

My Vision for Ministry with You

Rev. Roger Jones, Senior Minister Candidate

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
Sunday, January 12, 2014

Music: *Hymns:* Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; 346, Come Sing a Song with Me; 298, Wake Now, My Senses. *Special Music:* Oh, Freedom, guitar instrumental by [Ross Hammond](#).

Shared Offering: [WIND Youth Services](#)

EXPLANATORY NOTE: A Board member makes a reminder announcement that voting members of this congregation will meet on January 26 to vote on calling Roger Jones as the settled Senior Minister. The USSS constitution says that a 90% *yes* vote is required to call a minister.

Sermon

In a political town like Sacramento, anybody called a *candidate* might have his or her message scrutinized to see if it covers the laundry list of preferences and priorities for the voters. That's not possible here. Not enough time. And there is just too much diversity in a Unitarian Universalist congregation to cover all the bases.

For those of you who will be making a major decision in two weeks, I will articulate some of my ideas for the future and highlight the momentum we've achieved so far. For those of you who are new visitors, I hope to convey some of the spirit and promise of this congregation.

My vision for this congregation is that we empower ministry. Not merely my ministry, but your ministry. Everyone's ministry. Long gone are the days when professionals were the only ones who did ministry. There was this idea that church members would show up to provide an audience, do support work, attend meetings, and pay for the ministry. Bad model. No Lone Ranger ministry for me. We are all in this together.

Having ministry as my *job* means that I think about this congregation *a lot*. I devote my time and my life to it. It means that I serve with you in leading it, and cheer you on in the ministries that call to you. I strive to empower, equip, celebrate and reflect on our personal ministries and those we share.

This is a place where ministry is already happening.

On the Sunday before Labor Day, several children from our Kids' Freedom Club did a service with me about modern-day slavery around the world. Many of us had thought slavery was a thing of history. What an eye-opener. By various fundraisers the kids and their adult supporters have raised over \$4,000 in donations, since last summer. Every time they send \$94 to the Free the Slaves organization, we celebrate bringing freedom and safety to one more human being.

I want us to encourage and guide this kind of creative ministry, wherever it might spring up. Several years ago, this congregation became a hosting site for Family Promise. Our leadership team coordinates volunteers as we host homeless families, providing a safe place to sleep, an evening meal and breakfast. We play games with the kids and hear the stories of the parents. We are together, present as human beings.

Other ministries have sprouted up here--the Envoys to our denomination's office at the United Nations. The monthly toxics recycling boxes, our presence at Pride Fairs and peace vigils and Martin Luther King holiday marches,... cooking meals at shelters, the Saturday cleanups on the American River Parkway.... Some of this may be your ministry. I don't need to list it all, because we have the *Pathways* brochure.

Perhaps your ministry is to be a smiling face on our team of Greeters and Ushers, or to make tea and coffee for Sunday morning or memorial services. Perhaps it is to give a ride, lead a group, chair an event or a committee, teach a class, raise money, or give money away.

Perhaps your ministry is a subtle one, now after many years of activity. Your ministry is to be here, showing kindness, giving encouragement. Or maybe your own ministry is beyond these walls, and we are your home base, your launching pad. You come to church to renew your spirit, restore your sense of purpose, sit in silence for one blessed minute in a noisy week. Guess what! By coming here, *you all* enable others to have that experience of a spiritual home base. That is a ministry.

What new ministries can you envision for us? I hope to hear about them. Here are a few of mine.

Imagine that we are back here in this building after a year of construction. It is bigger,

brighter, and beautiful. And it's insulated! In the ceiling and the walls, we now conserve energy. Above my head is a projection screen, for gorgeous photographs to illustrate sermons or ease us into meditation. A lovely raised wood platform goes from here to here [in front of the stage]. Over here [to my left], our grand piano. Over there [on the right], on one Sunday a trio of percussion, guitar and bass accompanies our singing with a bounty of jazz, Gospel, and world music. Another day, a different ensemble inspires us with classical and sacred music. Our choirs include adults *and youth*. They shine as they sing to us, because that is their ministry.

Back there, to my left...the new main entrance and a spacious Welcome Hall. Not far outside are a new bicycle rack, special needs parking, and a drop-off driveway so you don't get wet in the rain. And let's imagine it is raining! We need rain! But in any case, now our landscape is filled with native, drought-resistant plants.

Entering through that new Welcome Hall are people of all backgrounds and stages of life. Long-timers can't wait to see what's new this week, and to meet *who* is new. Recent visitors have come back for another Sunday of centering, deepening, and connecting. Through gleaming glass and wood, first-time visitors make unsure steps inside, hoping that the real thing of religious community bears some relation to what they've read on our website.

