

TRANSITION

Special Edition
June 2014

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation
www.ouuc.org

EMILY MELCHER TO GUIDE TWO YEAR INTERIM PROCESS

Working intentionally

to our future with a clearer sense of who we are, building on our strengths and addressing our challenges,



ARTHUR RETIRES

The minister may bring gifts and understandings to the congregation that will hopefully benefit it and help it to grow and develop in many ways, but ultimately it's the congregation that matters.

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A move to the future faithfully, intentionally, and thoughtfully.

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Photos are by Tim Ransom; thoughts are from members and friends of OUUC.

This is one of a series of publications on a topic of interest and action among the members and friends of the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation. All publications are available on the web at www.ouuc.org. Feedback and theme or topic suggestions for future publications are welcome. Submit to publications@ouuc.org. Linda Crabtree, Publisher.

Who is Emily Melcher?



BY EMILY MELCHER

The Reverend Emily Melcher is a Unitarian Universalist minister who specializes in ministry with and to congregations in transition between settled ministers. Emily entered the ministry in mid-life, drawn by a calling to nurture, sustain and challenge individuals and congregations in their spiritual journeys.

Emily was born and raised in southern California, the second of five daughters. Her family lived one block from the Episcopal Church they attended. As a child, she loved reading, writing, singing, theater and performing in the local youth circus.

Emily went to Sweden as a high school exchange student and that experience had a tremendous impact on her. Emily earned a B.A. in Scandinavian Languages and Literature from UCLA (1983), then returned to Sweden where she lived for two and a half years teaching English and working as an entertainer, singer and performer of circus acts.

After rigorous effort by our Interim Minister Search Team and by Emily herself, we have committed together with enthusiasm to a two-year interim ministry starting August 1st.

In 1985 Emily married her longtime Swedish friend, Anders Hörnblad, and they returned to the U.S. together. She earned an M.A. in Scandinavian Literature from the University of Wisconsin—Madison (1989) with a specialization in the work of contemporary Swedish novelist Marianne Fredriksson.

Upon completion of her M.A., Emily worked as a visual artist in handmade paper and translated, performed, and recorded the songs of Sweden's best-known and most-beloved troubadour, Evert Taube. In the mid-1990s she began writing her own songs, eventually self-producing three additional CDs.

Emily first encountered Unitarian Universalism in the late 1980s at the First Unitarian Society of Madison, WI which is one of our largest congregations. She realized immediately not only that she had found her spiritual home, but

Emily earned a Master of Divinity with a specialization in Worship and the Arts (2009) at Andover Newton Theological School. She served a two-year, part-time internship with the vibrant, mid-size First Parish in Bedford, MA. She completed two units of hospital chaplaincy training at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

She then served as interim minister with the Champlain Valley UU Society in Middlebury, VT, a newer congregation going through not only a ministerial transition but transitions in governance, size and ministry structure, and new financial challenges in the wake of an ambitious building project. She is coming to the end of a two-year interim ministry with the Unitarian Society of New Haven, CT.

Emily is delighted to have found in interim ministry a vocation that utilizes all her gifts and skills and calls her to continued growth and new horizons. Her spouse, Anders, works from a home office as an engineer which

Emily has her Masters of Divinity from Andover Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, MA. She was ordained in 2010. She is also a singer, songwriter and recording artist. Her background includes music, circus and theater. www.emilymelcher.com

also that she felt the stirring of a call to ministry. She remained at First Unitarian Society as an active lay leader for five years testing her interest and her calling to ministry.

makes it possible for him to move with her for each new interim position.

Emily is thrilled to embark upon a two year interim ministry with OUUC and believes it will be a great fit. ♦

Transition

A conversation with Emily

BY DAVID VERBON

First, what would you like to say to the congregation as you take on the assignment as OUUC Interim Minister?

You will soon be saying good-bye to a minister. In doing so, you will also be saying goodbye to the particular congregation you were when that minister shared the ministry with you. These changes necessarily entail losses that must be grieved; they also create an opening for new and exciting things to emerge for the congregation as a whole and for its members.

As your interim minister, I will help you make the most of your transition by reflecting with you on your past, making room for all your feelings, and helping you discover who you are called to be as a congregation in this time and place, in these particular circumstances. Sometimes this means guiding you, sometimes walking with you into uncharted territory challenging you to try new things in order to discover who you are today. Always it means encouraging you to listen attentively to what calls to your hearts, what beckons you into deeper relationship with yourselves, one another, the wider community and the sources that nourish, sustain and challenge you. Ultimately, it means accompanying you faithfully, thoughtfully and intentionally as you move into your future with a new settled minister.

It's not likely to be a tidy, linear process because it's spiritual work. Together we will embrace the discomfort of the transitions, and as you come to trust their potential, you will find yourselves learning more about who you are as individuals and as a community, and



Emily with her stuffed elephant on his Standing On The Side Of Love Skateboard.

listening for what calls you into being today.

Ministering transitions is practical work as well. Part of what we'll be doing is considering the systems and structures of the congregation from governance to staffing needs to financial management and stewardship in order to discover what will best enable you to fulfill the mission of the congregation going forward.

We have two exciting years ahead of us. I look forward to being with you.

