

March Meeting Summary: Spiritual Diversity and Democracy with Lóre Stevens

3-26-2026 at the Scarboro Community Center

Lóre Stevens is the minister of Oak Ridge Unitarian Universalist Church. The church meshes well with her socially involved nature and enthusiasm for social activism. She is of Mexican-American descent, grew up in Powell, and has been overjoyed to return to East Tennessee. Lóre holds a Master's in Gender Studies as well as a Master's of Divinity from Harvard University. She has been the recipient of the UU Office of the United Nations Greeley Sermon Competition Award, the UU History and Heritage Society Research Prize, and was a



finalist in the Harvard Divinity School Billings Preaching Prize. Lóre enjoys science-fiction, illustrated journaling, and her two cats Twinkle and Tezzy. She has been very active in Oak Ridge and has spoken at the MLK Day at Oak Valley Baptist Church, the opening prayer at the Oak Ridge City Council, and other civic engagements. Lóre also answered the call put out by Minneapolis leaders for clergy to come assist them resist ICE overreach. In February 2026, during sub-zero weather, Lóre went to Minneapolis to join with hundreds of other clergy from all faiths in learning about and practicing non-violent resistance.

In her talk, Lóre described how spirituality is the feeling of connection with a higher power or ultimate reality, it is accessible to anyone regardless of their belief. When people recognize that they, and everyone else, is part of a universal wholeness that realization can lead them to act with compassion, nonviolence, and determination for the well-being of others. Religion, as distinct from spirituality, is the organized community aspect of spirituality. Religion varies based on a group's experience and worldview; however, all religions are connected, at the root, to the creative force of existence. The world's religions can be thought of as the many facets of the same big gemstone.

Throughout history, the forces of life and love reflected in the world's religions, such as Christianity, get used as tools for power and control – and separation. Currently, we are seeing some Christian groups forget the teaching to love their neighbors and enemies alike – and twist their message into Christian Nationalism justifying xenophobia and cruelty. Christian Nationalism has little to do with the teachings of Christ – although some national

government leaders would like us to believe they are one and the same. It is a way to grab power and justify xenophobia and oppression. It's about using religion for political control – a way to create an “in” group and an “out” group. When one group thinks it's right and everybody else is wrong there can be many horrors as we see all around the world in many many religions.

A fundamental power struggle in many religions around the world is the power between men and women. If we think about it, if only half the population has power those leading that half have even more power with a smaller cohort.

Our democracy was created with the principle of separation of church and state; however, the reasoning and details of this principle are sometimes lost. One argument in favor of the separation was that citizens should not be compelled to support, through taxation, religions they did not follow. As the founders were drafting the Constitution, the debate raged on about civil and religious rights. Eventually the solution was found in adding religious liberty to the proposed Bill of Rights – which allowed the document to move forward. One question we share with those founders is if there is a national religion which religion would that be – and which one of the many denominations within that religion would be the “winner.”

Here in Anderson County, we can see how easy it is to cross the church/state separation line. At the Anderson County Courthouse there is a banner “In God We Trust.” To many this is just a part of their everyday lives and goes unnoticed. However, if you were a Muslim or Atheist and had to go to the courthouse you could wonder if you would get a fair shot.

Some groups have used creative tactics to push back. They insist their guiding principles are posted in state capitals and courthouses along with Christian principles. That tactic has resulted in all materials being removed in some cases.

Freedom of religion (or from religion) is being eroded. We have to fight for the right to hold our own beliefs. We have to be vigilant and aware when our freedoms are being encroached and eroded. And then have the courage to stand up for ourselves and others. With all of us together the multi-faceted gem will be even brighter.

During the Q&A time, Lóre was asked about her experience in Minneapolis. There were between 600 and 1000 clergy from all religions and denominations – it was a bit like a United Nations gathering. On the first day she heard from local people who knew the situation on the ground and had excellent non-violent strategy training, such as neighbors supporting neighbors. It was heartening to see the citizens rise up with a common goal. The local clergy intentionally got arrested; however, they asked the out-of-towners to not join them due to limited resources for legal aide. There were so many people on the streets that

“marching” was not really an option. They were packed shoulder to shoulder. A very happy problem to have so many people on the streets.

She was also asked how to engage with people who are hostile. Lóre relayed a story about a chance encounter with someone who disagreed with her, but who explained their thinking. That encounter changed her perspective some and helped with her own personal growth. She shared another story about going to the Charlie Kirk vigil at the Peace Bell in Oak Ridge. She made a statement about the wrongness of violence regardless of a person’s views of the other person and wishes for the safety of those assembled. The response was hopeful surprise, and she still gets positive comments about her statement.