

Our Lay-Led Congregation and Religious Tradition

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Good morning! Thank you for the opportunity to give today's message. For almost three years we have been a lay-led congregation. If we were not a lay-led congregation, then I doubt that I would ever have had the opportunity to give messages at our church. I am grateful for the opportunity to give messages because in the run-up to these Sundays I get to research topics that interest me and to think about spirituality. Then I get to share ideas with you during this special time together.

I have been thinking a lot about what it means to be a lay-led congregation. At first, I thought that being a lay-led congregation was something to apologize for. After all, as membership numbers change, there may come a time when a minister is not financially possible. For that reason, I thought that being a lay-led congregation was a sign of decline, both financially and spiritually. Maybe a lay-led church is not a "real" church.

My actual experience in this church has been quite the opposite. I have never encountered such a spiritually engaged congregation. Because of the very fact that we do *not* have a minister, I see members of this congregation grappling with spirituality and religion in ways that I have never seen a minister-led congregation grapple with. We have asked ourselves: What is the meaning of worship? Who is a spiritual authority? How do we put together worship services that are spiritually nourishing? We have called on one another to fulfill roles within our church and during our worship services that a minister would mostly likely have performed. Through this experience, I think that we have had the opportunity to use our talents, wisdom and energy to make this church vibrant, welcoming and spiritually fulfilling.

Not everything has been perfect. We have had our ups and downs. Part of me would love to have a minister. But for the here and now, we are a lay-led congregation, and that is what I would like to talk about this morning.

Lay-led congregations played a prominent role in the early Christian church, as well as during the Fellowship Movement of the UU church from 1948 to 1967. During the first century, the early Christian churches were assemblies of people who elected elders, who were also referred to as bishops, to a church council that governed the church. Elders were men that people thought were gentle, genuine, and uninterested in money.

It was only in the second century, that the council of elders began electing a single bishop to be above the other bishops and to assume the overall responsibility for the welfare of the church. They did this because each of the bishops of the council wanted to claim their own followers within the church, specifically those whom they had baptized. The single-bishop model was created in order to defend and hold the church together so that the church did not break down into separate fiefdoms led by each bishop on the council.

The Fellowship Movement of the UU church was the most successful growth campaign in the history of the UU church. It occurred from 1948 to 1967. The Unitarian and Universalist

churches did not merge until 1961. So, technically, the Unitarian church launched the Fellowship Movement in 1948 and then the UU church continued the movement after the merger in 1961.

The Fellowship Movement started UU congregations anywhere they could find ten or more religiously liberal people. Many fellowships were founded in college towns because academics tended to be drawn toward the intellectual aspects of spirituality.

Today there are 323 UU congregations that started as fellowships. This represents 30% of all UU congregations in the United States. These fellowships began as lay-led congregations. Some have remained small, some have grown. Some are minister-led. Some are still lay-led. The important point is that lay-led congregations were critical to the growth and spread of Christianity in the first century and to Unitarian Universalism in the 20th century.

The history of the UU Church of Waterville takes a different trajectory than that of the early Christian church and the UU fellowships of the 20th century. We are in fact a traditional UU church because we were founded by an ordained minister.

In 1826, Sylvanus Cobb, who was the second Universalist minister ordained in Maine, founded the Universalist Church in Waterville. We are the first Universalist church in Maine. The church had twenty members and met in Reverend Cobb's Waterville home. The church that we are in now was built in 1832. In 1952, we united with the Unitarian Church of Waterville and the Church of the Good Shepherd in Fairfield to become the Universalist Unitarian Church of Waterville.

We are called the *Universalist* Unitarian Church of Waterville because our church was named before the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Today we find ourselves in a position where we have transitioned from a minister-led church to a lay-led church. The Unitarian Universalist Association does not keep statistics on the number of lay-led congregations; however, my sense is that transitioning from minister-led to lay-led is common for smaller congregations.

As far as mainline Protestant congregations go, nearly 40% do not have full-time ministers, according to the 2012 National Congregations Study. Sixty-eight percent of the 156 UCC congregations in Maine do not have a full-time minister. Transitioning from a full-time minister to a part-time minister and even to a lay-led congregation appears to be common.

The question for our church is: What are we going to do now?

To answer this question, I go back to Frances David. Frances David was the Unitarian court preacher of the one and only Unitarian monarch in history. The monarch's name was John Sigismund. He was the ruler of Hungary and parts of Transylvania, which is located in current-day Romania, in the 16th century during the Protestant Reformation. On the cover of today's order of service, John Sigismund is depicted on the left and Frances David is depicted on the right.