Why did you find your spiritual home with Unitarian Universalism?

I was raised Episcopalian and left the church as a young adult. In my late 30's, I was struggling with depression and felt a hunger for religious community and especially for

the ritual of worship and all it evokes. In Unitarian Universalism, I found a faith tradition that could nourish me spiritually and intellectually and challenge me to deepen my engagement with the world. In Unitarian Universalist ministry, four intertwining threads of my life come together into an organic whole: a deeply spiritual nature, a drive to live creatively, a commitment to grow in and through my experiences and to help others grow in and through theirs, and the need to be of service in the world.

What was it about interim ministry that made it your calling?

As an interim minister, my calling, and my joy is ministering with and to congregations in transition (and the people who comprise them!) as

they grieve their losses, discover themselves anew, and ultimately find joy in anticipating the future. I have deep, personal experience of this psychological and spiritual process, and love supporting it in others. Interim ministry is, for me, a spiritual discipline that allows me to enter congregations at pivotal moments in their existence, accompany them in this fascinating and challenging process, and then move on, leaving them free to open their hearts to their new future with their next settled minister while I begin the cycle anew with another congregation.

You have a very strong musical background. Do you know that the OUUC is acclaimed locally for its music program? Do you feel you will make a contribution in that area? Would you consider singing your songs at our services?

Absolutely! Singing and songwriting have been essential to my spiritual journey, and you will find in my songs much that speaks to the transitional times in life. One of my CDs, "Breathe Me Open," is a collection of songs about blossoming, living, loving, and saying good-bye, and the strength and courage to do it all again and again — in other words, it's about the kind of internal work members of the congregation will be doing during this interim period. I look forward to sharing that with you in a variety of ways which I'll work out in collaboration with your music director.

Which community outreach programs have you personally participated in through Unitarian Universalism? Have you worked with programs to help the homeless?

As an interim minister, my primary focus must be the developmental work of the congregations I serve. My work for justice is thus not so much participating in programs as it is articulating the connection between faith and justice, supporting congregations in living their faith in the world, and exploring the ways

we are changed, individually and as congregations, by our work to change the world. In past ministries, this has meant supporting congregations' commitments to immigration rights, urban ministries and ending homelessness.

If an interim ministry is a bridge between one permanent minister to another, what are the critical components of an interim ministry for a successful transition to occur?

If you will look at this interim ministry not as a bridge between settled ministers, but as an opportunity to jump into the river to see where it takes you, you'll be successful! During an interim period a congregation renews itself and prepares itself for the future by reflecting on its past and grieving its losses, exploring its identity (including strengths and challenges), discerning its calling as a congregation in the particular time, place, and circumstances in which it finds itself, and working on anything that stands in the way of fulfilling that calling. The work is both practical and spiritual, requiring and developing both skills and faith. A congregation that has faithfully engaged this process will be well-prepared to find a good match in its next settled minister.

What attracted you to apply for the interim ministry at OUUC?

I was mightily impressed when I saw the special edition on "Homelessness" a few months ago both for the depth and quality of the publication and for what it revealed about OUUC's commitment to ending homelessness.

OUUC next came to my awareness when I attended the UU Interim Ministry Guild's seminar in April where the UUA's Director of Transitions, Keith Kron; your District Executive, Janine Larsen; and my colleague and OUUC member Linda Hart gave glowing reports about what a wonderful, healthy congregation you are!

I'm excited by the potential of a wonderful interim ministry together with you!

Transition

Are you familiar with the Puget Sound region or Olympia in particular?

My mom and step-dad lived in Port Townsend, Bothell and then Seattle for many years, and I've loved my visits to the area. There's another connection in that I am a specialist in the music of Swedish troubadour Evert Taube and have given a few concerts of my translations of his songs for Scandinavian-American organizations in the area. I don't recall having been in Olympia before, however. My spouse, Anders Hörnblad (yes, he's Swedish), and I are very much looking forward to getting to know Olympia and the Puget Sound region over the next two years.

At the end of your tenure at OUUC, what do you believe the congregation will conclude about your interim ministry here?

If my past interim ministries are an indication of things to come, I think the congregation will conclude that, although you didn't know you needed it at the outset, the intentional work of the interim time gave you a clearer sense of who you are, helped you to build on your strengths and address your challenges, and ultimately poised you well for the future. You'll have a variety of opinions about me, of course, but many will say that I was exactly what you needed, and that, even though it's hard to see me go, I have helped you to open your minds and hearts to whatever's next for you.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I'm thrilled to be embarking on this journey with you and look forward to meeting you, getting to know you, and ministering with and to you these next two years! ♦

A view from the other side



BY THE REV. LINDA HART

As I finish serving as interim minister at the Evergreen UU Fellowship in Marysville, WA, I am excited to be nearby as OUUC begins the process of welcoming its interim minister. I'm especially happy to share a few things I've learned from being on the other side, as it were, and note for you a few things I've learned about this process.

Most importantly, these two years of interim ministry will be about change. Years ago I found a quip about change that has stayed with me. ‘No one likes change except a wet baby,’ the source opined. Having known a whole range of small diapered people, I can say with confidence that not all of them like change either. There’s a comfort in the familiar even if it is sometimes unpleasant. The start of an interim

ministry signals a time of significant change in the life of a congregation, and while it is often a time of high anxiety, it is also a time of growth and energy.

