

From California to Olinda: a Ministerial Journey
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

It is with a mixture of Joy and sadness I stand here today. Joy at being here with people whom I consider to be my Canadian family. Sadness, of course, for the reason that I am here at all today is due to the untimely loss of Christine. I have lost a friend and you a minister – we have all lost a relationship that was important.

I am going to talk today about a relationship between a church and its minister – this church and me. I think that it is appropriate, for as my time here as a minister was unique, there is also something that weaves through all of the relationships that this church has had, and will have, with its ministers, which is a topic acutely felt at the moment.

In November 1978, I arrived here in this very room, to begin my job as the minister of this church. As my title this morning suggests, I am going to talk about what that meant for me, but I am also going to talk about what that meant for this church (at least from my perspective). I want this talk to be both historical and personal – it is really about the coming together of two entities: an established church and a new minister. I hope that it will be enjoyable to those of you who were here at the time, and I hope that it will be interesting to those of you who were not..

At the end of my remarks today, I have left time for congregational response (as I always like to do). This would be great time for people to share any of their own stories as to how I did and didn't fit in here. And in case you are wondering about any of your stories, I think that it is safe now.

To describe how I actually got here, we really have to start with the Church.

In 1978, the UU Church of Olinda was in transition. Rev. Leonard Thompson had decided to retire after many years of service. Rev. Thompson had been an excellent minister, especially for this church. He could be described as a country pastor. He was ordained in the United Church of Canada, and liberal in his outlook. Under his leadership, the maintained its tradition for independent thinking.

With Rev. Thompson's retirement, the congregation engaged in a serious discussion as to whether Olinda would be better off as an independent church, continuing its important role in the local community, or as a full participant in the North American Unitarian Universalist Association. Their ultimate decision was to go with Unitarian Universalism – this is what the majority of the congregation wanted – but the decision was not made without considerable debate and strong dissenting opinion. The decision was somewhat tentative.

Full participation in the UUA meant that they were required to hire the new minister through the denominational process. Leonard Thompson had been hired through a want-ad in the magazine of the United Church. The UUA acts as an employment agency for our churches and ministers – connecting churches seeking leadership with ministers seeking employment, and vetting both in the process. This process was much more difficult and costly than the want-ad, and the outcome was perhaps more uncertain. But they had made the commitment, so they forged ahead.

One thing that they had to do was to write a contract for the chosen minister and the congregation to sign. I do not know if the ministers before me here even had contracts. Within the process, there was quite an argument about one contractual item: namely, it was the minister's responsibility to shovel the snow in front of the church on Sundays. Some thought that this was too demeaning of the position to be put into the contract; others thought that it was of paramount importance. It stayed in the contract. Of course it didn't bother me one way or the other – I was from California, and had no practical understanding of what shovelling the snow really meant. But it is interesting how things work here, for while it stayed in the contract, I never really shovelled the snow on Sundays, except for some cosmetic touches, as other people always made it their priority.

So, contract and informational packet in hand, the UU Church of Olinda was searching for a minister through the established UUA process. At that same time, I was a new minister searching for a church. But why would I consider coming here?

In connection with my ministerial studies, I had arranged an internship in England. Once it was finally put together, I essentially served two neighbouring churches there for six months, with only minimal supervision. One of those churches was an old 17th Century Unitarian (or non-Conformist) church in a small village outside of the city of Sheffield. Almost all of the families there had been attending for generations. We developed a very warm relationship.

When looking at my options for a first ministerial position in North America through the UUA, Olinda appeared as the most likely to replicate that experience – a rural church with strong generational ties among its membership. It was also appealing to me because I could not find it on a map, and it was located in a country in which I had never lived. Being rural and Universalist-based both meant, to me, that I would likely be in a cultural environment different than my own background, and that I would have a lot to learn. These were good things in my mind. I dutifully applied for a number of different positions, but after reading all of the church packets of information, Olinda was actually my first choice.

It was also the worst paying position – by far – but hey, I was in this for love, not money, right? If I remember my salary was \$7000 per annum, but I would have free accommodation right here in the building – and, as it turned out, an endless supply of apples on my back doorstep.

So now back to the church. At the end of the lengthy search process, I don't think that Olinda had many choices. There were not many ministers who thought that the “middle of nowhere” was actually a positive description. And the pay was certainly problematic. I do not know for certain, but I think that the Search Committee here may have had, essentially, no other choice.

We had the pre-candidating visit, and then the full candidating week, and then the congregational vote, and the minister that was chosen after this lengthy, and somewhat self-sustaining process wasn't exactly another Leonard Thompson. What they got instead was a bearded hippy from California. To be honest, I was not really a hippy, but from an Essex County perspective in 1978, I am sure that it was hard for many here to discern the subtle differences. It certainly wasn't love at first sight.

Culture shock is a term that comes to mind. I don't think that it was as hard for me as it was for the congregation. After all, I had asked for it – I wanted to experience something different – but I don't think that such was ever the actual intention of the search committee or of the membership.

For me, outside of ministry, I had to learn some new things – things about living in Essex County, like the fact that the front doors of houses had no purpose, that eating corn was a sacred ritual, and that I couldn't get into my car after an ice storm. I also had to learn that people keep very accurate surveillance on everyone else by observing and noting where their cars were parked, and when. And of course, since I met my wife here, and we started dating, this applied to her car as well.

