

Rev. Rob Kinslow

✉ rkmagic35@gmail.com

☎ (978) 618-6609

🌐 www.robkinslow.com

Last Updated: December 28, 2021

Experience & Preparation

Preliminary Fellowship: 2021

Full Fellowship: N/A

Ordination: 2021

Seminary: Andover Newton Theological School, 2012-2018; Starr King School for the Ministry, 2018-2020 (MDiv)

Congregational Ministries Served:

2021- 2022	Sabbatical Minister	First Parish Church UU	Duxbury, MA
2017- 2019	Ministerial Intern	First Parish Church in Taunton	Taunton, MA

Other Ministries and Work Experience:

2021- 2021	Magician-Teacher, UU MagicLab	First Parish Church of Groton UU	Groton, MA
2021- 2021	Minister of the Week	Star Island	Rye, NH
2021- 2021	Magician-Teacher, UU MagicLab	First Universalist Society in Franklin	Franklin, MA
2020- 2020	Magician-Teacher, UU MagicLab	UU Church of Medford	Medford, MA

2020- 2020	Magician-Teacher, UU MagicLab	The Unitarian Church of Montpelier	Montpelier, VT
---------------	----------------------------------	---------------------------------------	-------------------

Other Education:

- MDiv, Andover Newton Theological School (2012-2018)
- MDiv, Starr King School for the Ministry, (2018-2020)
- Chaplaincy internship, Boston Medical Center (October 2020-March 2021)

Other noteworthy work experience outside of UU ministry:

- Please see one-page [resume](#).
- [Volunteer activities and positions](#), non-UU.

Denominational and Community Activities:

- See [UU volunteer positions and activities](#).

Background

Give a story that embodies your ministry:

One day at Boston Medical Center I visited Ms. V, a 46-year-old single mother of six. She had been admitted the night before after a life-threatening asthma attack. When I visited, she seemed glad to see me but then immediately burst into tears. She continued to cry continuously during our initial conversation, constantly wiping tears from her eyes. She admitted to being very frightened and kept saying, "God saved my life!" She believed she had almost died in the ER the night before.

I sought to comfort Ms. V by asking about her faith and gently affirming her faith in God as a strength. This calmed her, but only somewhat, and she continued to cry and sounded very frightened.

As she recounted her experience, I grew concerned at the risk of triggering another asthma attack, which in Mrs. V's case could be fatal. I watched Ms. V's blood pressure reading out of the corner of my eye and it seemed to be elevating. I scrambled to think of the most soothing, comforting intervention I could offer.

This was early in my chaplaincy and I had never led a patient through guided meditation. I decided it was now or never.

"You have a lot of stressors in your life," I said to Mrs. V. "Have you ever tried relaxation exercises to manage stress?" "Oh, I've never been able to meditate," she said. "I couldn't even make 5 minutes." "Would you be willing to try?" I asked? "It doesn't even have to take 5 minutes." "Yes, yes," she replied, still wiping tears from her eyes.

I then led her through a brief guided meditation, during which I saw Mrs. V's left leg twitch when I said energy was coursing through her legs; I saw her hands twitch when I said the energy was flowing down her arms.

When I brought her back, Mrs. V burst into tears again, but this time with tears of joy. I held her briefly as she sobbed. Mrs. V told me it was the first time she had been able to breathe through her nose and that she could feel herself lifting off the bed. I told her she had done this and now she knew she could do it; she could try it on her own when she felt stressed. "No, no, you did this!" she insisted. "God sent you!" I told her we both did it, but that now she knew how.

As we said our goodbyes, I noted that Ms. V's eyes, which had been bloodshot throughout her crying, were now dry and clear. She was laughing.

My ministry seeks to meet people where they are and help them tap their own personal sources of spiritual strength, all while being watchful, mindful, caring, and willing to try new things -- to innovate -- and above all to affirm their humanity.

Why are you seeking ministry now?

I imagine that every generation of ministers has felt that their ministry and ministry in general were "needed now more than ever." Perhaps it is that ministry is always needed. However, I am seeking ministry not just because it is needed, but because people are, in increasing numbers, leaving church -- overlooking a tremendous resource, a source of strength. I became a minister to convince more people to come back to church -- and to keep coming back.

But what kind of ministry is needed right now? I have always felt a religious calling, longing to combine inventiveness and creativity (such as bringing magic to ministry) to help people work better together within a framework of interdependent love. As I write on my website, robkinslow.com, I see the future of UU ministry being "innovative, media-savvy, partnering, purposeful, grounded in mutual love and respect ... and inspiring creativity."

I'm seeking ministry now because ministry is needed; these times demand the kind of ministry I hope to offer; and I am ready and willing to rise to the challenge.

What ministry do you hope is ahead for you?

My ministry is centered on the mysterious and undeniable power of love and its ability to strengthen and embolden. There is so much work to be done—still—to achieve the basic tenets of a just society, such as safety and equality for all, still such a long way to go to mend injury and topple injustice for Black and Indigenous people and other people of color, as well as for LGBTQI people and especially transgender folk, who continue to face violence and oppression. There has been an alarming rise in anti-Semitism in recent times as well. Against all of this, as UUs we are called to push back with an unrelenting message that everyone in the Beloved Community deserves to feel beloved.

