miracle for a pandemic-bound household where one room is online first grade, one room is an ecumenical summit, and my office is a Synod strategy meeting. Thank God for the water, and for the stress-busting miracles of play and exercise.

What would you say are important learnings for the church, for PBUCC, UCBMA, and for ministry coming out of the last year?

We have permission, on a global level, to mend what is broken and let new liberation grow in the cracks of what fell apart during 2020. Don't go back to work practices that don't work; don't go back to practices that yielded no growth, don't let whiteness or other false powers silence the voices that are leading lights for today. It's acceptable to God for people to journey forward, carrying lessons and traditions in our hearts and not hauling them wholesale into a new world. We should gratefully act on the opportunity to make a more just world, with more space for faith, service, and hope.

