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ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH PHOTOS

The Rev. Joanne Blum of Unity Church of Delaware demonstrates its year-end Burning Bowl ritual, to take place on Sunday.

## Church’s New Year rite puts flame to troubles

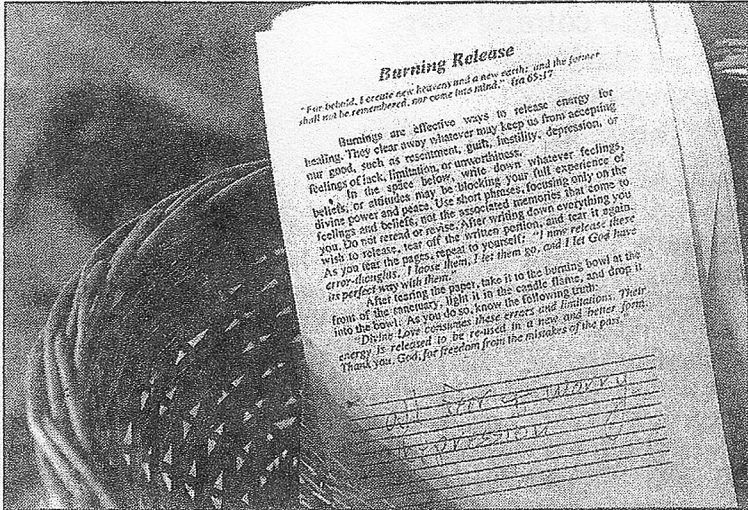
By JoAnne Viviano ■ THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The Rev. Joanne Blum touched a strip of paper to a candle flame on the altar at Unity Church of Delaware, held it over a pottery bowl and watched it transform into ashes and drifting smoke. As she demonstrated the ritual of the year-end Burning Bowl Service, she explained that participants burn a slip of paper after writing down something, perhaps some burden that they want to be rid of as the new year begins.

“It could be an emotional state, like worry about something, anxiety, depression, fear,” Blum, the church’s interim minister, said as her paper strip disappeared. “Most people like to see it burn up and make sure it burns all the way and it’s gone.”

The church, at 4277 Columbus Pike, will hold its Burning Bowl Service at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday.

Lynda McClanahan, who will oversee the service, said the ritual is performed by many congregations in the Association of Unity Churches and other similar denominations.



Blum’s note on an instruction sheet says what she wants to leave behind in 2016: “all fear & worry, depression.”

This practice of burning, she said, is borrowed from the Hindu faith, where fire is used in many ways, including to establish a connection with the divine realm. At least one Hindu group uses the burning bowl to send prayers to deities.

McClanahan said that churches perform the ceremony in a variety of ways; most encourage participants to write down hurts or resentments that are holding them back and from which they want to be released. Others also encourage participants to write down things they hope to cultivate in the coming year.

“You can’t get a much more powerful symbol for transformation than fire,” McClanahan said. “There’s light involved, and things go up into the ether and drift away.”

Performing a physical act also helps participants lock in intentions.

“It’s quite a beautiful service,” she said. “The physical

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ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH

The Rev. Joanne Blum of Unity Church of Delaware burns her note.

### New Year rite

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act of throwing something into the fire, it just strengthens the idea that ‘I just really want to get rid of this.’”

Along with offering the service through her congregation, Blum said that she and her husband, Joe Lambert, perform the ritual at home. She said she usually decides what to write on her slip right before she burns it.

“It’s a very impulsive thing at the moment,” she said. “Somehow it always comes to me pretty quickly.”

“Any kind of concern about something, that’s a good thing to focus on getting rid of, because it does drain a lot of energy,” she said. “Worry is a terrible energy drainer. It’s useless.”

Lambert said the tradition helps bring a bit of ritual to the denomination.

“It just lets you stop and think, ‘What are the things you want to work on?’” he said. “I think just setting out that intention probably helps in ways

“This is a powerful way of saying, ‘I’m done with that. I’m freeing up my energy. I’m not going to carry that forward from here.’”  
— the Rev. Joanne Blum

you don’t obviously notice.”

Blum said she suggests that participants in Burning Bowl ceremonies focus on what might be draining their energy, what they don’t want to carry into the new year. It might be a habit, but more often people find it’s an emotion, a lack or a limitation that they want to toss aside.

“This is an annual ritual we do in the church to enable us to move into this new year in our life unencumbered with greater freedom, with greater ability to face the new year with open hearts and minds,” Blum said.

“This is a powerful way of saying, ‘I’m done with that. I’m freeing up my energy. I’m not going to

carry that forward from here.’”

Greater freedom of heart and mind opens people, and they are invited to write a letter to God, the creator or the universe about what they hope to experience in the new year, such as more joy, abundance, prosperity or peace, perhaps more fellowship, a loving relationship or time with family and friends.

The letters are sealed in self-addressed envelopes, and church leaders mail them to congregants midyear to remind them of their new-year intentions and give them an opportunity to assess their progress.

Blum said the ritual can be useful amid a culture whose new-year focus tends toward parties and television and watching a ball drop. Taking a moment to pause and think about the coming year can be clarifying and empowering.

“I think the New Year’s holiday is a little spiritually bankrupt,” she said. “This is a way of bringing some meaning to it.”  
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