I want my congregation to join me, then, in a ministry of healing and nurture. I want to help people learn to love themselves better and practice humility, for I believe that our nation, our culture and our civilization suffer from an abject lack of humility. I believe growth toward wholeness occurs best from the inside out, whether one is moved by the words of a sermon, an encounter with pastoral care, or "that minister who spoke at that rally."

That is the ministry I look forward to and one worth pursuing.

Describe your call to ministry. What life events have led you to this moment?

First, I was named for a theologian, a doctor of the Catholic church, Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621). My parents were schoolteachers and devout Catholics who instilled a profound respect for religion in all their children. Very early on I believed I should grow up to be a priest and declared my vocation at the wise old age of eight. (I was a serious kid!)

By the end of high school, however, I decided I would one day want to have a family and gave up the dream of a religious vocation. In my early twenties I questioned Catholicism and later crossed the river into Unitarian Universalism in the mid-1990s. In the ensuing years, that vocational calling I had felt as a boy kept on calling. But keeping a marriage together and raising two young children became my life.

It was as I began preaching as a lay leader in the early 2000s that I came to realize my calling was more than a little boy's dream, and in 2012 I entered seminary.

I have been UU now for most of my adult life, and although I see the movement struggle with its own imperfections, I believe our theology is worth the work. I believe a religious practice should nurture the spirit to be able to give and receive love and respect with passion and generosity, with a preferential option for the oppressed, and our faith movement captures all of this in ways that always feel true and meaningful to me. I believe Unitarian Universalism is a much-needed antidote for our times.

Ministerial Roles & Functions

Share your ministerial presence and leadership style:

I have been told many times by both congregants and colleagues that my ministerial presence is pastoral and that my leadership style is as a voice of reason.

In my long career as a medical writer and brand strategist, clients and coworkers frequently commented on my calming demeanor and informal role as the voice of reason in any setting -- meetings, one on one, in front of a roomful of executives, or on stage before an audience at an industry gathering.

In any setting, personal or professional (including ministerial), I strive to meet people where they are and truly, truly see them -- for I believe a person can't really hear unless they believe they are fully seen.

My former colleagues often commented that they found my presence both resonant and indescribable. "You are a unicorn" and "I've never met anyone like you" were frequent comments. But I was just being me. I find it meaningful that others have found value in this uniqueness. Yet I insist that one goal of ministry is to help every individual find their own unicorn-ity; we all possess it; it is only a matter of locating it and bringing it out. I, too, have never met anyone like anyone else.

How do you function with church staff? What are your thoughts on staff relations and supervision?

Church staff members are the bedrock of any congregation. (Full disclosure: My wife has been the administrator for two corporate-sized congregations.) Because I've made my living writing and started out as a newspaper reporter, I regard deadlines as sacrosanct, and so many church staff I've worked with have expressed appreciation for my adherence to their timelines and needs.

As for staff relations and supervision, I have personally seen minister-as-CEO both work and not work. For any supervisory model, I believe the key is to be crystal-clear on roles and responsibilities for all staff positions (including the minister's as they relate to managerial functions), manage expectations, and schedule frequent check-ins.

Boundaries are important, too. If staff members are also members of the congregation, the minister plays a dual role as co-worker and counselor. Managing expectations here and being clear where to draw lines can help avoid conflicts and allow relations to run more smoothly. This can also be true when staff members are not members of the congregation, but may be easier to navigate as expectations may be different.

Having observed the life of an administrator up close for about 10 years, I've come to appreciate the importance of helping staff members manage their workloads and regularly offering personal recognition of contributions.

I see their role as critical to the life of the congregation and their work satisfaction is very important to me.

Regarding shared ministry what do you see as your work as minister? What do you see doing in partnership with the congregation? What do you see as the work of the congregation?

I have seen shared ministry work well and bring a special vibrancy to congregational life. A sense of ministering to one another through individual and group-centered roles and responsibilities can add not only meaning to one's life but accountability to others -- which in turn deepens that sense of meaning. These are good things.

In the spirit of congregational polity, I remain open to how a congregation might define shared ministry. My role is as "conscious partner," one who helps lead such a discussion and call people back to our shared covenant when needed as deliberations ensue, ultimately to ensure that however shared ministry is defined, it manifests in spiritually healthy ways.

The work of the congregation is to stay true to its definition of shared ministry and to honestly assess whether it is doing so on a regular basis. I have seen this work play out in my own experience and have further thoughts on the matter, which I can share should we have this discussion.

What role would you see yourself playing in the larger community?

I remember fondly a sermon given by the Rev. Gary Kowalski called "The Power of the Rev," in which he took a gentle but probing look at ministerial authority. The power of the Rev -- or the power of the pulpit or even the holler of the collar -- allows us ministers to speak out on social justice but also to serve as a calm and calming presence in public discourse. I see myself playing this dual role in the larger community, reprising what I have done throughout my earlier professional career as the voice of reason, while also calling on public officials and community organizations to be their best selves -- calling them to task, if necessary. I know from my work as a chaplain in one of the nation's busiest social safety net hospitals that serving as a calm presence can change conversations. I know from my first job in Boston as a young political consultant that gathering and organizing a collective voice can amplify voices for change and achieve desired outcomes. I intend to do both in the communities in which I exercise freedom of the pulpit.

