

Walking the Talk

(Version 1a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on February 4, 2017, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP

SLT # 434

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds.

The meditation will conclude with a Liturgical Dance by Karen Mallah.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

Walking the Talk

Reverend Michael Walker

I have often heard people use the phrase, *walking the talk*, as a way of suggesting that what we do is more important than what we say. It implies that the way to accomplish good in the world is to actively work to bring about that good, and not just talk about it.

On a smaller scale, how does this church walk its talk; how do we work to improve the world, as well as ourselves? Let's ask ourselves from time to time, do we **walk our talk** within our walls? The 'talk,' in the context of UU churches, includes our Seven Principles and the Covenants we make with each other. During

interim ministries, we have *Interim Tasks*. As I share these with you, consider the progress we have made together, and also what we can do in the future to ensure this is always a welcoming spiritual home and a congregation that works for justice and compassion.

We are partway through the second year of the second interim ministry in a row here. Some worry that UCH will have a total of five years of interim ministry prior to calling your next settled minister. I encourage you to *not* worry about that, because there's been significant progress in promoting congregational health, stabilizing finances, and developing realistic plans for your future together. When a fellow minister calls me, because they're thinking of coming to work here, I will

describe our work together on the five *Interim Tasks*.

This is a standardized structure used by interim ministers to organize our work with churches. These tasks are:

1. *Claiming and honoring the past*
 2. *Shining a light on the church's unique identity, strengths, needs and challenges*
 3. *Clarifying leadership roles and responsibilities for volunteers and staff*
 4. *Renewing connections within and beyond the UUA*
 5. *Enabling the church to renew its vision, strengthen stewardship, and otherwise prepare for the future*
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My goal for us today is to take a look back and a look forward, to consider how this church fulfills its potential and meets the needs of its members and friends.

Let's start with the first task, *claiming and honoring the past*. It is true that this church has a rather interesting history, with some ups and downs. A historical event that looms large in congregational discussions is the purchase of the Market Street building. Some believe that issue overshadowed the last attempt to call a settled minister. Another historical event here that had far reaching ramifications, but seems to be misunderstood by many, was the adoption of policy-based governance. And, the last historical event that I'd highlight was a long-ago disagreement about how church funds are handled. In all of these, the key to addressing past issues and making progress in the present and for the future, has been to improve communication and to intentionally and thoughtfully work at building trust in the congregation.

This church, including members, lay leaders, and staff, have worked hard on these and made some major improvements in the last few years. By hosting Town Hall meetings, the Board has kept the people of UCH informed of their work, and allowed for feedback and suggestions, regarding plans and goals for the future. Out of this came, for example, an important initiative to create a process for making high-stakes decisions. We also made a plan, currently underway, to prepare some under-utilized rooms at Market Street to be rented to nonprofits doing work in the neighborhood. It seems clear to me that members of this church want us to be financially sustainable and are working to make it so.

This takes us into the second interim task: *shining*

a light on the church's unique identity, strengths, needs and challenges. We are an unusual church with our two campuses, as well as with the non-profit organization that this church created to provide various social services in the Allison Hill neighborhood. In my time here we've encouraged the nonprofit, *Gather the Spirit for Justice* (or *GTS*, for short) to take on more responsibility for programs at Market Street. Following this, GTS did the work to raise their own funds, and added two staff positions (when they formerly had no staff at all, beyond our church staff.) I mention this because it has been an area of growth in which church members, as well as people from the wider community, have volunteered their time, talent and treasure to help GTS be a success. GTS' work is a prime example of people **walking their talk!**

Beyond the now-independent programs of GTS, the church has many strengths of its own. I've been particularly impressed by the generosity of members and friends who have maintained stewardship and pledging at a level that sustains the church. This is important to lift up, because it is actually far more common for stewardship to dip to dangerously low levels during interim periods. UCH has not done that – so, *well done!*

A challenge going forward, and this is a perennial challenge in every big church, is to keep open all channels of communication. This is a two-way street; the board and staff try to keep members informed of the work we do. Likewise, we always need members to communicate to us your ideas and concerns, as well.