As you prepare for meeting the Reverend Emily Melcher (the interim minister who will companion you through this change from Arthur to your next settled minister), I want to encourage you to take full advantage of the special gifts that she brings.

She brings fresh eyes.

One of the greatest gifts of an interim minister is that she will bring new insight to the congregation. Over time, every group develops particular ways of operating. They become accustomed to certain processes even when they aren’t the most efficient or logical. In fact, in our congregations we often become so accustomed to them that we cannot even see what we’re doing.

A key task of an interim minister is to hold up a mirror to the

An interim minister will bring new insight to the congregation. It is a time for discovery and exploration, a time for learning and creating.

congregation so that they can see more clearly how they operate, what they do and even who they are. I trust that many of the scenes that OUUC members will view in the mirror will be cause for pride and well deserved congratulations. But look well, too, for that which needs overhaul or significant tweaking. Look through her eyes for the fresh view of the congregation.

She brings new ideas.

Each minister has a kit bag of tricks and tools that they’ve collected over the years. Some of my favorites are the stories I tell to illustrate certain ideas and processes. Others involve techniques for engaging participation or running meetings. Because each minister has her and his own perspectives, the kit bag we each bring will have different items. Be ready for some new ideas and suggestions. Be ready to experiment with her, to engage in some playful explorations.

She brings new perspective.

It’s an old saw that ministers only have one sermon, but find (you hope) lots of different angles to preach it. While I, too, will miss Arthur’s delightful humor and the insights he has offered week after week, year after year, I am looking forward to having my heart opened in different ways, to having my understanding of life, love, religion, justice, truth expanded in new ways. Interim ministers simply by

preaching their own truth help congregations grow spiritually.

The interim period will not be holding everything in place until the next settled minister is called and arrives. It is a time for discovery and exploration, a time for learning and creating. Make good use of it. And most especially, enjoy it. ♦

The stages of transition

BY MARTHA NICOLOFF

William Bridges built his career helping people to understand and deal with the nature of transition and change, a career that grew out of his own struggles when he chose to leave his job as a professor of literature and move to an intentional community. There he found himself wrestling with depression, unhappiness, and confusion, in spite of the fact that he chose to make the very change that was causing him so much turmoil.

Out of that turmoil came a theory that distinguished change from transition, and that posited several predictable stages to the transition process. His first book, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, was followed by several others, including *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*, written following the death of his wife.

According to Bridges, change is a situational shift. Getting a new boss, remodeling your house, retirement, or losing a loved one are all examples of change. Bridges asserts that, in order for us to come to terms with change, we need to make a transition. Transition, in Bridges' system is “*the process of letting go of the way things used to be and then taking hold of the way they subsequently become. In between the letting go and the taking hold again, there is a chaotic but potentially creative ‘neutral zone’ when things aren’t the old way, but aren’t really a new way yet either. This three-phase process – ending, neutral zone, beginning again – is transition.*” Transition

happens internally, as we make the emotional, intellectual, and psychological shift to understand, accept, and embrace the external change that has occurred.

What might happen during each of these stages? In the initial stage, ending and letting go, we might experience anger, sadness, fear, and/or a sense of loss. As we move into the ‘neutral zone,’ we may experience confusion and anxiety, and may worry about our personal and organizational progress in coming to terms with how to move forward. It may feel like a time of turmoil, with a lack of direction and understanding.

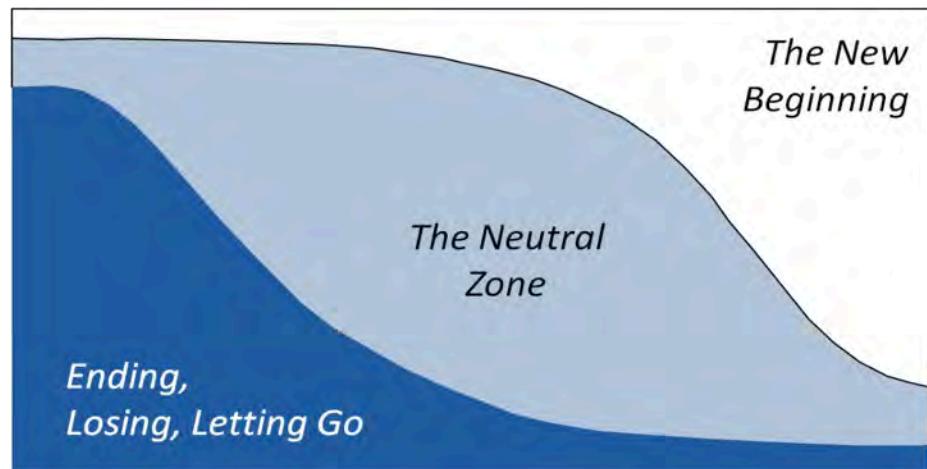
As we reach the time of beginning again, hopefully we will feel renewed energy and commitment. But we may also feel concerned and anxious about the risks of making a new beginning. While change can happen quickly, transition usually occurs more slowly. We may resist transition because it takes a lot longer than change, and it can be uncomfortable to be in limbo for that period of time. Each of us will go through transition at our own pace.

