

Universalist Anchor

Following the Call to Ministry as a Christian Unitarian Universalist

By Eric Stetson

Eric Stetson is the founder and executive director of [The Christian Universalist Association](#), an ecumenical, interdenominational organization for individuals, churches and ministries that believe in Christian Universalism.

I grew up in an agnostic family, was a Baha'i for a few years in college, then became a Christian and joined the Assemblies of God, a moderate Charismatic denomination. After I came to believe in Universalism, I made many connections with Charismatics and Evangelicals who share that belief and had left the mainstream of conservative Christianity. In the last two years, I have been an active member of UNMC, and have found myself increasingly attracted to some aspects of the Unitarian Universalist tradition and the interfaith movement.

All of these parts of my spiritual journey have made a mark on my belief system and identity. Right now, I would describe myself as a "nondenominational liberal Charismatic interfaith-oriented Christian Unitarian Universalist." As such, I find it difficult to fit into any religious box, whether a denomination or specific organized movement.

Having a free-spirited, complex individual spirituality makes it very difficult to enter the ministry as a career. Most people who become pastors tend to do so while they still roughly conform to some standard, easily identifiable and classifiable type of religion – and then, over time, after they have already entered the pulpit, they may gradually move outside of narrow denominational boundaries, to the degree that they can do so and still keep or find a job leading a church.

I believe, and have believed for a long time, that my calling is to be a spiritual leader. I would like to become a church pastor. As I have been recently pondering with great seriousness my options for how to achieve this goal, I have realized that my extremely interdenominational and even interfaith tendencies pose a tremendous challenge, in terms of the intersection of my personal spiritual identity with my potential career in ministry.

One might ask, "Why not go to a Unitarian Universalist seminary and seek to pastor a UU church?" I deeply wish that would be a realistic path for me. In my heart, I would much prefer to remain in the Unitarian Universalist denomination, because it is the most open-

Services for July

Services at UNMC will begin at 11:00 A.M. throughout the summer

Sunday, July 5: "Surrender" Surrender is a natural process: We can hardly avoid surrendering to gravity, for example. So why does spiritual surrender seem so rare? Sue Mosher

Sunday, July 12: "There Must Be A God Somewhere" There are times in our lives, however, when that quest for connection with the divine leads to little more than a cul-de-sac of isolation and disappointment. Absorbed in the physical and emotional intensity of the moment, we feel estranged from God's presence. Drawing on his recent hospitalization, Seminarian Erik Resly will excavate traces of holiness amidst the rubble of hardship.

Sunday, July 19: "Alabaster Village" will be about Ferenc Balazs, a Unitarian Minister for whom the "Balazs Scholar" program at Starr King Seminary is named. Catherine Bocskor

Sunday, July 26: "A Complaint Free World" Too often we are quick to criticize, question, or gossip. There is a worldwide movement today which encourages people to refrain from doing all this verbal, negative behavior. The founders of a "complaint free world" offer us a way to accomplish this much needed behavior.

from the Heart ...

Reverend Henley is on vacation and professional leave until July 9.

See you in church, Pastor Lillie

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mindful and I would not have to worry about losing my job – or failing to get a pastoral position at all – because of my nonconformity to standard Christian doctrines or open promotion of the wisdom to be found in other religions.

However, the vast majority of UU churches are nothing like the UNMC I have come to know and love. In fact, my experience with the UU denomination outside of UNMC has shown me that a person such as myself, who wishes to promote belief in God, the soul, and the importance of Christ, would be regarded as little more than an oddity in almost all UU churches – certainly not someone they would wish to hire as their pastor.

I find this troubling and unfortunate. Nevertheless, it is the reality of the UUA today. I think the UUA has gone so far in the direction of being noncreedal that it has sacrificed its ability to provide a deep, coherent spiritual message for hungry souls. There are a few UU churches such as UNMC that avoid this problem, but not enough to make commitment to this denomination a viable option for an aspiring pastor who has beliefs such as my own – which ironically, are very much in accord with the historical beliefs of both the Unitarians and Universalists!

