

“Shared Ministry”

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Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

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Exactly one year ago this weekend, I made my first visit to OUUC. It was part of your minister search process on what is called a pre-candidating weekend. I met your Search Team in person for the first time, visited Olympia and OUUC, and led worship in a neutral pulpit nearby so the Search Team could see me in action, so to speak. Early on Friday morning, Jack Jackson let me into the building to see the space...and it was filled with books! Books everywhere! Jack led me on a quick tour before the BB&B volunteers showed up for the day. Seeing this commitment to building community and service in the wider community were things that drew me to this congregation.

The ministerial search packet described the minister that you were looking for as the executive and head of staff and a spiritual leader, someone who honors the past and looks to the future, who is engaged in positive social justice, is warm, caring, open, inspirational and transformational. You wanted someone who could offer engaging worship, model intellect and discipline, and inspire social engagement. No pressure!

During my candidating week last April, Linda Crabtree thoughtfully gave me this booklet, which outlines the history of the ministers who have served OUUC over the years. This

issue was published in the Fall of 2017, just after Rev. Eric started as the second interim and as the congregation was making sense of Rev. Thomas's departure. In that booklet, Rev. Tandi Rogers wrote an article about being a free congregation in which she says: It's Not About the Minister. And, she's right—it's not. Ministers come and serve, journeying with a congregation for a time. But at its core, a congregation is about you, the people who join and engage and remain. It's not about “the minister,” it's not about the sound of one voice. It's about “the ministries,” the ministry that we share.

“Shared ministry” is a concept that is being explored in many religious circles these days. If you look on-line, you will find denominational papers on shared ministry by the Baptist church, the Episcopal church, and of course Unitarian Universalists. In reality, shared ministry is an ancient idea that some denominations are rediscovering. The practice of serving together toward a common goal first appears in the early Christian church and came from the idea of “the priesthood of all believers.” The early church built on the teachings of Jesus had no priests; it was informal, non-hierarchical, and egalitarian. For example, it included women in leadership roles in a culture where women had little power or authority. The teaching was that the divine was to be understood and experienced through Jesus, not mediated by anyone else, such as a priest. It included the idea that everyone had gifts to share and was called to contribute those gifts to the larger mission.

Over time, egalitarianism was replaced by hierarchies. Those with power made many doctrinal decisions, such as what was in the sacred texts and what wasn't; there are many ancient texts from the time of Jesus and right after that are not in the Christian bible. Doctrine was modified to put priests between the divine and the people. In 1517, the priest Martin Luther railed against a Catholic church where priests had exclusive access to the holy, and some granted access to God by selling indulgences, thus beginning the Protestant reformation.

The roots of Unitarianism are buried deep in the fertile soil of the Protestant reformation. Those who would come to be known as Unitarians took the reformation even further by not only questioning the doctrine of priestly authority, but also questioning the doctrine of the trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost). They questioned basic church doctrine, all the while maintaining that every person has the right to discover their own, direct connection to the divine. Now this idea is expressed as one of the six sources of our living tradition: we affirm and promote direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.

From the very beginning, Unitarians rejected the idea that clergy were above everyone else and only clergy had direct access to God. We still do.

One of the ways that Unitarian Universalists practice shared ministry is through our “congregational polity” which gives congregations decision-making power rather than a denominational hierarchy. We do have a Unitarian Universalist Association, but it is just that—an association of independent congregations. Each congregation can determine whether to associate with the UUA or not. The Unitarian Fellowship of Olympia—UFO--was officially recognized as a member of the American Unitarian Association, as it was known then, on October 6, 1952. There were 13 charter members. Roots go deep here, too.

The coming together of our independent congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association is governed by covenant, not by hierarchy or by prescribed creeds. Because each congregation is independent, each calls or hires its own minister. LAST SPRING, You as a congregation voted to call me to be your minister, and I was honored to accept. Some of my new colleagues in Olympia from other faiths are here because their denomination assigned them here; neither they nor their congregation had any say in the matter.

Congregational polity also means that, in our denomination, only a congregation can ordain a minister, the UUA does not have that authority. This week I celebrated the two year anniversary of my ordination, jointly by the UU Congregation of Salem, OR and First Unitarian Church of Portland.

We are a denomination that empowers congregations. This is part of our history, and it grows out of our dislike of hierarchy and a mistrust of authority. This thread always leads to discussion about leadership and ministerial authority, and this leads to the idea of shared ministry. Unitarian Universalists believe that the ministries of a congregation do not belong only to a minister, they belong to everyone—they are shared.