As our own Board has noted, the UUA recognizes the need for a

planned period of transition in the circumstances that OUUC is now facing with Arthur’s departure. In such circumstances, the UUA recommends that the congregation seek an interim minister, as we have done, to guide and assist the congregation through the period of transition.

Recognizing the ‘neutral zone’, the *Transitional Ministry Handbook* notes, “*The interim period following the end of one relationship and preceding the beginning of another offers [a rare] opportunity, providing the breathing space during which a congregation can review its goals, assess its programs, consider the quality of its life in common, and ‘tune up’ for a new era. The purpose of interim ministry is to enable a congregation to call a successor minister based not reflexively but on the basis of its own independent identity, strength, and direction.*”

As we embark on this transition, we can find comfort throughout its ups and downs in understanding the process and accepting that the journey through transition will be one of discovery, transformation, and hopefully excitement at the prospects that lie ahead. ♦



A two year journey of renewal

BY CURTIS TANNER

This past January Reverend Arthur Vaeni announced to our congregation his plans to retire from settled ministry in June. Arthur and his wife, Sally, will be leaving us returning to their beloved home and family in New England.

In his letter to the Congregation, Arthur acknowledged “going through transitions such as this can be difficult for some. My hope is that we will move through this experience with the same thoughtfulness and depth of caring that has become a hallmark of this congregation. Let us also remember the many accomplishments we have worked to achieve, and the many times we have laughed and loved life together. In the days and weeks to come may we seek to bring perspective to our relationship so that when I depart, though there may be sadness in our hearts, we will be prepared to continue wholeheartedly on our separate journeys.”

OUUC has an opportunity, indeed a responsibility, to carry forward with our Mission, especially with Arthur’s departure. By calling a transitional minister to serve our congregation, we also have an amazing opportunity to reflect on our liberal religious community and embark on the next phase of our journey together with great intention. As my mother, the Reverend Nancy TannerThies, suggests, this is our “prime time for renewal.”

Rev. TannerThies has many years of experience as an Interim or transitional minister in her Protestant faith tradition. Through

my relationship with her, I’ve come to have great appreciation for the critical role a transitional minister serves in the life of a congregation processing the departure of a settled or parish minister. A congregation that embraces this opportunity, served by an effective transitional minister, can undergo a transformative process that leads them to readiness for new leadership, and more importantly, a strong and healthy future.

Shortly after Arthur’s announcement, the OUUC Board met with Pacific Northwest UUA Executive Janine Larsen to discuss the transition process. Janine walked us through the basics, and helped us understand what our governing body needed to do to help facilitate an effective transition. Janine assured

Hard work will yield an important understanding: This is who WE are no matter who serves as minister.

us that our congregation enjoyed an excellent reputation, that the UUA transition process was time-tested and almost always highly successful, and that she was confident we would attract an excellent transitional minister.

The Board agreed to follow the transition process recommended by the UUA for congregations such as ours that have enjoyed a long and close relationship with settled ministers. These guidelines include quickly hiring a transitional minister to serve our congregation for a two-year period of grieving, healing, evaluation and planning for the

future. UUA guidelines, including the Transitional Ministry Handbook, can be found on the UUA Transitions website [here](#). From the handbook, we have learned that:

Interim ministers are recognized for their ability to assist congregations in coming to terms with their past and claiming their new identity as they ready themselves for a stimulating relationship with a new settled minister. In order to guarantee their ability to speak the truth “without fear or favor,” interim ministers agree not to serve beyond two years in any congregation, and not to be a candidate for the called position until they have been absent from the congregation for at least three years.

To enable congregations to heal and to enrich their sense of religious community during this transitional period, the specially trained interim minister seeks to:

- Bring the reassurance that a seasoned professional is working with the congregation. Momentum will not be lost.*
- Deal with “termination emotions” surrounding the former minister who was at the center of a web of relationships now tender, often torn. Unless these emotions are discharged, they will wait to be dumped onto the following settled minister.*
- Help the congregation review its operations and clarify its goals.*
- Model a different but still successful style of ministry, thus showing the congregation that more than one ministerial style can be effective.*

The purpose of interim ministry is to a congregation to call successor minister based not reflexively but on the basis of its own independent

Transition

identity, strength, and direction—in sum, based on its health.

It is difficult to overstate the opportunities provided to a congregation during an interim period. Rarely in the life of any human institution—congregation, business, nation, or household—is there such a chance to begin anew. The interim period following the end of one relationship and preceding the beginning of another offers such an opportunity providing the breathing space during which a congregation can review its goals, assess its programs, consider the quality of its life in common, and “tune up” for a new era.

The one- to two-year period it usually takes for a congregation to grow into and own its identity, independent of both positive and negative feelings about the ministry that has come to an end can be exciting, even transformative, when devoted to self-examination and institutional renewal. A palate cleanser, one might say.