But for the church, I think, the culture shock was deeper than it was for me. I was American, urban and West Coast. Olinda was none of these. I also had little direct experience of the Universalist side of our tradition. Plus, I was an inexperienced minister, and was thus ignorant of some of the expectations of ministry learned through experience by both ministers and congregations. I think that we all kind of stumbled forward at first.

In one of the first months that I was here, I chose to host the Women's Association meeting at the church. At that time, this was the monthly meeting of a core group of women, mostly older, who were doing the lion's share of the daily/weekly work of the church. As host of the meeting, I provided the refreshments. My choice for appropriate snacks: bowls of nuts, dried fruits and banana chips, ch were apparently not the usual refreshments. Everyone was polite, but I learned that “appropriate” is a culturally relative term. It is also interesting that for the remainder of my ministry at Olinda, no one ever suggested that I host this meeting again.

As time passed, I began to learn the strength of this congregation. I attended the local area ministerial meetings, and I learned how unique this church was in Essex County, especially in its commitment to respecting others. I learned how a quite, thoughtful religious liberalism, predicated in a firm belief that critical thinking was also a part of religion, had not only sustained the members here for 100 years, but that it had also positively affected their neighbours. And I also learned that sometimes their message was not kept quiet, as when this congregation, a few years before my arrival, had taken a courageous public position regarding the inappropriateness of Christian prayer in the Public school system, for which they received harsh public criticism for being on the right side of both history and ethics. Universalism and Unitarian Universalism was taken seriously here.

And this is essentially why the majority of the congregation had voted to affirm their Unitarian Universalist identity in 1978, with their decision regarding ministerial leadership. Nevertheless, they then had to live with that decision, and it wasn't always easy. Most members believed that it was a time for change here, and I represented that change. At times, I could even be used as the excuse for change, to make it feel less divisive within the membership. In my two years of ministry here, a lot of change took place. Some of the suggestions and ideas were mine and some came from the members of the congregation, but nothing was pursued without the backing of a substantial core of long-term members. People began to trust me in this, and our moving forward together became less stumbling.

Here is a list of some of the more visible changes that happened in those two years: [note: when I delivered this sermon, I went into detail about these changes, but that was without notes, so I do not have a copy of what I said.]

- we began the lighting of the chalice
- we added response/discussion as a part of the Sunday service
- we changed the curriculum in the children's religious education away from Bible study
- we began evening adult religious education classes
- we created the Committee of ministry

- we began the writing of church bylaws, beginning with membership bylaws
- we started the routine of having coffee after the service, instead of everyone leaving right away
- we made changes to the Statement of Purpose, and moved its display from directly behind the pulpit. This was perhaps the most controversial of the changes.

More subtle changes were:

- an acceleration of the shift away from a Christian framework. While most members still considered themselves to be Christians, they were accepting of me framing the discussion on other models. Biblical preaching was certainly not expected, as Leonard Thompson before me had already moved away from that, by and large, but I used very few Christian references at all, which was appreciated by some and accepted by others.
- The promotion of more urban (so-called Unitarian) themes, especially on social issues – women's rights, war and peace, homosexuality, freedom of choice, etc. Most members really encouraged me in this regard, and I liked to find and stretch Universalist themes to fit the topics, themes such as salvation for all, God is Good, no Hell, actions speak louder than words, etc.

There were some things that I was not very good at:

- Perhaps the most significant for the congregation was pastoral visiting. I was OK once I got there, to the hospital or to someone's home, but I didn't get there at the level of frequency to which people had become accustomed. I didn't stop by and chat and involve myself in people's lives, in their general well-being, the way previous ministers had, and I think that people felt that loss.
- I didn't like, and thus avoided as much as possible, fund-raising. This was fairly easy to do because no one here liked to talk about money either. I did my part mostly by agreeing to live at an income which the Lloyd Fund and the low-level of member giving could support. But this was not really in the best long-term interests of the church. Ministers after me would help the congregation deal with this important issue.
- I was musically challenged, notorious for picking hymns that no one could sing. When I dared sing loudly enough for anyone to hear, it made it more difficult for the good singers to stay on key. I remember one member approaching me after a special service here and requesting, ever so politely, whether I might make sure that I was well away from the microphone during hymns, especially if the service was being recorded for posterity.

I was good at sermon writing – I had interesting things to say, and with time I improved in my delivery. For special services, such as wedding and funerals, I was able to connect well with people, and thus produce services that were meaningful and satisfying. I was good with people one-on-one. By and large, the human elements carried me through when some of professional skills needed support.

I was also helpful in the religious transition that the majority of the people here wanted. At the time, I was given lots of messages that most people wanted to broaden the perspective here, and that they wanted to broaden themselves. I was luck to step into such an environment; and I was also lucky that I realized that their desire for change here was in no way a rejection of their past, but really more an affirmation of that past. I respected the depth (often hidden depth) of conviction here, and I knew that people really thought about what they believed, even if they were somewhat reluctant to say so.

Change was certainly a focus at the time, but it rested on a foundation that people and relationships were critically important. We did not avoid controversy within the church, but we tried to validate all of the many possible paths which might lead us to the same conclusion. Consensus was not always reached, but the congregation remained united.

And through it all, we developed a strong and heart-felt bond. We got through our challenges because our obvious differences were, in fact, superficial, and beneath them, we were more alike than different. In the end, at least from my perspective, our relationship became more familial than professional (and perhaps there is an element of this in all first ministries). To this day, I think of the people here as my Canadian family – after all, they helped to raise me – and then they married me off and sent me on my way.