

June 16, 2022

Dear Friends,

The time is drawing very near to my retirement on June 30th, and I wanted to write you one more time. I'm so very grateful for our time together, for all we've done and accomplished, and for all the life we've shared these seven years. Your trust and your companionship on the journey of ministry together has meant the world to me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Over the past few months I've had several conversations about my relationships with you, the people of UUCOB, after I depart, and the boundaries I'll be upholding. The fact that Gaye, Oliver, and I will continue to make the Outer Banks our home adds complexity to these issues. Understandably, there are some questions, so I thought it would be good to say it plainly all in one place. There's still time to talk before the 30th, if you have any questions or concerns you want to raise with me. Here are the key points:

Departing from Ministry Means Ending Ministry

When a Unitarian Universalist minister ends ministry with a congregation, the professional expectation is for that minister to end ministry in all its forms with the congregation and its members. That means not preaching, not conducting memorial services or weddings, not providing pastoral care, not weighing in on institutional questions. That much is clear-cut.

Ending Ministry Means Ending the Deep Connections We've Had

Where it gets less clear, and more emotional, is ending other forms of relationship. So, to be clear, for **at least a year after a new contract or settled minister comes**, I won't initiate or accept invitations to coffee, lunch, walks on the beach, or any one-on-one or group gatherings with members or friends. I won't exchange emails, phone calls, or online messages. After June 30, I'll make changes to my Facebook account to make sure I stay out of message threads that relate to UUCOB. As a family, we won't be attending services at UUCOB; we'll seek our spiritual community elsewhere.

This may seem cold or inhumane, after years of meaningful relationship. Ministers don't make these decisions lightly. We know it's hard for you, and it's hard for us and our families as well. But we make them wholeheartedly, supporting the reason why it's important. I'm guided by the ethical guidelines that all UU ministers commit to uphold, both from our professional UU Ministers' Association and the Unitarian Universalist Association, which ask all departing parish ministers to accept these hard choices. I'm guided by the wisdom of our colleagues, both those who've left congregations and those who have led congregations whose departing ministers made different choices.

Why These Boundaries Matter

The reason it's important for a departing minister to end direct relationship with church members is to support the congregation's ability to fully sustain its own ministry, and to establish connection and trust with a new minister. If a departing minister stays on the scene, or stays connected with congregants, it's harder for the new minister to build that trust and rapport. So, when we withdraw from regular exchanges with congregants--when we don't return an email or accept an invitation to coffee--it's not out of a lack of caring. It's from a sense of care for the congregation's ongoing flourishing, in a new relationship, with a new minister.

We Will Probably Still See Each Other

Often, a departing minister leaves town, which makes ending the ministerial relationship simpler and cleaner. However, Gaye, Oliver, and I will continue to live in the Outer Banks for the foreseeable future, and as we all know, the year-round community here is very small and interconnected in many ways. We will run into each other. What to do then?

Well, I'm not going to hide or to pretend I don't know you, and I hope you won't either. I will be glad to see you! Remember, I'm also grieving the loss of this important relationship in my life, and the loss of connection with such wonderful people. I'll be very happy to chat and catch up on how you (and we) are doing personally. I'll make every effort to keep it light, though, not out of any lack of care, but because it has to remain very clear that I'm not your minister any longer. If anything is happening in your life that needs pastoral care, I'll encourage you to bring it to the new minister, and have a conversation with them.

I won't talk about the congregation with you; I won't want to be on the receiving end of news or opinions about church, and I won't offer thoughts about it myself. A new minister will likely be very different from me. You may have opinions about that. You're going through a big transition time, and things may be shaky as you experience a different kind of ministry and leadership. I hope you will bring ideas, encouragement, and concern directly to congregation leaders and your new minister. I will steadfastly support the lay leaders and that new minister, and their relationship with you.

My Covenant with the New Minister

When the new contract or settled minister arrives, I will initiate relationship with that colleague, and establish a covenant with them, so that we are all clear, as colleagues, about what mutual support looks like and how to uphold it in these unusual circumstances of all living together in a small community. Part of that covenant will include my intent to defer to the new minister for all matters related to UUCOB. I want their leadership to take root and thrive.

What about Gaye and Oliver?

People have asked about Gaye and Oliver. As I see it, decisions about the personal relationship between family members and congregation members are between them, and not for me to decide. Gaye can think and decide for herself, in conversation with you. Of course, she'll be guided by the same ethical codes that I am about conversations regarding the congregation and pastoral care: those conversations belong with the new minister and lay leaders of the congregation.

As for Oliver: his relationships with you are important to him; he'll miss you, and he'll be glad to see you whenever (inevitably) that happens! But any ongoing connections with him will be limited by the necessary boundaries his grownups are setting.

Exceptions

There will be exceptions to what I've described. As I've said, we live in a very small and interconnected community, and there's no telling where any of us will cross paths. The idea is not to disappear, but to dramatically dial down my connection with the congregation, so as to give the new minister their best chance to establish a new relationship with you.

What if There's Not a New Minister?

One of the possibilities in the challenging environment the Transition Team has described to you is that

the congregation may spend some time as it has in the past, as a lay-led spiritual community. If—and only if—that happens, there are a few things that I or Gaye might be able to do, provided the Board is willing to make a covenant with us making clear that our services are limited to such events alone and are not part of the larger ministry or leadership of the congregation. Specifically, in the event of a death during that time, we may be able to lead a Unitarian Universalist Celebration of Life service. Gaye may be available to preach on occasion—I should not do that—if the Worship Planning folks want to invite her to come and speak some Sunday. As long as there is not a colleague serving the congregation, we may be able to help in those ways if it is wanted; when a new minister does come, that availability would necessarily end.

Love Will Guide Us

We can be sure that love will guide us into the future, because it has guided us this far. Our ministry together hasn't thrived through rules and recipes, but through covenant and commitment. That's what we can all count on as I leave: that we'll figure it out, in love, as we go, in ways that support your strength as a congregation and your new relationship with the ministers who come after. The future of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks is as bright as you want to make it. I am grateful to have been part of the congregation's story, and I'm glad I won't be too far away to see where love and life lead you!

In faith,

David