We are families with kids, nature lovers deferring their Sunday hike for a few hours, and young people in their first job in a new town, hoping to connect and belong. And we are the newly retired, now seeking new ways to serve, seeking ways to put our talents to use by our free choice rather than as a job. We are empty nesters, and we are elders, looking to reflect on our life story along with others, seeking to make meaning of our journey.

After services, there are so many tables for activities, events and ways to serve that you will think every Sunday is an Opportunity Fair. You can learn about an adult and youth backpacking trip in the summer. Register for an all-ages retreat on a Saturday on this campus, when kids, parents and other adults walk the Labyrinth, work on the grounds, and share a meal without speaking--an eating meditation for all ages. You can sign up for tutoring in a local school, teaching English as a Second Language, or lobbying the Capitol on

legislation that we have been learning about. You can find out about the *five* ongoing discussion groups on weekdays, up from two right now. Sign up for groups doing meditation, prayer, Yoga, journal-writing, earth-based rituals, and Bible study for seekers and skeptics. You leave on Sunday, looking forward to the week ahead.

Now imagine it's Wednesday or Thursday evening. People stream in at 5:30, driving from work, or coming by bike, wheelchair or motorcycle. We come by Para-transit, or walking from the bus stop, or with a lift from people they have come to know in a small group. In our new kitchen, a rotating weekly group of volunteers is making a meal of soup, salad and bread. Or perhaps we splurge and hire some culinary students to nourish us. At 6:00 PM, we *sing* a blessing for the meal, because there are too many people to get it quiet for a spoken grace. After supper there is a 30-minute evening worship service in a large classroom. All ages can hear a story and a message, sing some songs, move our bodies, then take a few minutes to center ourselves and remember what is important to us. After worship, there is child care, choir practice, a room set aside for homework, a New Member class with a tour of the campus, and a weekly drop-in discussion about UU theology, history and social action. Outside groups who rent a meeting room here will *wonder* at all the activity in our congregation.

This ministry is possible here. I've seen it in St. Paul, Minnesota, and at our church in Berkeley. It's happened in Charlottesville, Virginia, and in Walnut Creek, and elsewhere.

In my vision, this congregation is a place where kids and youth have mentors and friends of all ages who listen to them, welcome their insights, and model ways to be authentic, generous and hopeful. And you know, it's already happening. In our Community Garden, at our Tree Trimming party, at the all-church camp on Father's Day weekend. It happens in our kitchen, in Sunday school, on overnight youth retreats, in Coming of Age programs, and with youth bringing their music and spoken reflections into Sunday services.

These days, few places exist where people of all ages build community together. This is one of those places. You brought me here to be the Family Minister back in 2008. Since then, I've watched kids growing up and gotten to know many of you. I've shared the joys and sorrows and struggles of

your lives. Since moving into the acting senior ministry last July, I've realized that I'm still the family minister, in a way. That's because I see myself as the minister to the *whole church family*. This is the kind of congregational family I want to belong to.

But we strive to be more than that. Our values inspire us to reach out in compassion and service. For example, in a service I led on August 18, three Unitarian Universalists talked about visiting county jails to connect with undocumented immigrants detained by ICE [U. S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement]. We called the service, "Touching Hearts through Bullet-Proof Glass." More UUs have joined on these visits. Last month JoAnn invited us to pick up the name of a detainee and send a Christmas card to them at the jail. Later, one jailed immigrant told a UU visitor about another detainee, a man from Vietnam who has been held for a long time. He got a Christmas card, and he doesn't know English. Maybe he doesn't know Christmas either. But he knew that someone from outside the jail had written a card to him, his first card from a U.S. American. When he opened it, he sobbed. I am so grateful for this ministry. We call it Faithful Friends, and now there are members involved from four UU congregations in this region.

My vision is that USS reaches out to build strength with Unitarian Universalist congregations in this region. I want us to be a flagship congregation in our UU Pacific Central District. Guess what, it's already happening! We brought the creator of the Spirit Play curriculum to train us. To cover the cost, we invited people from other churches in the district to send volunteers here for the training. We collaborated with the Livermore and Stockton congregations on a week-long journey of service projects in three cities. They were here one evening. After dinner, we had worship and I gave them a historical tour of our campus. Then I slipped out, while our overnight volunteers stayed overnight with them--sleeping on the floor!

We have hosted the district-wide training for teachers of Our Whole Lives, the UU sexuality and values curriculum. Two years ago, we launched a summer day camp based on UU identity. This summer will be our third in a row to hold Chalice Camp. Recently, the UU minister in Reno called me to ask if their Youth Group could collaborate with our Youth Group on some shared activities. I

said: "I'd love it!" And I connected them with Miranda, our Religious Education Coordinator.