How have you seen change happen in a congregation or community? What role would you see yourself playing in congregational change?

First as a layperson, then as a minister, I have witnessed the dynamics that lead to congregational membership decline as well as growth.

The chief dynamic leading to decline, from my view, is the presence of an "in" crowd of many years, many of whom may be growing older and tired, and the enormity of the volunteer tasks they had routinely taken on that new members balk at. It is very hard for newcomers to break into such a club, particularly parents of young children, because of long-running friendships formed, the age differences, and the cost of entry in terms of volunteer hours and the energy and dedication required.

The chief dynamics leading to growth, from my experience, are the presence of a charismatic minister and a more evenly distributed age mix. That everyone sees people of their own age in the congregation actually makes it easier for them to relate to other age groups as well. How do we get to this more equitable age mix? It helps to have a charismatic leader who nurtures relationships on all levels, who is just as comfortable telling a Time for All Ages story as as they are delivering an intellectually and emotionally stimulating sermon to adults of all ages.

I see my role in congregational change -- in this case, and perhaps most important to most Unitarian Universalists, membership growth -- as being able to attract a range of ages. I have used my skills as a magician to bring in young children and their parents, while also offering sermons that appeal to both intellect and heart, both humanist and God-leaning.

Aside from membership growth, appealing to all ages is just a healthy goal unto itself. We need to welcome -- and retain -- all voices in our congregations.

Describe how you handle being in a conflicted situation:

When I detect conflict, or when it is brought to my attention, first I listen. If I am told I am complicit in the conflict, I listen even harder and longer. If an apology is warranted, I apologize but don't rationalize -- I acknowledge the harm I've done but don't add to the other's burden by then explaining what I really meant to say

or do, and thereby place the other in the position of then making *me* feel better. This has been part of my training as a minister, and is an instruction I would offer others as well to help them manage through conflicts of a more personal nature.

In group conflict situations, as a voice of reason, I try to call people back to a larger or higher goal or principle that unites everyone -- something we can all agree on. If none surfaces, I default to reminding everyone that we are here to love one another and that everything else is details. As the early American Universalist Hosea Ballou wisely said, "If we agree on love, no disagreement can harm us. If we disagree on love, no agreement can help us." Things don't need to be perfect for us to get things done. That's what love is for.

Tell a story that deepened your understanding of what ministry is:

In 2005 I traveled twice to El Salvador, a tiny country with big problems, as a traveling magician with Magicians Without Borders (MWB). We performed magic shows for children and taught magic to teens who had been rescued from child labor situations and gang recruitment. We performed in schools, in huts, in the streets, in the shadows of volcanoes, even in garbage dumps.

Toward the end of our first trip, we were driven deep into a dump to see how many children lived and worked there. Whole families sifted through garbage all day to find something they might be able to sell in the city nearby. Tom, the founder of MWB, asked that we be allowed to get out of the truck and perform. Our hosts said no; it was too dangerous; they had just wanted us to see the conditions, which were desolate. Through the windows we watched barefoot children wading through mountains of garbage, with wild pigs, dogs and chickens running around. "Give us ten minutes," Tom begged. "Ten minutes. I would love to perform here."

Our hosts relented and we jumped down from the truck and did an impromptu show. I did a trick with little rabbits made of sponge in the hands of a little girl named Beatriz. They were the grimmest hands I've ever handled and a face I'll never forget. As Tom performed the big finish, pulling a long streamer from his mouth, an old woman jumped up and down, crying and clapping her hands. Clearly our audience had never seen anything like this.

As we drove away, everyone in the truck seemed lost in thought. Finally, Marian, a child advocate from our host organization, broke the silence. "Time has changed for those people," she said. "From now on, they will speak of the time before the

magicians came, and of the time after the magicians came.”

In the years since, I have asked myself, What is magic? What is ministry? My experiences in El Salvador gave me an answer I would not have had otherwise. We didn't rescue those families from their situation, but we gave them perhaps a seed of hope. Likewise, we ministers can't just go about solving other people's problems -- indeed, in our training we are cautioned to know the difference between pastoral care and psychotherapy and practice the former, not the latter. But we can give people something they might not have had otherwise. We can awaken their imaginations. That, in my mind, is real magic.

Tell about a mistake you've made in ministry and what you've learned from it:

In a macro sense, the biggest mistake I've made is not starting my formation sooner. I entered seminary years after deciding I wanted to, and the upshot is that I won't be able to spend as long being an active minister as I would have liked (although I intend to do this work until I drop). I answered others' calls before my own. I accepted volunteer assignments that were substantial and that kept postponing my applying to seminary. Looking back, what I finally learned was how to say no, and for the right reasons.

In a micro sense, more to the on-the-ground work of ministry, I now realize that some of my earliest attempts at preaching and leading worship used humor inappropriately. I don't mean off-color jokes. I mean injecting humor in an effort to be different and cool -- experimenting -- when in fact the sacred nature of worship deserves more intentional and respectful use of one's rhetorical skills. I still use humor, but only if I am 100% sure it is just what is needed, and I wield it gently, carefully -- a little goes a long way. Worship is not chemistry class and congregants are not experimental subjects.

