

“Celebration Sunday: Better Together”
March 20, 2022
Rev. Laurel Gray

Ministry is something we do together.

And being a minister is a bit like being Mary Poppins - it's a role that becomes real only in relationship with another. A kind of loving and helpful presence, a kind of magic and power that is created when someone separate from a group arrives to care and is welcomed in return.

My arrival, as the hiring team I'm sure remembers well, was something of a sudden appearance. Similarly, for me, the possibility of serving in this congregation came into quick and unexpected view – a little like falling out of the sky.

Unlike settled ministers, which are our version of tenured professors, and require a year and a half of congregational reflection and then endless interviews – unlike that, the process of hiring a contract minister who agrees to stay for a set period of time, happens in fourteen days, from resumes being made available to having a signed contract.

It's definitely a whirlwind, one made slightly less stressful by the thought “if it doesn't work, it's only two years.” And so it was that the winds of life brought me here, to be your minister. Little did we know what a storm we were in for, or how much possibility would bloom in the struggle of finding our way through a pandemic and untold global chaos together.

Thankfully, it seems to be working and we're already talking about our third round of contract extensions.

See ministry is a relationship that requires a leap of faith, a willingness on one side to believe that a barely vetted stranger with a carpet bag filled with skills and

compassion might just create an expansion of possibility beyond what you imagined. And, too, a belief on the part of the other that you will be met with shelter and sustenance, kindness and welcome.

One of the odd things about being a Unitarian Universalist minister is that we are paid entirely by the congregation that we serve - there is no bishop or centuries old wealth covering our cost of living. And that means that having me here is the single most expensive part of your annual budget.

And yet, the care of a minister is not a financial transaction, nor is it a cost that should be shared equally by all members - it is a cost that should be shared equitably. So, in a capitalist system of extraordinary wealth disparity, the congregation serves as equalizer, assuring that the sharing of in-equal resources means that everyone can be cared for fully.

In this congregation-minister relationship, a kind of connection becomes possible that no individual person could create alone. It is in the collective sharing of financial resources, which we call pledging, that everyone gets to belong and the conditions exist for a minister to have a place to land and to live and to offer their care. The financial exchange isn't the motivation, it's the condition that makes existing in a particular place possible.

And that's true of the rest of our church staff. Kala's magic doesn't exist because we pay her to play here on Sunday mornings - it's our paying her that makes it possible for her to give of herself in this place, while meeting her own human needs.

Everyone contributes what they can to this collective flourishing, because it is the good pairing of minister and staff and congregation that makes the magic of ministry come alive.

And think how much we have created in these last two and a half years. When I arrived, the minister's office seemed to be a place of untrodden mystery. And I quickly asked Vince to put a window in the door, and he gamely removed the wallpaper, too. I ordered a soft couch and colorful pillows, and it became a place of

comfort and care.

When I arrived the idea of google suite and digital calendars, a podcast and standardized email addresses for staff were all an out of reach dream, but we put our heads together and worked it out. Thank goodness, because a pandemic was brewing that was about to make digital connection the most critical tool we had.

The helpful thing about storms is they remove facades – caring under stress isn't something you can fake. And I've noticed this year that there is a depth to this place of ministry that didn't exist two years ago. There's a different level of trust in our relationship – when I arrived, there was general surprise that I was friendly and brown-haired and liked to make things colorful – I don't think you're surprised anymore, and I'm grateful for that trust.

When I arrived here, the minister's role was 3/4 time, which meant trying to do all the work of ministry in 30 hours a week. Now the minister's role is 90% time, which, in practice means I'm supposed to limit my work to 36 hours a week. I appreciate the concern that exists within this - a desire to not ask more of me than is fair.

And yet, when your role is a way of being in relationship, how do you do 90% of it? It's become an increasingly complicated question.

So it is that our pledge goals this year, as Bruce detailed, are to make the minister's position full time, increase staff wages to account for inflation, and continue on the path of adapting to a new world as a congregation – which includes everything from joint children's programming, connections with other congregations, and all this technological wizardry.

