

Letter to Unity Spiritual Center Georgetown, TX

December 14, 2024

Dear Fellow Unity Truth Students,

I am writing to express support, concern, and clarification for the future of Unity Spiritual Center Georgetown. As the Unity Worldwide Ministries Member Support Team Lead and Consultant Team Liaison, I have been included in much of the communication and sharing of documents since mid-September 2024, including documents that preceded this date. I have been requested by the ministry Board of Trustees to put the standard UWM processes in writing for the Unity Spiritual Center Georgetown membership.

Unity Worldwide Ministries and Silent Unity have been in prayer with you during this time. Although the situation the ministry finds itself in at this moment certainly is upsetting and confusing, our Unity teachings provide support first to seek guidance in prayer and meditation. Each individual involved is a divine being acting in alignment with the faith they hold in consciousness. My prayer is that we grow in consciousness as we move through this experience toward the highest and best for the ministry and all persons involved.

The paragraphs below outline the standard UWM practices and policies relating to the current unresolved situation between Rev. Tomas De Leon (UWM Member Minister) and Unity Spiritual Center Georgetown, Texas (UWM Member Ministry).

First, allow me to clarify the relationship between the ministry and Unity Worldwide Ministries. Unity Spiritual Center Georgetown, Texas is a US Member Ministry among the Association of Unity Churches, Intl. d.b.a. Unity Worldwide Ministries (UWM). That means the founders of this ministry applied to become a Unity ministry, the members at the time voted to submit an application and to become members of Unity Worldwide Ministries, and the UWM Board of Trustees voted to accept the application and approve the ministry into membership as of 2011.

We often refer to our ministries as autonomous. What this means is that a UWM Member Ministry can vote on their board members, bylaws, etc. while they function in alignment with all UWM policies and member agreements. The responsibilities of ministry membership are outlined in the document UWM Membership Model Policy.

When conflict arises between the minister and the ministry board, a ministry is to reach out to UWM. UWM attempts to support the active communication and listening of each party. If the parties are unable to resolve the conflict on their own, then there are standard procedures that follow.

(From the UWM Bylaw Template for a Ministry 2024, Article 6 Board of Trustees, Section 10, I.)

When conflict arises between the individual board members or between the board and the senior minister (or co-ministers), such ministry shall seek to reconcile differences and immediately notify the UWM Member Support Team for help with procedures and to provide guidance and consultation. After a ministry and its senior minister (or co-ministers) have sought to reconcile differences and cooperated with the procedures and guidance of UWM, the board of trustees may terminate the employment of a senior minister (or co-ministers) by a two-thirds (2/3rds) vote (excluding the minister.)

(From the Georgetown, TX Bylaws dated 3-7-2021 Article 6 Board of Trustees, 6.9, I.)

When conflict arises between the board and/or the senior minister, such ministry shall seek to reconcile differences and immediately notify UWM for help with procedures and to provide guidance and consultation. After a ministry, and its senior minister, have sought to reconcile differences and cooperated with the procedures and guidance of UWM, the Board of Trustees may terminate the employment of a senior minister by a two-thirds (2/3rds) vote (excluding the minister.)

In mid-September, the ministry board reached out to UWM as they had attempted to resolve their conflict with the minister directly. Additionally, I had email and Zoom communication with Rev. Tomas De Leon. I am not at liberty to discuss the details of our emails and conversations as they apply to the employment, conduct, and understanding of the ministerial role and duties of Rev. Tomas De Leon. As the Unity Worldwide Ministries Member Support Team Lead, I have had access to confidential documents regarding employment concerns and feedback from the minister and the board. As UWM is a worldwide organization, we recommend that each ministry confirm compliance with local laws as they feel necessary. Upon that guidance, the ministry board contacted Treaty Oak Employers' Law Group. At that time, the ministry board had followed the steps outlined in the ministry bylaws as noted above and Texas law regarding employment matters.

The active voting members of Unity Spiritual Center Georgetown requested a Special Meeting, and as such one was held on November 15, 2024, following the procedures outlined in the ministry bylaws. It should be known that I was present on Zoom for the Special Membership Meeting requested by the membership and held on November 15, 2024, which was facilitated by Rev. Cynthia Vermillion Foster, UWM Transitional Specialist. I witnessed as each board member spoke to the member's request to reconsider their decision to not renew the employment contract of Rev. Tomas De Leon. I also witnessed the comments of members and those who were present at the Special Meeting. Although there was an outpouring of sentiment from the congregation, the ministry board is following both the ministry bylaws and Texas employment law regarding this matter. Afterward, I was present at Zoom meetings with the board following the Special Membership Meeting. I can confirm with certainty that the board did discuss at length the topic at hand as promised. Ultimately, their decision stands.

