

Children's RE Annual Report 2019/2020

The Children's Religious Exploration program hired a Program Support Person following consent from the UUCR Board and Congregation at the 2019 annual meeting. The intent was to provide continuity of program support primarily for the elementary age level program, and direct oversight and supervision of the children's room provider for infants-preK. We were fortunate to hire Connie Schroth, who brought a wealth of educational and administrative experience. The hiring of Connie provided immediate relief to the volunteer teachers who have struggled for years trying to prepare and deliver a high quality program to an inconsistent, very low or non-existent number of children. (Note: the dramatic loss of attending religious institutions has been a nation-wide trend that has been developing over the past 10-15 years, not only in UUA but all mainstream denominations, putting the traditional "Sunday School" model of religious education in crisis and requiring a paradigm shift in assumptions about how we minister to families and youth.) We also were fortunate this year to employ Annie Southworth, a very talented high school senior, as our children's room provider. Annie provided childcare and a lightly structured program to 3-5 year olds and cared for younger children as well.

We saw a slight uptick in attendance this year in the RE program (primarily due to 2 families attending on a more regular basis), but a sharp decline in our children's room attendance as the families utilizing that service no longer were attending on Sunday mornings.

The CRE initiated a spiritually-focused family offering this spring called BITES. Weekly affirmations, family activities to nurture spiritual development, prayers and graces, and Random Acts of Kindness are now being offered through UUCR's weekly newsletter and Facebook page in brief "bites" to nourish the development of spirit-filled families.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an interesting challenge in the spring of 2020 – how to keep our families and children engaged while physically distanced. At the initiative of the CRE committee chair, we immediately began implementing Sunday morning online teleconference gatherings. Although not without its own technological glitches, the real-time face-to-face experience was so overwhelmingly positive that every family requested continuing even on Easter Sunday. Kids literally rolled out of bed (or stayed in bed and pajamas!) to join the online meetings. Attendance was consistently higher for this experimental platform than it has been for the past 6 years in church, perhaps reflecting the enormous need that youth had for connection and familiarity in this time of upheaval, uncertainty, and anxiety. Although at this time we do not yet know how the online platforms might continue once COVID restrictions are lifted, the online experience offers the potential to connect with today's technology and media-savvy families and youth, shaping a new interpretation and delivery of religious exploration and spiritual development.

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Bjorke

Chair, Children's Religious Exploration Committee