What needs do you have to strengthen your ministry and how might a congregation assist you in this?

As a practicing magician of more than 50 years, magic has been an important part of my ministry since I stepped into the pulpit some nearly 20 years ago. I have used magic to reinforce teaching our Seven Principles while drawing upon

our living tradition's first source, "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."

I have continued to expound on this concept, most recently, in 2019, founding a nonprofit called The Meaning of Magic to teach magic to young people. Then the pandemic hit and I quickly morphed the concept to teach magic to UU middle-schoolers, an activity that continues. I would ask any congregation that calls me to consider bringing MagicLab to youth in their community as part of their social justice work, and, if willing and able, to help me expand the program.

I'm very excited about the possibilities of this nonprofit -- I see it helping aging adults and mental health patients as well, for example -- and can speak further to my vision and the specifics how a congregation could support it. You can learn more about it and my concept of magic in ministry by viewing the presentation I gave at GA 2020, "Tricks to Inspire: A Magic Ministry Workshop." (Workshop #309)

Describe briefly your ministerial approach to the following:

- **Worship and preaching:**

I grew up in church. I believe in church. From an early age I felt that what occurred in a sacred space should feel more special than what I was experiencing. When I first encountered Unitarian Universalism, the sheer creativity of worship services appealed to me, but what really drew me in was the commitment to delivering a meaningful passage of time for all those taking part.

That is my intention each time I prepare a worship service. I plan services and write sermons to move my listeners. My goal is for worshippers to really feel something that then might linger to feed their spiritual life. I pay particular attention to reinforcing our Seven Principles and Six Sources and often cite UU theologians and the prophetic women and men of our living tradition.

I've worked directly with dozens of worship associates, DREs and music directors. I've consistently sensed their appreciation in my willingness to collaborate, including as a musician (guitar, singing, occasional trumpet) and as a magician, especially but not limited to Times for All Ages.

In short, my ministerial approach to worship and preaching is to be a collaborator and inspirer.

- **Pastoral Care / spiritual guidance / counseling / home and hospital visitation:**

One of the most powerful actions a minister can take when providing any of these doesn't look like an action at all -- it is holding sacred space, serving as a calm and calming presence. Active listening allows the silence to speak and the petitioner to discover their own spiritual resources -- the divine inside -- which can be both helpful and satisfying to the person I am caring for.

Having said that, I also believe in providing pointers -- or, to be more precise, pointing out the pointers, such as a moment of grace the suffering individual has experienced that reminds them there is hope, there is love, there is a birthright to divinity we all can claim.

As for home or hospital visitation, I believe in the power of in-person attention. I am likely to drop everything to be at the side of someone in need. My chaplaincy at Boston Medical Center in particular taught me the life-affirming practice of a ministry of presence -- to affirm someone else's experience by actively being with them. I am called to journey with others. It's an honor and privilege to be with people at their most vulnerable and at such meaningful moments in their lives.

- **Children's religious education:**

For this and each of the following sections in religious education, I regard the minister as a partner and collaborator with the RE professionals. I've worked with many, either as a volunteer RE instructor, storyteller or guest speaker. For children's RE, my focus is on safe and spiritually healthy instruction in our principles and sources.

I see young children as viewing the world through a kaleidoscope ... constantly changing, everything seemingly connected, and the child in control as she twists the viewfinder. Her spiritual need is joy. One reason I brought magic into

church is so the very young could associate religious teaching with fun and surprise. And that is my approach, to bring magic into their lives in a rich and religiously contextual way.

- **Youth work:**

In my own work with youth, I have seen that they are in a tender and liminal place. (My experience as the parent of two boys reinforced this.) If as a child they viewed the world through a kaleidoscope, now they are using a magnifying glass. They are investigating, looking more closely, but everything appears larger and they are not always comforted by the greater detail they see. They themselves are growing, becoming larger, but they are still small compared to teens and adults. They can feel overwhelmed. My role is to tend to their spiritual need, which I see as acceptance. Youth are teetering on the springboard of adolescence, and they need to be able to try things out, especially their social skills and leadership style. My magic teaching program was designed to address these needs, which I can elaborate on in person.

As for teens, they are viewing the world through a microscope, discovering worlds within worlds. Their spiritual need is affirmation. They may be questioning everything else but need to know that no one is questioning them. They get to do that for themselves. They need to be allowed to discover that there is beauty in the complexity and that they get to play a part.

- **Adult religious education:**

I see the minister as a religious teacher-scholar. Although I have not personally taught adult RE, I would welcome the opportunity, as I am a student of UU history and theology as well as Biblical criticism, which I believe helps answer all sorts of questions adult UUs wonder about: What in the Bible is true? Is God real? Did Jesus really say all those things? What can we learn from Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, pagan/earth-centered religion, humanism, Christianity? Can I even have a conversation with my evangelical cousin?

As for UU specifically, I have a lot to offer in an educational setting, having studied UU history deeply (my first explorations focused on the letters of Judith Sargent Murray, an early feminist who married the Universalist John Murray). It is full of revelations for the adult who is new to Unitarian Universalism!