Knowing the strengths of our amazing congregation as I do, aware of the talents and dedication of our staff and possessing great faith in the experience and care that our lay leaders have for OUUC, I am exuberant about the future of our beloved community. I know that we

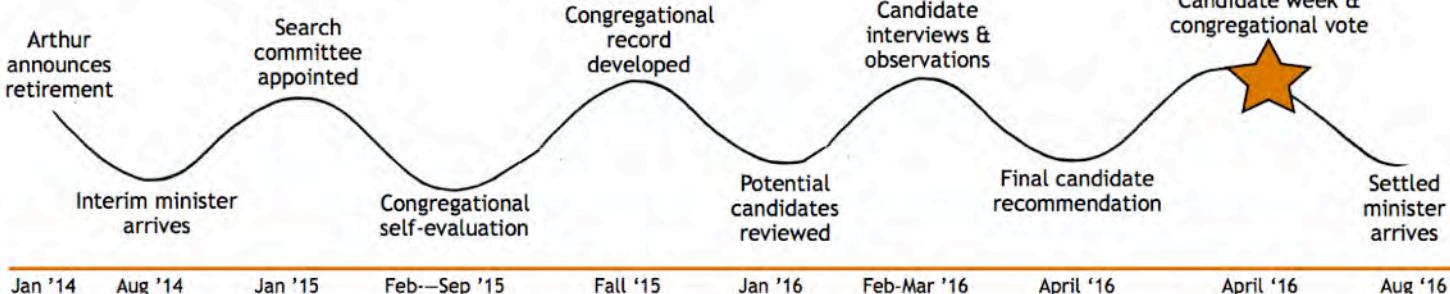
have been given a great gift – prime time for renewal. Over the coming years, we have an incredible opportunity to reflect on our history, on who we are and how we got here. We will celebrate our many accomplishments, and dream of what more we will do together. We will reflect on the difficult experiences that we have had. We will know that these differences could have torn us apart, and instead we have survived as one congregation and emerged with new appreciation for our resilience. And most of all, with Arthur’s departure we will move beyond the identity that he has given our congregation, drafting our new shared identity.

Hard work will yield an important understanding: *This is who We are, no matter who serves as Minister.* With that clarity of identity, we will then be well prepared to find someone who can support our vision of that identity. And together, we move forward to realize an even greater potential. Our mission continues to become transformative reality as our work manifests greater love in the world.

That is the opportunity I see and I believe that your Board shares that sense of optimism. We also understand that realizing this opportunity will not be easy. It will

require dedication and continued hard work. Introspection is tough stuff, particularly when it is honest. Not everything that lies in my heart and mind is positive or comes from a place of love. We are, as Arthur has reminded us, human. Some may find the pain of Arthur’s departure too much to bear and may need to leave or step back. We must honor those individuals and help heal their pain as we are able. New leaders will emerge as needs arise. We must work together to identify, nurture, and trust new leaders with new ideas, energy, and vision.

So as we wish Arthur and Sally a fond farewell, let us then turn our efforts towards defining the journey of OUUC that begins at that place where “two roads diverged in a yellow wood” (Robert Frost). Let us welcome Reverend Emily Melcher and place our faith in her ability to facilitate a process of renewal and transition. Our process of transition has already begun. Let us covenant to make this part of our journey together truly enlightening. In doing so, we will share in building a new future for our beloved community. There is much need in the world for the Unitarian Universalist message of love and a place for all of us to help realize the mission of OUUC. ♦



Estimated process and timeline from minister retirement to a congregational vote and, finally, the arrival of a settled minister.

Finding a settled minister

BY MARY ANNE TRAUSE

We of OUUC are about to begin an amazing two-year journey to find and call our next settled minister. We as a congregation of individuals with different needs, aspirations, understandings, challenges, sensitivities, strengths and weaknesses need to come together to ultimately agree on one person to call to OUUC. According to the *Unitarian Universalist Association Settlement Handbook*, “*No choice is more important to the future of a Unitarian Universalist congregation than its call of a minister.*

A thorough, uncorrupted, and mutually respectful search process is the essential first step in the hoped-for partnership of lay and ordained leaders. For both minister and congregation, the process is strenuous, exciting, and informative. It can also be frustrating and discouraging. But generations of lay leaders and ministers testify that such a process, followed well, richly repays the time and effort it requires.”

The structured approach developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association, or UUA, for searching for new settled ministers involves a number of steps which are facilitated by the OUUC Board: hiring an interim minister; appointing a search committee; self-evaluation by the congregation with the goal of developing a Congregational Record which, once accepted will be posted on the UUA website for applicants to read; reviewing potential candidates; interviewing pre-candidates, and finally deciding on one candidate who will be called by the congregation.

The final candidate proposed by the search committee will be brought to OUUC for a week of

activities to introduce him or her to Olympia and to the congregation. Toward the end of that week the members of OUUC will have a meeting to discuss and vote on calling that candidate to be our settled minister.

The hope and purpose of the structured search is that the prior work has been done so well that the vote is overwhelmingly to call the candidate. There is also much “behind the scenes” work done such as developing a budget for the search process and a compensation package for the new minister, creating materials to share with UUA and the prospective ministers, making arrangements for visits by the pre-candidates and final candidate. Members of the national and district UUA transition staffs work with both congregations and ministers throughout this process. The actual time each step takes will depend on how our particular process evolves.