In fact, I suspect that if most Unitarian and Universalist pastors from 100 years ago were starting out in the ministry today, they probably wouldn't be able to get a job as a pastor of most modern-day UU churches, because the congregations would regard them as "using too much 'God language'" or "being too Christian." How ironic!

Similarly, such a minister would still face problems finding a job pastoring a church in most, perhaps all Christian denominations, for they would be told they are "too focused on weird, unorthodox doctrines such as 'universal salvation'" and are "too interfaith" and "don't believe Jesus is God." Probably a fair number of United Church of Christ congregations are liberal enough to accommodate such a pastor's theological eccentricities – but I doubt that the number of churches even in that denomination (the most liberal in Christianity) that would want to hire such a controversial pastor is very high.

So, if I go to a Christian seminary and seek to become a professional pastor, the job market for someone like me is going to be rather limited. However, that doesn't mean it's impossible or not worth trying. It just comes with a lot of uncertainty and risk. These are issues I am considering as I make my decision of how to move forward.

What I do know is this: No matter which denomination or tradition I end up in, I would be an unusual minister – not the cookie-cutter version. That means I would have the opportunity to become a transformative spiritual leader, a pastor who could provide a new model

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for church that is different than the norm, perhaps drawing from the best of the liberal Christian, UU, and Charismatic traditions. What it also means is that following my calling will be an especially challenging and perhaps lonely road ahead.

I believe that UNMC is the closest thing I have ever seen to the perfect church in terms of its overall spirit, message, and polity. Sure, there are some things I would change if it were up to me – such as making the worship style more contemporary and flexible – but in general, I think UNMC is doing a lot of things very uniquely right!

I think it's absurd that our church is so unusual. There should be dozens, even hundreds of churches like UNMC. I would like to encourage this special, God-anointed church to take more concrete steps to see itself as a missionary model for new churches to be created or existing churches to be modified in its image, and for a new generation of liberal Christian Universalist pastors to be inspired and assisted in their path toward the pulpit through this singular and historic institution.

I am deeply grateful to UNMC for providing me with a living, working example of the kind of church I someday hope to serve as a pastor, and for giving me opportunities to be involved, even to preach. Hopefully in the future, there will be many such examples of liberal Christian, openly Universalist churches all across America. God willing, perhaps my own efforts in ministry can add one to the list someday..

Sharing Our Plate in July

Each month we share 10% of our free-will plate collection with a non-profit organization that works in our neighborhood and gives to those in need. In July, UNMC will share ten percent of its collected offerings with HIPS (Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive.)

HIPS' mission is to assist female, male, and transgender individuals engaging in sex work in Washington, DC in leading healthy lives.

Utilizing a harm reduction model, HIPS' programs strive to address the impact that HIV/AIDS, STIs, discrimination, poverty, violence and drug use have on the lives of individuals engaging in sex work.

HIPS was formed in 1993 by community and police representatives in response to the recognized need for specialized services for youth engaging in sex for gain in Washington, D.C.

INTERWEAVE

Last month UNMC Interweave members took Brother Perry's suggestion and like Jesus we were fishers of men and women. On June 14 we shared a festival booth with All Souls Interweave / Lambda Souls at Capital Pride. UNMC people staffing the festival booth included Marti Martinson, Kari Amidon, Eddie Smith, Ron Eanes, Devry Becker, Ruth Vader and her partner. Ruth and her partner won the prize for hooking the most people! UNMC gave out Welcome Brochures, free pens with UNMC's address, copies of the June Anchor and copies of the summer UU World story about Universalism.