As a larger congregation, we can extend the reach of Unitarian Universalism in this region. We could launch satellite locations in towns that are a long drive away and too small to support a full-service congregation with a full-time minister. *Imagine*—miles away, in a rented hall, a group gathers in the afternoon to watch a web stream of the morning sermon, but they sing together and light their chalice. They have their own Sunday coordinator. Also, our ministers take turns in going there to give an afternoon sermon at the satellite. With staff support, people at the satellite site would find social action opportunities that meet the needs of *their local area*. People here on Sierra Boulevard *plus* those gathering at the satellite site on Sundays are members of one congregation, but in two locations-- maybe three or more. Things like this have been happening at our large churches in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Rochester, New York, and San Diego--stretching our ministry and our UU message. This could happen here.

It's getting harder for smaller congregations to afford a full church staff, but the needs for paperwork, bookkeeping, and online technology do not shrink. By connecting with smaller congregations in this region, we can share staff resources. By sharing administrative positions, we all save money. *Imagine*--we can join with a group of UU churches to fund a regional social action minister, a pastoral care chaplain, or a director of adult programs.

This congregation can be more engaged in the issues of our state. Imagine that our campus is a hospitality center for UUs coming from around California to lobby with the UU Legislative Ministry, which has just renamed itself the UU Justice Ministry of California. The Justice Ministry aims to help each congregation find and express our own social action ministry. The new Executive Director will speak here on Sunday, March 9. I hope you can meet him.

Imagine if the Justice Ministry were to rent a small room here at USS for its office, and relocate from downtown Sacramento. (Sometime later, of course, after this building is expanded.) Giving us a little more income, this also would save the Justice Ministry from rising rents downtown. It would make us a hub of Justice Ministry. UUs around California would look forward to visiting us.

I couldn't make this happen, but if you choose, we could do it together.

A minister can be the link or the initiator for many programs, for all kinds of ideas. However, it is the effort and enthusiasm of our members that make it happen. Shared ministry is powerful ministry.

I have a story about it. Nineteen years ago as a minister in training, I was co-leading an eight-week class for adults with a lay leader. Each session focused on some aspect of our life journey. I will never forget the ministry that occurred in meeting number 3 of our class. There was a single man in his 50s. He had lost his job a year before and was living in an extra room at the house of an elderly woman in the church. When his turn came to speak in this meeting, he told us that when he was a boy of six, his father had died unexpectedly. He regretted that he had not thought to tell his dad that he loved him before his dad died. "I didn't tell him," the man said, and he began to cry.

I did not have a very useful answer for him, but I did respond. Before I spoke, I paused for a few moments, and the group was quiet. Then I said I appreciated his honesty and his tears. I appreciated his risk to be open with us about his pain. I said it was a compliment to our group.

Perhaps one reason I did not have a more helpful answer for him was that when I was 14, my own father died unexpectedly of a heart attack at home. My parents and I had a habit of a good night kiss and saying "I love you." But the night before my father died, I refused to do so. At 14, I was feeling distant from him. Perhaps I was mad at him. In any case, I felt guilty about it, and I kept quiet about it for years.

In our class in that church, after I thanked the man for his honesty, I invited the next member to speak. This next man was about 40, a cheerful man. He had a wife and baby at home. He looked at the man who had just spoken and said, "Before I tell you my story, may I say something to you?"

"Yes," the other man said.

The younger man said: "I'm a dad. My son is two years old. And even though my child hasn't said it yet that he loves me, I know. *A dad knows.* I can see it in his eyes when he looks at me. I know he loves me. Your dad knew you loved him."

This was a moment of ministry and a moment of grace. It was a ministry to all of us, including me. It was a gesture of love that no

professional minister could have created or engineered. Of course, my co-leader and I had planned that class and set the expectations for how it would run. We had invited people to attend. We prepared before every session. But what happened was a shared ministry of each to all.

This is my vision of ministry: Set the stage and make the invitation, so that we can evoke *your* ministry to the world, and point it out to you, and give thanks for it. In the days to come I ask you to think about *your* ministry.

Last year I spoke with one of the ministers of the Mount Diablo UU Church in Walnut Creek. It now has the largest attendance and membership of the churches in our district. If you are keeping score, we are #3.

I asked her: "Why do you think you have grown so much in five years?" She told me that their building expansion and renovation had infused more energy into the congregation, giving new vision as well as more space. Good to hear.

However, a few months later, I was having dinner with two members of her church, who have been my friends for many years. They gave credit for the growth to their ministers. More opportunities for service to the community, more social events, more adult education and small group ministry programs, more intentional hospitality, and a culture of gratitude and generosity.

I'm sure they are both right. The right mix of ministers and members generates new ways to reach out and more ideas for coming together. Shared ministry is the right mix. My vision is to keep mixing it up with you.

I offer myself to you in faith and with joy. But more important than what I offer to you/ is what we can offer together, offer to the world beyond these walls. What matters is what we offer to the people who will come seeking to share in what we have to offer, people who come seeking and finding this community of spirit and promise. So may it be.