The UUA strongly recommends that congregations which lose a settled minister through retirement, resignation, or death, spend two years with a transitional minister before hiring a permanent or settled minister. It has guidelines for a process of self-examination for both ministers and congregations involved in this search. The interim minister helps with this process. The key is not getting the “best” minister according to particular credentials or experiences but the best “fit” for our congregation.

Some report that the goal of the search is to call a minister who complements what the congregation is becoming rather than what it was. Finding this best fit requires both the congregation and the prospective settled minister to

honestly evaluate and present their preferences, wishes, strengths, weaknesses and future goals, so they can deeply experience the calling, once made and accepted, as the right choice for both.

Our congregation is likely to conduct our congregational self-evaluation through surveys, personal reflection, sharing of our views and listening to others in small groups, focus groups and/or potlucks. These activities are among those used by other congregations. Among other things, we may want to be able to answer questions like these posed by the UUA: How would you describe this congregation to its prospective minister? How would you describe it to prospective members? How would you describe it to a close, non-member friend?

Looking back, after our settled minister has been with us a year, what will be our measures of success? What achievements will make us say you’re glad the minister is among us? We will want to be able to describe who we are as a congregation, what OUUC means to us, what challenges it faces, in what direction we want it to move and how we want it to fit into our lives. We will want to find a settled minister who can respond to our identity and vision.

The UUA reports that when a transitional minister works with a congregation for two years, 90% of congregations are successful in finding a minister who is a good fit for that particular congregation. When only one year is devoted to the process, the congregation has a 55% chance of being successful in selecting a new minister.

Once we have welcomed Emily, our interim minister, and she is beginning to feel at home, may our incredible journey begin! ♦

Change happens but is not easy

BY SARA LEWIS

The teachers reading this are probably familiar with this scenario: you are out in your town doing something perfectly ordinary (buying groceries or getting the oil changed in your car) and run into one of your young students who is surprised and says something like: "What are you doing here?" or "Why aren't you at school?" In the student's mind, you belong in their classroom. They do not imagine you having a life outside of that environment.

As a religious educator, I experience this as well. Children will be surprised when I am seen outside of church — "Why aren't you at church?" It's the same for ministers as well, and most of our children (and maybe some of you adults too) have a hard time imagining what Arthur's life outside of church looks like. Does he buy groceries? Go to the post office? Or does he just sort of go into ministerial power-saving mode and meditate all week between Sundays?

But of course, real people — even teachers and ministers are real people — don't stay in the imaginary boxes that we build for them in our minds. They stubbornly show up in places you don't expect them or proceed to move on and have a life outside of the church.

And real people grow and change and move as well, somehow not staying just where we have expected them to be. Transitions are a normal part of life and cannot be avoided. Each year we will meet new friends, teachers, and even ministers. And we will also have to say goodbye to friends, teachers, and ministers.

Remember, though, that just because something is normal doesn't mean it is easy. Depending on their age and how long you have been attending the congregation, some of your children may have never known another minister in their entire lives.

I still remember when the first UU minister I had ever known retired when I was a teen, and I just wasn't sure how the church could possibly ever be my faith home again. Then I showed up to "check out" the new minister and it turned out to be okay, but for a while I felt abandoned in that transition.

Ideas to help your kids in the transition:

- Make sure you have talked to them about Arthur's departure. The kids are often not aware of the conversation that is going on in the adult part of the congregation.
- Ask the kids if they have any questions, and absolutely let them know that they can bring those questions to me or to Arthur.



- Encourage them to write a goodbye note to Arthur. This is their chance to tell him goodbye, or to tell him what his ministry here has meant to them.
- Bring them to RE classes in June so they can participate in group projects for Arthur's departure party on June 21st.
- Bring them to the party on June 21st. It will be multigenerational and we will have childcare and children's activities during the "boring" parts.
- If a letter or note doesn't appeal to your child, they could also do a thank you gift — a picture, a gift card, any small thank you (think similar scale to the teacher gifts you do at the end of the school year).
- For very young children, the concept of change and goodbye can be introduced with a book like *Farfallina and Marcel* by Holly Keller.

Change and transition are inevitable in life. But that doesn't make them easy. For those amongst us — often our youngest ones — who have had the least practice with transitions, we should extend extra grace and care. And remind them that in the end, new friends arrive in our lives,

new teachers turn out to be pretty nice, and new ministers can bring a different, but still lovely, faith development into our congregation. ♦

A conversation with Arthur



BY HELEN HENRY

Arthur Vaeni was born April 8, 1950 in Concord NH. In his earliest years he attended an Adventist Church with grandparents, then a Baptist Church with his parents, and later a Catholic high school where his religious yearnings led him to voluntarily participate in Mass and religion classes. He was a cadet at West Point from 1968-1972. Following graduation he married Gail, the woman he had been dating since early high school.

Arthur served his five years of active duty primarily in Germany and Oklahoma. Upon leaving the Army, Arthur attended Indiana University

Telecommunications. This was followed by four years in the corporate world of communications. During these years his two children, Annemarie and Brian, were born. Arthur attended Harvard Divinity School, graduating in 1987. In 1988 he and Gail divorced. Arthur served as minister at Starr King UU Fellowship in Plymouth, NH during 1987-2001. Although Arthur and Sally Gove both grew up in Concord, they did not become acquainted until 1990. They married in 1993.