Ron Eanes created a UNMC bulletin board of pictures and information for the table. Many people who came to the festival table were surprised to learn that UNMC is a welcoming, inclusive and a liberal Christian church. Other UU's, friends and even Carolina stopped by on her bike too! However, the UNMC festival table had competition from Episcopalians on one side and Lutherans with a table on the other. But Padre Marti enjoyed having religious discussions with everyone from various faiths. Overall the festival booth was a successful outreach effort for the church and we had fun too. The following Sunday we had two newcomers that learned about UNMC at Capital Pride. Hopefully more newcomers will attend in the coming weeks.

In addition, Interweave is planning a tentative social for Monday, July 20 to see a Nationals baseball game on gay and lesbian night.. Tickets will be available to all. For additional information, call or email Ron Eanes.

Midsummer's Eve Repast at Leland Place

The men of Leland Place enjoyed oven-fried chicken, hearty vegetarian pasta fagirole, tossed salad, and vanilla ice cream with blueberries and strawberries on Saturday, June 20.

Thanks to volunteers Angela Khaminwa, Emily Skidmore, and Dave Skidmore--and to Sankar Sitaraman, who dropped by briefly and provided a much-appreciated assist on the chopping.

Our next meal is scheduled for Saturday, July 18. Volunteers should RSVP to Dave Skidmore or the office at office@universalist.org by Thursday, July 16. We plan to gather in the church kitchen at 2:30 p.m. and carpool to Leland, on North Capitol Street, around 5, returning to the church by 6:30 p.m.

Volunteers share the cost of the meal, usually between \$15 and \$25 a person. Anyone interested in volunteering only their time is welcome. See Dave or Pastor Lillie.

Leland, a facility of SOME (So Others Might Eat) is a halfway house for men recovering from addiction.

JOINING UNMC

Our path to membership is a series of three events on a regularly scheduled, cyclical basis throughout the church year. Each is scheduled for 90 minutes, which should allow some time for fellowship. We invite and encourage all who are interested to attend, ideally—but not necessarily—in order.

Kindred Spirits is a gathering of newcomers, guests, and other members of the congregation interested in exploring their spiritual journeys. ***Get to Know UNMC*** provides newcomers, guests, and interested others useful information about Unitarian Universalist history and the history of UNMC. ***Thinking About Commitment*** is for all those interested in making a commitment to the works and ministries of the Church, although no one is obligated to join the church upon attendance. It is a time when participants explore what it means to be part of a religious community.

THE SURENESS OF HEAVEN

Owen Brown was pro-choice on the Other Side—not because he didn't have questions, but because he wanted to stop the suffering. Some of those questions arose from what he thought could be prenatal memory. Here's what he wrote in his journal:

I am jarred. Awareness. I breathe in-out, in-out, almost passively. Silky liquid streaming, caressing, through nose, mouth, lungs. Feels good.

* * *

I had no sense of temperature, air, light, dark. Shaken out of a deep sleep, all I wanted was to return to it. Unconsciousness pulled me quickly back.

*Somewhere around the age of six, this "memory" caused me to announce, "I can breathe underwater." I put my face into the little swimming pool at the foot of the hill, breathed in, and nearly choked my lungs out. Mother says about halfway through the pregnancy she went into labor and had to be rushed to the hospital. She nearly lost me.**

* * *

After he came Home, Owen still had questions, so God stepped in:

"Tim, why did God send you to me?"

"I was aborted in a clinic at Virginia Beach near the end of my second trimester."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I feel fine."

"Did it hurt?"

"No. My brain wasn't wired for consciousness yet, but my mother had us both anesthetized, just in case. No moral abortion allows unnecessary pain—certainly not for the one not choosing it."

"But what happened to you?"

"Nothing."

"Tim. She killed you."

"She didn't. She didn't conceive me either. God did. If I'd come to term, I would have been me."

"Did you have another mother?"

"I did, and I was born right. Everyone is."

"So abortion is not wrong."

"What's right or wrong depends on what works. Don't let 'ideas' get in the way. Except this one: It's all based on how well we respect the person. Every person."