Additionally, I have also had communication with retired minister Rev. Steve Bolen. He had inquired with both the ministry board and UWM regarding the specific details of the unresolved employment issue so that he could be of support to Rev. Tomas De Leon. Neither the ministry board nor I am at liberty to disclose the details of our emails and conversations as they apply to the employment, conduct, and understanding of the ministerial role and duties of Rev. Tomas De Leon with Rev. Steve Bolen. If Rev. Tomas De Leon wants to meet with Rev. Steve Bolen as a coach, mentor, or friend they certainly may do so. However, Rev. Steve Bolen is not an approved UWM mentor assigned to Rev. Tomas De Leon by UWM, which would include a signed Release of Information to have these crucial conversations under one of the UWM standard support programs. It should also be clarified that Rev. Steve Bolen is not interested in becoming an approved UWM mentor per his conversation with me on December 5, 2024.

Moving forward there are standard UWM procedures regarding the departure of a minister at a UWM Member Ministry. Based on the circumstances specific to Unity Spiritual Center Georgetown, two

assessment processes are required. One is for the minister and the other is for the ministry. These are supportive processes to ensure that the minister and ministry are ready to resume ministry employment. Both the minister and the ministry have been informed about these required processes.

Minister Employment Assessment Policy 4-10-2023

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to support ministers to have a successful transition into their next ministry if they have been away from field ministry for more than a year, had abbreviated tenures in ministry, or left a ministry due to challenging circumstances. The Employment Assessment will include the reasons for the leave, the activities pursued during the leave, and the individual's current situation.

Scope

An assessment process is required of any Unity minister who:

- Is absent from field/center ministry for a period exceeding one (1) year.
- Leaves two (2) ministries within a five (5) year period.
- Leaves any ministry prior to completing two (2) years in that ministry.
- Leaves a ministry due to challenging circumstances, such as an extended illness, a death, a period of conflict, a forced resignation, or a termination.

Ministry Employment Readiness Policy 12-2022

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to support ministries to have a successful relationship with their next minister if they have been without a minister for more than two years, have a history of abbreviated tenures with a minister, or lost their last minister due to challenging circumstances. Ministry Employment Readiness will include and explore the reasons for the minister's departure, the activities pursued since the minister's absence, and the ministry's current situation.

An employment readiness process is required of any Unity ministry that:

- Is without a minister for a period exceeding two (2) years.
- Has had two (2) ministers depart within a five (5) year period.
- Has released or lost their minister due to challenging circumstances, such as an extended illness, a death, a period of conflict, a forced resignation, or a termination.

Rev. Tomas De Leon was notified of this requirement during our Zoom conversations some time ago. He was sent the official documentation on December 5, 2024. The UWM Employment Department and Employment Assessment Team were notified of this pending assessment to process in January 2025. Only after the process is complete will Rev. Tomas De Leon be eligible to continue in ministry.

The next step is for the ministry board to fill the board vacancies within 90 days as stated in the ministry bylaws. After that, I will be able to assist the ministry in moving forward with the required process. Once the vacant board seats have been filled, I can send the Ministry Employment Readiness Policy (assessment) and accompanying documents to the ministry board. It is a standard practice that as a part of the ministry assessment, the ministry works with a UWM Certified Consultant for a time. As the Consultant Team Liaison, I will make the recommendation to the ministry board of the UWM Certified

Consultants who have the appropriate training, skills, experience, and availability to support this ministry. Only after the process is complete will Unity Spiritual Center Georgetown, Texas be eligible to hire a Unity minister or spiritual leader under UWM Special Dispensation.

I empathize with the members who believe that this situation should have never happened. However, we know that all situations arise in our individual and collective experience for our highest good even though it may not feel like it in the moment. Although I acknowledge the level of discomfort this situation has created, I ask that you please refrain from demonizing the ministry board for upholding the bylaws and the employment laws of Texas. The board is required to do so.

As a Unity minister serving the field, I trust that there is a sense of peace that passes human understanding found in prayer and meditation. By taking time in prayer spiritual healing and spiritual growth are available to us when these situations arise. I pray each one of you can use the principles of our Unity teachings to be spiritually centered and compassionate to one another as the community undergoes this process. These standard UWM procedures have been supportive for many ministries.

I request that the minister, board, and congregation allow these standard UWM procedures to fulfill their purpose and support the ministry and all individuals involved.

As we celebrate this season of the re-birth of the Christ consciousness in each of us, I pray you can see the Christ presence in one another. Peace be with you.

Abundant Blessings,
Rev. Joanne Burns
UWM Member Support Team Lead and Consultant Team Liaison

Attachments:

UWM Membership Model Policy
Minister Employment Assessment Policy 4-10-2023
Ministry Employment Readiness Policy 12-2022