Following his ministry with Starr King UU Fellowship, Arthur left for the Pacific Northwest and ministry at the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation. In August, Arthur will officiate at his daughter's wedding. His son will become a father in September. Fall will bring many changes to the Gove-Vaeni family as

he begins his interim ministry in Bangor, Maine.

On a rainy afternoon in May, Arthur and I sat down in his office which was filled with books and, of course, his bike.

Being a West Point graduate and being a Unitarian minister don't seem to go hand in hand. Can you talk about how those paths are connected?

I don't think it's that unusual for folks to realize from the time they're eighteen and making their life choices to when they're a bit older, that they need to be on a different path from that which they originally set out. After I left West Point and fulfilled my five-year obligation, I knew that making a career in the military wouldn't suit me given my evolving understanding of myself and of life. Through my twenties I struggled with and against my earlier understanding of God.

In time I determined that if I was to discern meaning in life, it wouldn't come from the God I no longer believed in. Rather, I would need to create it. So, I decided to study telecommunications because our ability to communicate well has a great impact on society's welfare. Upon completing my studies, I returned to my hometown in New Hampshire. Shortly after turning thirty, which I subsequently learned in a developmental psychology class in seminary can be a religiously significant age for certain people, I found myself wanting to be in church. Upon finding the Unitarian church in my hometown, I finally understood that one could be religious in different ways than I had known as a

child. It was at that point that I remembered I had felt a call to the ministry earlier but had suppressed it as I believed I couldn't engage in Christian ministry with integrity. When I realized that a church existed in which I could believe what I felt to be true rather than what I felt I had to believe, I was able to respond to that call.

You've encouraged others to look for a daily spiritual practice like meditation. Can you tell me about your introduction to meditation.

After I was ordained in 1987 and I began working as a minister, my theology was primarily humanistic, and it was still evolving. I thought here I am ministering to a religious community and working with people on how we deepen our experience of life. So wouldn't it make sense for me to do something on a regular basis that would help deepen my own experience of life? I found that a Buddhist meditation practice offered a way for me to deepen my experience and ground my internal being. I went to the Insight Meditation Society where the primary practice is Mindfulness Meditation, and that just resonated with me. It was also there that I learned the Loving Kindness Meditation.

I attended more retreats and began a daily meditation practice and have found it to be very helpful in just deepening my experience of being alive and what it means to be human. I'm a good example of one who doesn't meditate particularly well yet I still find it to be effective. I often sit and my mind goes wandering. From my experience, I think the intention of meditation is almost as important as the meditating itself. When people say "I can't meditate," I say "That's baloney. You think you can't meditate because your mind wanders. Based on my experience, if you're just willing to sit and at least try, it still is helpful."

A minister wears many hats: writer, speaker, counselor, leader, political activist. Can you speak to how you find comfort and balance with so many roles?

Meditation is an important part of it. It helps with the discipline of being more aware during the day, being more aware as you're going about your everyday business. Even though my mind may wander during meditation, it helps me to be more mindful as I'm engaging in counseling or as I'm getting ready to do some political action that may be difficult. It's helpful just being able to focus, having that in reserve, taking a breath and being present. My morning routine of meditation and light exercise is very important to me. It helps to ground me for the day.

Many of us are grieving your departure similar to a death since we know there will be no further contact with you after you leave. Can you share what that is like for you personally?

It's very hard. Most of the time, I'm busy preparing to leave, but when I settle down and think about it like now and you ask me the question, (*long pause while Arthur regains his voice*), it's incredibly sad. I will miss this congregation deeply.

What would you tell people like me who have only known you as the minister at Olympia UU and are nervous or unsure about this coming transition?

Ministers are clearly important to the well-being of congregations. I hope they are (*laughing*), having dedicated my life to being a minister. Having said that, it is ultimately the congregation that's important. The minister may bring gifts and understandings to a congregation that will hopefully benefit it and help it to grow and develop in many ways, but ultimately it's the congregation that matters.

Life in the congregation is about the congregation and not primarily about the minister. It is about the relationships within the congregation and the relationship of the congregation as a whole. One can grieve and miss the New Yorker cartoons and all of that, and that's good and appropriate, but ultimately it is about life here in the

Transition

congregation, not about this particular person who did these things well and these things not so well. It's about the congregation.

What advice would you give to the interim minister?

This is fundamentally a healthy congregation. It does many things wonderfully and other things need work. I wish you well with helping them with the things that need to be worked on.

To the long term minister, the new called minister, I would say, "If you just love this congregation you'll be blown away by the response you get in so many aspects of your ministry."

Is there anything that you'd like to say? Just to wrap this up and get the last word.

(*Arthur smiles...*) Oh yes, the last word. Thank you for the last word. It has been a privilege, such a privilege to be minister at this congregation. In the groups recently convened by the Committee on Ministry to reflect with me on the past thirteen years, a number of people spoke about the impact that my ministry, either directly or indirectly through the congregation's ministry, has had on their lives. It's very gratifying and I so appreciate hearing that.

