

What are our Ministries?  
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton  
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UUMSB

Today in our annual meeting, we will have the opportunity as a congregation to name Rev. Kathy Duhon as our minister emerita. The founding of our congregation went hand in hand with Kathy's training in professional ministry, a unique and special story. Kathy served the community for many years, in many locations, and with much care. The designation of emerita is an honorific to lift up the love and sweat Kathy put into building this congregation, together with our members, to honor the pastoral care she continues to offer to our community, and her continued engagement through preaching. Kathy kindly stepped in for pastoral care while I was away last summer, and will be on call during my sabbatical beginning in July. Her generous heart is helping to make my sabbatical possible and I am very grateful for her support and care.

To minister is to be of service, which *is in* its word root in old French. Today at our annual meeting we will be talking about our strategic plan for the next five years. In the section on ministry we have written:

“Ministry” is not limited to the Minister; it is a core element of our congregation which involves everyone at UUMSB. It includes how we relate to and support one another, what we do to support the overall congregation, and what we do which reaches into the external communities of which we are a part, both as individuals and together.

We are all in service of one another, and one way we can describe the work that we do together, are the ministries of our community—the ways we serve one another, and we serve the broader community. I am excited for the frame that our new strategic plan will offer us in the work we do together. We have the potential to do infinite things, but the capacity to only choose some, and an updated tool to help us make thoughtful and informed decisions on how to proceed will be invaluable.

A feature of our planning for the next year is that as we work over the summer to plan for the next church year, I will be on sabbatical. I know that our leadership will do a great job moving things forward. It will be exciting to come back in November and see what is already rolling. There is lots happening between now and when I leave, but I bring it up today, because as we plan for the future, care and feeding of the minister is part of that conversation. Many callings and occupations do not allow for something like a sabbatical, but I am grateful for the opportunity to have the time to recharge my spiritual battery, so that I can be of better service to our community. The grace of ministry in community is that we are all in this together, and that while the congregation will be shaped by its lay and professional leadership, ultimately, connections in community will drive the ministries of the congregation.

I don't often preach on our fifth principle, “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large” because it can seem dry. But in large part that is only because our congregations have been organizing by such principles for so long. It is important to remember our history, and be attentive into the future about the relationships between religious bodies, the state, and democracy.

Together with the Congregationalists, we were the first to ordain women. This change was fueled by the ministries of clergy like William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Hosea

Ballou. These were some of the founding fathers of modern Unitarianism and Universalism who broke open ideas of biblical criticism, theology, and the roles people are called to play in shaping a just society. William Ellery Channing preached against slavery in a community of wealthy, newly Unitarian people in Boston who benefitted directly from the slave trade, through banking and industry. Unitarianism had some rocky years while people came to terms with this. Parker was even more forthright and direct about ending slavery and thousands of people in Boston flocked to hear him talk about it each week. While many Unitarian and Universalist women and men spoke out for women's suffrage, there were people in the churches who called them false prophets. Many people, including many Unitarian women, fought hard *against* women's suffrage and women in the pulpit.

Through our commitment to the democratic process, change happened. Because of our commitment to congregational polity, that congregations can determine their own fate and leadership, and because as attitudes about the roles of women changed in society, congregations voted to ordain them. These same women then worked to strengthen their rights and gain access to the democratic process in government. Women were teaching and leading congregations for 70 years before they were allowed to vote in a national political election. A small flourishing of women in ministry followed the ordination of Olympia Brown in 1864 to Universalist ministry and Antionette Brown Blackwell in 1851 to congregational ministry. In the mid-west in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a group of 21 Unitarian women ministers known as The Iowa Sisterhood including women like Eleanor Gordon and Mary Safford. My dear colleagues Jackie Clement and Allison Cornish wrote of the Sisterhood:

Life was hard in the Plains states, with little glory to be earned by bringing liberal religion to the settlers of the area. Few male scholars from the seminaries of the East were attracted to the life. But if the Plains were beyond the recognition of an Eastern religious hierarchy, they were also remote from that hierarchy's rules and control. It was a place where women were accepted for their willingness to step in and serve, for their tenacity in the face of hardship, and for their ministry.<sup>1</sup>

This breathing room from hierarchy, and the experience of being treated as less than in their ministry and scholarship helped spur many of these women on to be crusaders for women's suffrage, though many did not live to see the amendment passed. These women lived the fifth principle. Of her career in professional ministry, Olympia Brown wrote:

Those who may read this will think it strange that I could only find a field in run-down or comatose churches, but they must remember that the pulpits of all the prosperous churches were already occupied by men, and were looked forward to as the goal of all the young men coming into the ministry with whom I, at first the only woman preacher in the denomination, had to compete. All I could do was to take some place that had been abandoned by others and make something of it, and this I was only too glad to do.<sup>2</sup>

Today about 60% of Unitarian Universalist clergy are women.

Ministries can challenge us to look at ourselves and our community in different ways, and help us to see new ideas. They connect people with each other and the transcendent. They build relationships. And not to sound too Wonder Woman about it, but they support and promote democracy. In the example of women's suffrage, there were arguments that giving women more

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1 <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop9/178592.shtml>

2 <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/ethics/workshop6/191917.shtml>

freedom would break relationship—that it would change families and push women into inappropriate situations. Today, we have a different understanding. Unitarian Universalist ministries intend to lead to greater freedom for people and away from restricting identity. They call us to open doors.

Each and every one of us has moments when we help one another to find our way, or our truth. We are all engaged in ministry, caring for our community and our larger Unitarian Universalist community. When we have found our way, center, or truth, we are called to shape the future of ministry and care in Unitarian Universalism, through our connections in this community and in the larger association. We are all ministers engaged in the work of shaping our faith. Hear these words from Gordon B McKeeman:

Ministry is all that we do—Together

Ministry is that quality of being in community that affirms human dignity—  
beckons forth hidden possibilities, invites us into deeper, more constant, reverent  
relationships,  
and carries forward our heritage of hope and liberation.

Ministry is what we do together as we celebrate triumphs of our human spirit,  
Miracles of birth and life,  
Wonders of devotion and sacrifice.

Ministry is what we do together—with one another—  
in terror and torment—in grief, in misery and pain,  
enabling us in the presence of death  
to say yes to life.

We who minister speak and live the best we know with full knowledge  
that it is never quite enough...

And yet are reassured  
by lostness found,  
fragments reunited,  
wounds healed,  
and joy shared.

Ministry is what we all do—together.<sup>3</sup>

May it be so.

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3 Source: "Awakened from the Forest: Meditations on Ministry" Ministry Is All That We Do Meditation