- **Incorporating music, the arts, and creativity into congregational life:**

I've long held that the arts can add vibrancy to congregational life. Be it music, poetry, dance, painting, theater or other art forms, creative expression can help individuals connect more deeply with themselves and with each other. Coffeehouses, Music Sundays, plays, musicals, arts and crafts festivals -- I have seen all of these bring people together and also live their UU values as they use creativity to seek truth and meaning in their lives. (I have directly taken part in many of these, too.) As a parish minister, I would champion any effort to flex a congregation's creative muscles, either by incorporating arts into worship services or through arts projects people could participate in as part of their spiritual practice.

It's not about being a magnificent performer or jury-rated artist, either. The point is to find joy in the giving and receiving of each other's creativity. One of our theologians, Henry Nelson Wieman, wrote in *The Source of Human Good* that the source of human good is creative interchange -- creating the conditions for creativity. The arts do that. I see them as vital to our living tradition.

- **Community building / facilitation skills / coffee hour and social times:**

Ministers should be seen as well as heard. I noted earlier that my ministerial style is pastoral. If we are to journey with our congregants, we need to walk among them, and if we are to take a lead in community building, we need to take part in congregational community life. Because any healthy community needs healthy boundaries, that also means the minister's taking part up to a healthy limit and not turn this commitment into 80-hour work weeks. Coffee hour is a natural time to connect (and I would be there) and social gatherings -- say, the annual Harvest Fair or spring flower sale -- are ideal times to be in community especially when the work of the community is taking place.

Being on hand also allows providing spiritual guidance when problems arise, such as hurt feelings, failed expectations ("We didn't sell many mums this year!") and conflicts among volunteers, say. This is where minister-as-calming-presence can help the community stay in community.

- **Committee / Task force work:**

Healthy congregations rely mightily on committees and task forces to get things done, while their Boards set policy. Whether I am part of a working group or not, my approach would be to help each begin its work (or year) by connecting their mission or portfolio with the congregation's covenant and, by extension, our Seven Principles. Part of my responsibility to any congregation is to guide it in doing its work in spiritually healthy ways.

The extent of my involvement, i.e., number of committees, number of hours apportioned, attendance expectations, may be laid out in the ministerial contract. If not, I would want to be sure expectations are clearly stated and agreed to at the outset, for another of my responsibilities to the congregation is to model healthy boundaries as well as healthy lifestyle, which includes a Sabbath -- at least one day/night of rest.

I would also want to review any policies regarding confidentiality of task force and committee meetings so that I might reinforce them, as I see honoring those confidentiality as covenantal. It also helps prevent unnecessary misunderstandings and even inadvertent violations of confidentiality.

- **Leadership development:**

Taking after the leadership expert Edwin Friedman, **I think of my approach to leadership development as "ecclesiastical immunotherapy."** In cancer immunotherapy, the drug trains the body's immune system to fight the cancer, rather than bombard the body with toxic chemicals and radiation to wipe out the cancer cells in the hope that they don't make a comeback. Those immune cells are what biologists call "highly differentiated." They know what their job is, and they do it. They don't try to do other cells' jobs. That's why they work so well.

In ecclesiastical immunotherapy, self-differentiated people -- folks who know who they are -- are the congregation's immune cells, preventing the church body politic from attacking itself from within, the way cancer cells do to the body. As Peter Steinke wrote in *How Your Church Family Works*, "Community needs immunity." (Steinke, 119) Ecclesiastical immunotherapy is the process of electing or appointing "immune cells" to positions within the congregation where others can see them model self-differentiating behavior, ideally to emulate that behavior. Immunity builds, and the body politic trains itself to fight dysfunctional tendencies from within. In time, those who come to emulate and adopt self-differentiating behavior in turn become candidates for leadership positions.

Eventually, the congregation becomes a healthier system in which it becomes easier to identify and nurture future leaders.

- **Long range planning / mission / vision / covenant:**

My approach is informed from having helped many organizations develop their own mission/vision/values statements as a brand strategist in the corporate world. As a church lay leader, I helped facilitate "covenantal conversations" when my congregation hit a bump in the road early on in the search for a new minister. I also created a branding workshop during that search that I led at Ferry Beach to help my congregation better define its identity and hopes for the future.

This approach is not unlike what is considered best practice for interim ministers, namely, to ask a congregation, "Who were you before, who are you now, and who do you want to be?" In a sense, any organization is always in the interim, heading from one point to another. The very essence of a living tradition such as ours is that we constantly seek to improve and grow to make a better world, for now and for generations to come.

This approach is all-inclusive -- at that Ferry Beach workshop, the youth played a lead role, for they represented the future. As a brand strategist, which also includes having been a market researcher, I want to make sure my congregation hears from all stakeholders and sifts through the data for nuggets of wisdom that help not only discover its best truths, but inform planning for the future and agreeing on how we covenant with one another.

- **Membership and membership growth:**

A CEO once told me, "The mission of any organization is to grow." The challenge these days for UU congregations is not to be just Welcoming Congregations but Keeping Congregations, and also Outreach Congregations. My approach, admittedly influenced by many years in marketing, is to professionally research a congregation's community and surrounding area for what is missing in people's lives -- and then envision how Unitarian Universalism *as practiced by that congregation* could fill this gap. What would the world dearly miss if our parish didn't exist?