On the other hand, it has been such a gift to me to serve here. I'm amazed by the privilege of ministry. Simply because I'm a minister, people invite me into their lives and share very intimate life experiences, describing what gives their lives meaning or sharing their deep sorrows. Being present for that is such an incredible privilege. I am so grateful to be in a line of work where I get to be in deep relationship with people. So I am deeply appreciative to this congregation for providing that opportunity, and I am appreciative of the people I've been in relationship with. ♦

The many faces & facets of Arthur

Angie Trzepkowski

I enjoy Arthur's way of taking a complicated, often potentially divisive topic, and creating a sermon that educates and inspires me to look more closely at my beliefs. He cleverly walks a fine line between both sides, opening up windows of insight along the way. I find myself thinking of the sermon long after service has ended.

Ann Yeo

I would not be the same person today without Art Vaeni's ministerial encouragement and guidance during his 13 years at OUUC. I cannot say enough about his positive influence, so I will stop there! Thank you, Art, for all that you gave to me, to our congregation, and to our larger community. Know that you will remain in our hearts.



Howard Rosenfeld

Art will always hold a special place in my heart. When my daughter had an unplanned and frightening hospital admission in Tacoma, we received a spontaneous visit from Art to check on how we were all doing. I can't remember how he heard about our daughter's admission or how he found us but was so happy to see him walk into our hospital room. For that, Art, I will always be grateful.

Susan Lawson

Finding the UU's and Arthur was for me like finding water in the desert. He spoke to a place in my soul that was empty and made it whole again. No words can convey my gratitude for his gift.

Ginny Taylor

One of the many things I appreciate about Arthur is his extraordinary listening skills. Whether I'm talking with him in his office, in the hallway, in the parking lot, or in the Commons after a service, I feel I always have his complete attention. He is really listening to what I have to say. That is a rare talent, and one that means a lot to me.

Otto Bulls

I feel most fortunate and lucky to have experienced Arthur as our minister. He has had a profound affect on my life and over the years, and I wish him well.





Joan Forst

Arthur Vaeni is the epitome of "Smooth Operator" sung by Sade.

Dorothy Gist

"You should have heard Arthur's talk this week," was a comment I'd heard from friends many times before I ever attended OUUC. I finally became so curious I decided to attend services one Sunday a few years ago. I planned to go just once but I kept coming back. Sometimes I laughed; a few times I clapped; many times I shed a tear and always my heart was opened. I began a meditation practice after attending his class. Every time I saw his smile, I felt welcomed. Every time I spoke with him, I felt heard. I will miss Arthur.

Samantha Ritchie

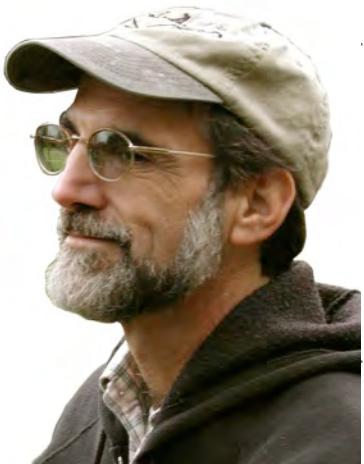
I love and respect Art Vaeni for many reasons, but mostly because he works hard to live his values. In the Tao Te Ching, verse 27, as translated by Stephen Mitchell, there is this description: "Thus the Master is available to all people and doesn't reject anyone. He is ready to use all situations and doesn't waste anything. This is called embodying the light." Art embodies the light, and he has tried to teach us how to do that, too. For that, I am very, very grateful.

Terrence Zander

I came to visit UU about eight years ago after a long and protracted life of suffering from childhood trauma, depression, anxiety and panic attacks. I sat with Arthur in his office and gave him a short synopsis of forty plus years of searching. He listened intently and then solemnly said, "Being happy isn't a choice for you. You need to BE happy!" Within a couple months I gave a 'This I Believe' presentation on being happy, a dramatic turning point in my life. Thank you, Arthur.

Caroline True

Arthur is capable of being so in the moment. It creates an atmosphere of people in the church and community of being a part, "included" as it were, of a greater whole.



Billie and Robin Williams



In a New Yorker-type cartoon a helmeted fellow stands beside his bike and offers another bike and helmet to a startled-looking woman as he says, "Sure you can, you'll love it! It's only 3,000 miles but we'll take it a day at a time." Arthur and Sally heading east? Perhaps, but it's really Arthur telling us, "Sure you can"... do what seems impossible: successfully carry through a huge building expansion project, reorganize OUUC's system of governance, help create Camp Quixote and Quixote Village, support partner churches in Louisiana and Transylvania financially and with hands-on labor, work directly with community groups to address specific social justice issues, weather an agonizing rift in the congregation that could have destroyed us, but didn't. Sure, "we" did all that and more, but only with leadership so skillful and sensitive that we often didn't notice.

"Can-do" spirit is a powerful legacy for 13 years of ministry, but Arthur leaves us with something even more meaningful and deeply challenging: messages repeated over and over in sermons, poems, stories, in conversations where, with endless patience, he listened to our personal concerns. Be present and pay attention. Love life and each other. Take care of the earth. Open the windows of your mind to greater truth and meaning. Connect with your higher self. Now that's a truly powerful legacy! It's been a great ride, Arthur. Thank you! ♦



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