At OUUC, there is a ministry of worship, of pastoral care and caring friends, of social action, of outreach, of hospitality and membership, of religious education, and more. You might recognize these as names of committees or teams. You might also recognize the governance structure of this congregation with five ministries: Spiritual Life, Faith Development, Community Life, Faith in Action, and Resource. They reflect the work of—the ministries of—this congregation. So, now we are learning how to serve our mission and ministries together.

Next year, we will celebrate our journey together with a ritual of installation. I am grateful to the Transition Team and Zoe Myer for taking the lead on making this happen. An installation is the formal covenanting process between a congregation and a minister, a ritual where we make promises to each other. Just like our association of congregations, our ministry together is also covenantal. As we work and learn together, we build trust and keep the promises we make to each other and to the larger world.

I believe that shared ministry is important because it is not only part of our heritage, it is part of our future. The ministry that we share is based on the idea that everyone has gifts and is invited to bring their gifts to the table. It takes different gifts to do all of the work that we are called to do. Some of us are called to create worship, others feel called to teach. Some are called to welcome, others to plan. And, some of us commit to a vocation of ministry, bringing our unique gifts to the mix. We give generously with our financial pledges to support this congregation. We also give our skills and talents to our mission. And, we offer our presence to each other, in worship and wherever we gather. Shared ministry is the calling of all people; it reflects our 7th principle—that we are all connected. When we share our gifts, we affirm our interdependence as we come together in service to our mission.

This model for being together is important because it is a spiritual practice that opens us to asking some of our biggest spiritual questions. Who are we? Why are we here? These are questions of mission and purpose.

Shared ministry also calls us to directly ask what I think is one of our most pressing and urgent spiritual questions: how are we to be together? Given that we are all connected, how are we to live and thrive together? Shared ministry invites us each to be vulnerable, to open ourselves to different ways of thinking, doing and being. It invites us to explore and express who we are and why we are here. It invites us to step up with minds, hearts and hands wide open.

When we share ministry we may not always agree, we may not always think alike, we may hold different beliefs. It is easy to be in relationship when we agree. A real test of community is how we are together when we disagree. That's what makes this such an important spiritual question: how are we to be together? This question is crucial on the world stage as we grapple with the violence of war and the refugees who are fleeing that violence; as we struggle to understand a fundamentalism that leads to death and destruction. It is crucial as a nation as we strive to overcome political divides that prevent governing in a way that protects the health and welfare of all of our people. And, it is important for our community as we craft our future together.

To me, shared ministry is an invitation. It is an invitation that we both offer and accept. It is an invitation to each of us to open our minds to share our gifts with each other and the world. It is an invitation for each of us to open our hands to share of ourselves in service to a larger goal. It is an invitation to open our hearts to be in relationship even when it's hard and we might not agree. As our reading said, you don't have to do it all, but you must add your voice to the song. Shared ministry is an invitation for all of us to bring our gifts to the table and to be of service, and in that process we can be transformed.

As we explore our theme of resilience this month, I notice that we tend to focus on our personal strengths, our own core values and roots. And this is part of resilience to be sure; resilience is about looking within and reaching down

deep. And, it is also about looking around and reaching out to others. It is both “me” and “we.” Just as the song grew from “I’ll Be All Right” to “We Shall Overcome,” we are strongest when we reach deep and reach out. You keep singing when I pause to breath and I keep singing when you pause to breathe. “Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time.” We are more resilient together. I believe it is our only chance for survival in the challenging future ahead.

One day when Linda Crabtree and others update the publication, I hope to be included in the list of ministers who have served here, another spiritual leader who has journeyed with you. Shared ministry is rooted in the history of a particular congregation and expressed in its unique context. How our ministry together will unfold is shaped by history and location. How we express it is up to us. That challenging, and dazzling, future is waiting.

We are all in this together. None of us can serve our mission alone. We need each other. Our shared ministry is the sound of all of us. And, when we join our voices together, we make a mighty roar.

May our heads, hands and hearts open to the invitation that is shared ministry.

May we extend our invitation to all those who may wish to join us.

And, may our many voices unite in a song that serves all creation into “the dazzling treasure of our future.”

May this be so. Let us hold a moment of silence together.

More about the six UU sources [here](#).