Frances David believed in the power of human thought to arrive at truth. Frances David started out as a Catholic, then converted to Lutheranism, then converted to Calvinism, and then he finally became a Unitarian. The reason that he became a Unitarian is because he could find no basis in scripture for the Trinity. Frances David believed that God was one and indivisible and that Jesus was a person who followed God. Rather than worship Jesus, Frances David thought that we should follow Jesus.

I mention Frances David because he was a thinking person who arrived at his own understanding of God and spirituality. We that are gathered here today are thinking people. The UU church supports our responsible search for truth and meaning. We support and encourage one another's spiritual growth. There are many benefits to having a minister, but, like Frances David, we believe in the power of human thought. We do not *require* a minister in order to practice our faith or to nourish our souls. To answer the question "what are we going to do now?", I think that we should continue to use our thought and reason to arrive at our own understandings of truth and spirituality, and to support one another on our spiritual journeys.

This fall the Worship Committee conducted the Worship Service Survey so that we could understand how the congregation felt about our lay-led services. We wanted to know the extent to which the congregation felt that the worship services were meeting their spiritual needs, what was going well, and ways that we could improve our worship services.

We received responses from 41 people, which is an excellent response rate given that we typically have anywhere from 45 to 65 people attend worship on Sunday mornings, and that we have approximately 60 church members. The first question that we asked the congregation was "To what extent have the worship services met your spiritual needs?" 17 people said that their spiritual needs were being met *very much*; 17 people said that their spiritual needs were being met *somewhat*, and 7 people said that their spiritual needs were being met only *a little bit*. No one said that their spiritual needs were not being met at all. So equal numbers of people said that their spiritual needs were being met *very much* or *somewhat*, and many fewer people said that their spiritual needs were being met *a little bit*.

The worship committee was interested in learning about what people liked the most about the worship services and how people thought that the worship services could be improved. There were four big winners when it came to what people like the most about our worship services.

The first winner is that people like learning about new ideas and perspectives. People said that they liked interesting topics, the opportunity to think deeply about a topic, to be challenged, and the different perspectives that ministers and speakers share.

The second winner is that people like the fellowship and community of our worship services. People mentioned Joys & Concerns as one of their favorite parts of worship. They also mentioned that they like the feeling of simply being together in this beautiful space, and to see familiar faces.

The third winner is that people like the variety of topics, ministers and speakers. People said that they especially like that many different people are involved in the various aspects of the service.

The fourth winner is the music. Many people wrote simply that they like the music the most, while others specifically mentioned that they love Harry and Anna Beth's music.

So those were the four big winners when it came to what people like the most about our worship services.

The Worship Committee is always trying to figure out what we can do better, so we also asked people how we could improve the worship services. There were three main suggestions for how we could improve our worship services.

The most common suggestions had to do with practical ideas for helping the services run more smoothly. These suggestions focused primarily on starting and ending the service on time, making sure that each component of the worship service did not last too long, and, in general, tightening up the worship services and making them more organized.

The second most common suggestion was to have an ordained minister, one who was either full-time or part-time, or who was simply a regular monthly speaker at our church. The people who offered this suggestion mentioned in particular that they would like more spiritually-themed sermons, and that sermons should be a little less intellectual. These comments were the inspiration for my message today.

The third most common suggestion was to connect the worship services to the UU Principles. People appreciate an interesting message, but they said that they want the message to relate directly to at least one of our seven UU principles.

Those were the high-level results from the Worship Service Survey. The Worship Committee is working on a report that summarizes the Worship Service Survey, which we will share with you as soon as we can complete the report. The Worship Committee is delighted for this feedback, and we are working hard to incorporate the congregation's feedback into our services as much as possible.

In closing, I would just like to say how happy I am to be a member of this congregation, and in particular to be a member of a lay-led congregation. Being a member of a lay-led congregation has given me opportunities to participate in church in ways that I probably never would have participated in if we had a full-time minister. When I used to go shopping for churches, my number one criterion was how much I liked the minister. I was less interested in being part of a church community. Being part of a lay-led congregation has turned that upside down for me. Now I recognize the value of community in supporting one's spiritual growth.

We as a lay-led congregation follow in the footsteps of the early Christian church and the UU fellowships of the 20th century, many of whom are still lay-led. Whatever the future may hold, whatever rises or falls this congregation experiences, whether we hire a full-time minister or a part-time minister at some point down the road, right now we are a lay-led congregation – and I am proud to say it.