And, truth be told, it is a profound honor being your minister. I don't have my finger to the wind looking for a new place to land. We are, I'd say, better together.

And in true teamwork fashion, I'd like to invite Kim Hall up to speak. Kim very gamely agreed to join the board my first year, and has spent the last two years as co-chair of the board, which has been one rewarding adventure.

Good morning.

I am very happy to be here today, to speak about my personal experience of being a

member of this congregation since 1990s, and the relationship I have seen between the congregation and the minister. After 30+ years in the church, I accepted a three year term on the board and have been co-chair for the past three years. I especially want to address why having a full time minister again is beneficial to us all, minister and congregation together. I view this through my lens as a nurse. For many years, I was an hourly employed staff nurse; then I became an administrator. As you know, a hospital pays nurses hourly to do their 8, 10, or 12 or sometimes even 16 hour shifts, and it is important to pay them well in order to keep them happy, and nowadays, just to keep them. And as Laurel says, while the relationship between a patient and a nurse is not perceived as a “financial transaction,” staff nurses and hospital administrators are responsible to be sure that all the needs of patients are met. Staff nurses are critical to the success of the hospital as an organization. Of course there were times as a staff nurse in the ICU that my patients still needed me after my shift ended and I did overtime beyond my hours then to make sure their needs got met. Then I spent several years in hospital administration, which was a full time salaried position rather than an hourly role. Now my nursing responsibilities didn’t necessarily follow a specific hourly pattern- I had to be “on call” and there were times I went in at midnight to handle an issue. Also, I was now committed to the overall view of the organization, and had a more comprehensive role in planning for the future beyond just the day to day needs of patients. I often had a hard time resolving the fact that health care delivery was a business, and nursing care was an “expense.” However, in order to meet needs of patients, there was a financial “bottom line”. A hospital is a business, but with a “caring mission”. In a way a church is a similar “business” in that it has to keep the lights on, but also has a “caring mission”, to support the needs of the congregation, which includes a budget that covers fair compensation for a minister and staff. As a board member I definitely have more of an appreciation what that means. How that relates to our current pledge goal of making our minister position full time is that a minister, like a hospital administrator, must also have such availability and access to and for the congregation, and holds a comprehensive view of the overall needs of the church. This is best accomplished when the minister can be a full-time “exempt” position. When we first hired Laurel, our finances were only able to support a part time “contracted”, meaning “hourly” minister position. Also since the pandemic started, we have been very much in a week to week, “get through it” mode. Due to many critical needs during this period, Laurel was often required Laurel to work “over-time” above and beyond her contracted hours in order to meet our basic needs. The board appreciated, acknowledged, and compensated these extra hours. Because she did, and thanks to an extraordinary synergy between our congregation and minister

working together, we remained strong during this time, and I believe we are even better than before.

Now as we hope to be able to look past covid, we want to continue this synergistic momentum to further continue to build our bridges to internally and externally. And like a hospital administrator, giving the minister the ability to work without the restriction of “contracted hours” puts her in a position to best serve the needs of the whole congregation now and in the future. And our hourly staff Kala, Cynthia, and Colleen, just like nurses, needs to be fairly compensated as recognition for the importance of their roles to the organization, as well as to ensure their satisfaction and retention, to “keep our grass green” so to speak. As you know, we have recently lost Elisa to another church. We were very fortunate to have just hired another very experienced church admin. and are now establishing her in this all-inclusive role. Maintaining Cynthia’s recently-hired role is critical to re-energizing RE for our children. And of course we all agree Kala’s beautiful music is essential to all our well being; Kala is our longest-held “employee” , with us since 2018, and hope she maintains that distinction for many years.

So our financial goals this year include an increase in our pledges to support fair pay for our staff, as well as an increase for Laurel to a full time “exempt” vs hourly contracted position, to remove any conflicts or barriers to her being available to and for the congregation without reserve, and to support her ability to continue to creatively lead us into our new future. This won’t happen, as we know, by Mary Poppins magic, but by our mutual commitment to one another, congregation and minister, to create an expansion of possibility beyond what we all imagined.