The next step would be to write a positioning statement. Then a value proposition. Then promote that value proposition. When we say it, it's a positioning. When our *stakeholders* say it, when they've come to believe what we say is true, it's become a brand. Don't be afraid of that word. It simply means promises kept.

The other piece to the puzzle is retention. Part of my job is to help a congregation not just broaden its appeal but expand its inner life -- the spiritual connectedness at the heart of why we gather in the religious community in the first place. To create a sense of belonging for everyone -- not just the insiders, not just the lay leaders -- so that people not only stay, but tell others about this best-kept secret in town. Despite Facebook and TikTok and every other social channel, the most powerful form of advertising is still word of mouth.

I have many more thoughts about this -- I have pondered this challenge often as I have watched many congregations struggle with membership and growth -- and would look forward to a discussion focusing on this topic.

- **Anti-oppression work:**

I tend to work on people's insides to dismantle systems of oppression. By that I mean through sermons and by example, I exhort people to look at the bigger picture and understand the intersectionality of all forms of oppression. Although I look forward to joining other UUs in protests and other means of speaking out publicly now that I've graduated, my anti-oppression work during my ministerial formation has focused more on speaking from the pulpit and supporting myriad causes. I worked full-time throughout my seminary years

and had a number of life events claiming my attention, and had to allocate my time accordingly. Contributing financially, joining public events (such as the Women's March in January 2017 in Boston, when I wore the pink hat my wife crocheted) and online rallies during the pandemic have been my way of keeping my hand in until I can play a more public role as a settled minister.

- **Social justice / social action:**

I founded a nonprofit, The Meaning of Magic, so I could have a portable, long-term social justice project that, ideally, outlives me. Doing this exemplifies my approach to social justice: Find something that addresses systemic causes of injustice (teaching magic to children who may be at risk addresses many deficits in our society); match person to task; make it expandable (other groups, such as seniors or mental health patients, can also benefit from learning magic); and design it so that interested organizations (such as UU congregations or middle schools) can offer support to varying degrees.

My emphasis, however, is on creativity -- creating something different and innovative that naturally attracts interest and participation. This is a topic ripe for discussion with any congregation considering me.

- **Interfaith / community work:**

I believe religious organizations in general would benefit by speaking with one voice more often. I've both observed and participated in interfaith work and seen its benefits -- but those benefits, including a feeling of fellowship, are always short-lived. Since Unitarian Universalism is already perceived as religion's wild card, I think we can play a natural role in bringing faith traditions together for the greater good of a community -- we are *expected* to rock the boat a little.

Specific examples could include joint worship with a neighboring United Church of Christ congregation, temporarily uniting the two factions that split back in 1821 after the Dedham Decision. Working with a local mosque on a social justice project would help speak out against Islamophobia. Even volunteering to help paint a neighboring synagogue or church would be a very visible sign that for all our differences, religious people believe in love -- and that religion is a good thing to have in one's life.

- **Denominational activities:**

It's important to stay close to our denomination, and there are many ways to do that -- General Assembly (I presented at GA 2020), ministers association chapter meetings (UUMA), Star Island and Ferry Beach field trips and retreats, for example. There are also a number of Facebook pages (beyond individual congregations' pages) I personally consult, such as the UU Ministers Worship Collaborative and, for male-identified clergy like me, the Post-Bruno White Fellas Workin' It Out page, as a way to stay close to my UU colleagues and learn what other congregations are doing. There are also ample opportunities for ministers to volunteer for UUMA committees and other roles.

The pandemic made clear that individual congregations need the UUA, but also that the UUA needs us, too. The tag line for the UU Ministers Association is "Because we need one another." Going forward, I believe more intentional involvement with the UUA (made easier by, say, encouraging virtual GA attendance) could unite us as a denomination more and amplify our voice in the public square. I see parish ministers playing a role in looking for and promoting opportunities to engage at all levels of the denomination.

- **Stewardship:**

I define stewardship as the responsible and sustainable use of precious resources to achieve greater good. I've heard many ministers speak at least once a year (or multiple times during pledge season) about living our values through the giving of time, talent and treasure. This is a call to stewardship, but it is usually focused on this year's budget and the maintenance or reduced drawdown of the sustainability fund or endowment.

Going forward, with rising numbers of "nones" (those whose religion affiliation is "none of the above") and rising rates of churches folding, we need to look further into the future. As spiritual "steward-in-chief," I would appeal to a congregation to find news ways to instill a sense of stewardship in our members if we are to survive for the long haul. My approach would be to encourage the imagining of news forms of outreach and even new missions -- new causes or newly refined focuses on the causes that a congregation holds dear. New ways of "doing church." The "nones" may be nones because they

see nothing in what we have to offer. To bring younger people in -- future stewards -- we need to appeal to what is important to them, and, fortunately, research shows that what they seek is a sense of meaning in their jobs and how they spend their time. And isn't religion about meaning-making? We have what they want! We just haven't told them in a way they want to hear.