"I've always thought it's best if a baby is loved from moment you know it's there, and the sooner, the better."

"That's true, but my first mother needed the experience. She had assumed abortion was murder until I came along and forced her to think. Paul's words to the Romans* helped. Then she remembered a definition of love she'd heard somewhere: *Love wants the beloved to Be*. And the sun came up. This wasn't about her *or* me. It was about her *and* me. We were in this together, and we were both in God's hands—Safe, no matter what."

"Was anything wrong with you? *Spina bifida*? Mental retardation? Was she raped?"

"Nothing like that. She didn't want a baby, so she didn't have one. Don't get bogged down in the details, but here's a hint: It would be wrong for the moment-of-conception you to mean everything and the possible you to mean nothing."

"My cousin Anne was a late child. I'd look at her and those two ponytails, hanging onto Teddly, her old stuffed bear with the eyes pulled out, and think, *What if Anne hadn't been born?*"

"What if *Dean* hadn't been born? Are you going to tell me, 'If there had been no Dean, it wouldn't have made any difference?'"

"No!"

“Exactly. Chance is a terrible thing, but let’s say that’s how it is. That would mean if you aborted a malformed fetus and tried again, the first child wouldn’t suffer, and the next would get a chance to live. What’s wrong with that? Not to mention, if you were the child of rape, wouldn’t you be glad your mother was raped . . . just once? Owen. There’s something wrong with this picture.”

“I think I see the point: Chance is impersonal, meaningless, which means it’s amoral. That’s why it doesn’t make moral sense to think abstinence is right no matter who isn’t born and abortion is wrong no matter who is.”

“You do. Confusion arises when we think what’s right depends on something other than the thing itself. Believe this, that’s right. Believe that, this is. We need a Principle, and we have one: The Person always comes first, which is why a sensible moral code is pro-choice *and* pro-life: 100%.

“Personhood weaves a seamless cloth. Let me give you a couple of related examples: Whoever controls the pain has the power, so if it’s your pain, it’s only right that every morning you wake should be your choice—not somebody else’s. The right to die is the right not to be a slave. It is just as much a right as the right to live. And consider this: To watch someone, wanting to die, begging to die, and there you sit, on your hands, praying to *God* to intervene? You wouldn’t do that if someone was begging to live, now would you? And what if God sent *you*?”

“So we really are Free. . . . But, Tim, since everyone is born who can Be, what about the bad ones?”

“Everyone born of God is good. A ‘bad’ person? An ‘imperfect’ person? It’s an impossible possible—a paradox. Like Hell. God is the Radiance. You are born of God. You are a Radiance, too.”

“So no one is left out.”

“No one. And the true you being absolutely and unalterably Good is no more ‘limiting’ than God is ‘limited’ because God doesn’t, won’t, can’t ‘choose’ to be bad. Never forget: Goodness is the truest form of Freedom there is. And Goodness is not only beyond Being, it is Being. If we really knew what we were

doing, why would we harm ourselves? That’s what evil means, you know: Against us. Where’s the ‘freedom’ in that?”

“Then we are as free as God. But it’s subtle, Tim. In a proper moral code, no one *can* be left out. If you care for others—all others—you have to see that abortion, suicide, and euthanasia all make sense.”

“But remember, Owen, if suffering didn’t have a purpose it wouldn’t Be. Good comes of it. How do you think we got to be human in the first place? We are the children of love and war. You can’t look at things moralistically . . . yet I must say, if it wasn’t for the Plan, it would be a tragedy.”

*“But all is well, and all will be well . . .”**

“. . . and all was well . . . all along.”

-- Kirk Perrow III, © 2000 rev. 2009
a chapter from his book-in-progress, *The Heaven Tales*

*This may be a real prenatal memory. – Kirk Perrow III

**Romans* 8:38-39: For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things that are to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God. . . .

*Julian of Norwich

The editors encourage other writers at UNMC to send their writing for inclusion in an upcoming Anchor.