- **Finances:**

Good fiscal management is critical to our congregations, especially with razor-thin margins between "accounts receivable" and "accounts payable." The reality is that many of our congregations are struggling, to the point that finance issues can veer into the realm of pastoral care. I see the minister's role as helping leadership be guided by the congregation's covenant and stated mission in its fiscal policies, brainstorm through fiscal shortfalls or other challenges requiring practical solutions, and to counsel through budgetary woes. The minister is also fundraiser-in-chief, ideally with a strong supporting "cabinet."

- **Other areas not covered above:**

Ministry is, in part, an art of selflessness fueled by faith. In each of the areas in this section, I see part of my call to be removing myself from the center and placing another there -- a child, a teen, a committee chair, a Board member, a colleague, a victim of intimate partner violence -- anyone in my pastoral care or my ministerial purview. I truly rely on our Seven Principles to guide me and our Six Sources to give me strength. As a recently ordained UU minister, I can't point to years of direct experience in many of these areas. But I am solid in my faith, and in a community of faith, that provides some sure footing.

How do you build trust with a congregation and individuals?

Trust is at the heart of any relationship. I've noted elsewhere that I try to listen first and really see those I may be meeting for the first time or coming into relationship with. My chaplaincy supervisor said I have an ease about me that helps people relax and open up. I myself am not sure where this comes from. I know that I see our lives as fairly intricate dances between events and emotions, and I see that both pain and humor can live side by side.

Beyond that, it's pretty simple: Stay honest, do what you say you're doing to do, honor confidences, and make sure people know they can count on you. I've often reminded myself that the word *sermon* derives from the Latin *sermo*, which means conversation. To build and maintain trust, a minister is in constant conversation with the congregation, and that conversation remains truthful and faithful.

Describe your theology and the role of the ministry in a congregation that has multiple theologies:

God is the indescribable, self-surpassing reality that is with us, in us and for us; that which we cannot name that bids us to love beyond all human reason. Our encounter with this reality is what we call spirit, and our spirits always matter.

But it is more than God for me. In truth, theologically, I want it all: the Bible for the wisdom it contains through poetry, song and folk tales; the best of my Catholic upbringing (virtue as a strength; stay close to one's God); Earl Morse Wilbur's "freedom, reason and tolerance"; the wisdom of other world religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as earth-centered traditions; and I want what feminism and ecowomanism teach us about nurturing each other and loving nature. I want what humanism wrests from our corporeal existence to find a sort of heaven-worthy meaning—a theology seeking to be as good as God. Most of all, I want those Seven Principles shot through with the Six Sources of our living tradition. I call this theology Unitarian Universalism: the oneness of goodness and the goodness of all.

I believe that by witnessing to this theology as a minister, I can help people see that there is room in our UU theology for multiple faith traditions. It is right there in our Third Source: "Wisdom from the world religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." My role is to help people see that whatever their personal beliefs, they, too, have a religious home that honors what they may already hold sacred.

What questions do you hope our congregations are asking themselves and discussing?

A Top Ten:

1. What role should Unitarian Universalism play in today's world? Can we be stewards for that vision?
2. Who do we think we *need* to be, and who do we think we *want* to be?
3. What's missing in people's lives in our community? If we don't know, do we want to find out?
4. If diversity is a goal, how do we define it for our congregation?
5. If money were no object, what would we dream for our congregation?
6. What are we willing to let go of?
7. Where are our wounds?
8. What have we learned from the past that inspires us about our future? Who are our heroes?
9. How will we incorporate online activities into congregational life post-pandemic?
10. Should we call Rob?

How do you give and receive feedback?

I give feedback gently and receive feedback humbly. If I have a criticism, I am likely to approach someone privately -- I will never call anyone out publicly -- and always from a perspective that I may be misunderstanding something. As Stephen Covey wrote, seek first to understand, then to be understood. When my

feedback is positive, I am likely to celebrate that person publicly if appropriate. I also believe in the power of the handwritten note when expressing praise or gratitude.

When offered feedback, positive or negative, I listen first. In either case I express gratitude. If the feedback is critical or negative, I will want to know how the other person or people would like things to be and discuss how I could make it so. If the feedback is positive, I am thankful but also likely to share any credit. Ministers are not solo acts.

Should giving feedback be a matter of urgency -- an intervention, say -- I consult with others as to how go go about it fairly and in a way that honors our covenant with each other. (See note above about solo acts.) We then decide who should be involved and agree on the desired outcome.

How do you suggest your ministry with the congregation is evaluated?

Having worked on a committee on ministry, which included conducting a triennial survey of the congregation's shared ministry, and then a search committee, for which I worked on another survey -- I suggest that my evaluations be of a regular cadence (e.g., annually) and that they include space for the congregation to self-reflect or self-evaluate.

Taking a page from systems-centered theory, this would help me but also the congregation celebrate satisfactions, identify dissatisfactions, note new learnings and also uncover any surprises our shared ministry has brought forth. This allows us to move forward in a systematically healthy way, making any evaluation truly evaluating and not about judging (by judging I mean either positive or negative verdicts). I also believe this helps people feel freer to share their true feelings -- indeed, it can help them identify their own feelings more accurately, itself a healthy practice that can deepen our shared meaning-making.

What do you hope for the future of Unitarian Universalism?

I would like to see Unitarian Universalism get more credit for what we offer the world, not for our own gratification, but for greater awareness so that more people can join us at our table. I hope for Unitarian Universalism to begin to imagine itself as a much larger denomination and honestly question how it would manage itself if this came to pass.

I hope this for two reasons. First, if we dream bigger, that could actually help us *become* bigger. Second, if we question how we would operate at a much larger size, we might take a second look at how we second-guess ourselves all the time. If we doubled in size -- to about 310,000 members -- we would still be less than 1% of the U.S. population. Yet that would be a remarkable feat and have huge ramifications for how our denomination would be run. Dare we imagine such a thing? Are we self-limiting our visibility in the world? Are we content with being a best-kept secret?

I don't mean to imply that merely wishing for growth will make it so. But I am reminded of the prophetic words of Walt Whitman from *Leaves of Grass*: "I am larger, better than I thought; I did not know I held so much goodness."

What else would you like to say about your ministry and ministry skills?

My strongest skills are in planning worship and preaching, for that is where I began years ago with some natural aptitude (writing for a living) and have had a lot of practice over 20 years or so.

I have had limited experience with rites of passage, partly due to ordination being required to perform weddings. I've planned or played a main speaking role for a number of memorial services, but not many.

However, I know three things about me: I always want to give people something special; I am an excellent researcher; and I know when to reach out to colleagues for help.

Having said that, you would be getting a strong minister. I work hard and imaginatively. I have put myself to the test before multiple congregations and have sought feedback along the way. And I've been mostly successful, based on that feedback and continued engagements that have lasted years. I've more to learn -- I always will -- but I have a great deal to offer here and now.

Personal

What should a congregation know about your family situation?

First, they may rest assured that I am in a happy, healthy marriage. Janice (Zazinski) and I have been together about 11 years and married for five. It is the second marriage for both of us. We have two grown children (both from my first marriage): Jay, a labor union researcher, and Dan, a master auto technician. We have also welcomed into our fold Jay's partner, Stephanie, who has worked in child education and is now studying to be a veterinary technician. We're proud of them all, they all live nearby, and we see them often.

Janice and I understand, however, that a call to ministry may require us to move farther away from our children, and we are emotionally prepared to do so. Janice's parents live in downstate New York, and although we had wanted to stay within easy traveling distance, likewise we understand that that distance may increase. Fortunately, as we have seen during the pandemic, there are a number of ways to still stay close.

Just as I have a ministry, so too does Janice: In addition to her full-time role as a UU church administrator, she has build a dog training business called Janice Z Dog Training. Not only does this blend well with her religious identity as a Buddhist, it is highly portable business and can move with us if we relocate.

What should a congregation know about your health?

I enjoy excellent health. Although I have had some surgeries -- hip arthritis runs in my family and I have had both hip joints replaced -- I remain physically active and manage my weight well, keys to good health and preventing the onset of disease.

Near the end of my first marriage I was diagnosed with mild depression, for which I take an antidepressant daily. I also consult a psychotherapist as needed, which is seldom nowadays. At this point in my life, I am self-aware enough to know how to anticipate and manage any depressive symptoms or triggering events, and it does not disrupt my life in any way. That, plus raising one son with bipolar disorder and another with executive processing issues, has also made me very empathetic to others who may experience mood disorders and other mental health difficulties.

How do you take care of yourself so that the congregation does not have to?

As a medical/health writer, I wrote about nutrition, diet and healthy lifestyle for years, and I always endeavor to practice what I preached. I watch what I eat, keep everything in moderation, stay physically active and practice good sleep hygiene (I wrote about that, too) to stay well rested. I maintain a Sabbath practice -- one day each week to do non-work things I enjoy, namely, cooking, baking, art projects, learning and practicing magic, playing guitar and singing, even occasionally playing my trumpet.

Spiritually, I take care of myself through daily prayer, reflection and writing in a gratitude journal, and meeting monthly with a spiritual support group consisting of minister and chaplain colleagues. I also meet weekly with two seminarians as part of their support network, but I benefit as well.

Mentally, I do crosswords and occasional brainteasers -- math and science-y puzzles I can't resist. I'm learning to solve Rubik's cube. And I read a ton.

Emotionally, I write poetry and songs to try to create some beauty out of the things I'm wondering about. That often brings me joy.

How long do you hope your next ministry lasts? What's the minimum commitment you would make?

This is somewhat dependent on what positions are open and congregational need. For settled ministry (versus interim or sabbatical), three years is the recommended minimum commitment, and I hope and expect that my next post will meet and exceed that threshold.

Additional Information

Having served on a search committee myself, I imagine you are reviewing ministerial records documenting a wide range of experience and tenures. You probably have a number of candidates who have many years and several congregations under their belts (or Geneva robes, to be more precise). And here I am, 60 years old yet new to the field!

The ministerial life is singular in its experience, and I can't claim years as an ordained UU minister. I have, however, ministered to family, friends and congregants for years, to the point where they have often called me a minister, especially congregants. It has been a natural calling and one I've answered gladly.

I hope you have felt by what I've written into my record that I offer much and have every confidence in leading successful ministries. I wish for you the gift of a grounding discernment in finding your next minister, and a lot of love on the way.

With blessings,

Rob