The next interim task is about *clarifying leadership roles and responsibilities for volunteers and staff*. Last year, we streamlined the staff by not hiring replacements for a couple of people who left our employ, and after a couple of retirements. By realigning some staff duties and combining some positions, we've been able to sharpen our work on the mission of the church. This also caused us to end the last fiscal year in the black for the first time in three years.

Some of my work with the church board, and also with my staff, has been around exploring what policy-based governance means and how it works. This system of governance has built in mechanisms for accountability and communication – we come back to communication again – and allows members of the church to get back to

the reasons they joined a church in the first place, rather than worrying about running the church. The one area of church operations that has not in alignment with policy governance is the area of finance, and accountability is something that needs attention. I've advised our board that we need to develop a comprehensive financial accountability policy and procedures.

While church operations are largely run by the staff, the programs in the church benefit from the noteworthy levels of participation in our UCH family. Lay-led ministries are just what they sound like. They are ministering to people through the Mindfulness Meditation Group, the Forum and the UU Christian Fellowship, as just a few examples out of many. We have members who now coordinate the Lay Liturgists,

Small Group facilitators, Lay Pastoral Care Associates, and other programs that serve to meet the spiritual needs of the congregation. My role has largely been to provide resources, training and advice, when asked, and then to get out of the way and let the members do their work.

An area of church operations that has been successful in my time here – if I say so myself – is that I brought with me my administrative background. I'd hazard a guess that not many of colleagues have that interest or background. In fact, I'd like to share a short reading from the book, *Living the Call: Ministers and Congregations Together*. In one chapter, one of my colleagues points out that ministers do far more than one might imagine – that we don't just spend all our time researching, ruminating and writing. This colleague

wrote about “The Burden of Administration”:¹

I know clearly what it means to be a pastor to people. I lose my way with the question of what it means to be a minister. Church administration is both the greatest threat to my call to ministry and the very function that makes my ministry in a congregation possible. A ... friend once commented that most writers and thinkers in various religions do not serve congregations. They are monks, theologians, or yogis. That makes sense. Priests, rabbis, ministers, and imams don't have time to write [books]. To care for the spiritual, pastoral, and administrative needs of the

[congregation] ... takes most [clergy] far more than 40 hours a week. When would we squeeze in time to read, think, or write?

Church administration constantly threatens to derail my ministry. I know what to do in the hospital room of a critically ill congregant. I know [how to conduct a] marriage ceremony [...] I know what to do in the pulpit on Sunday morning. Press conferences, community prayer breakfasts, and social-justice rallies offer me arenas where I proceed with confidence. But the barrage of tiny details involved in running a church gobbles up my time and threatens to bring me down.

I admit that I empathize with his position. I've learned that the administration and operations of a church are

¹ Dana, Howard, “Why Couldn't I Have Been a Lutheran?” in Michael Durall, ed. *Living the Call: Ministers and Congregations Together*. (Tulsa: Jenkin Lloyd Jones, 2006), p. 19.

more complicated than an average person might guess. Thankfully, I've had opportunities to gain skills this area, so I don't feel so overwhelmed by it all... The reason I bring this up is not to pat myself on the back, but because I hope it is something you all consider when calling your next settled minister. On congregational surveys from around the country, I frequently see that church members rate administration as a low priority for their new minister. *And, so it seems* – until things are not working well and then church members get angry. Take my word on this: the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg is a complex, multi-site church, needing a minister (or ministers) with skills in administration, operations and governance, not just in preaching and teaching.

By the way, the long quotation I just shared about

the '**Burden of Administration**' was written by one **Rev. Howard Dana**. For those who are new, Howard was the most recent settled minister to serve here.

Let's move onto the next interim task, which is *renewing our connections within and beyond the UUA*. In recent years, this church has engaged in an exploration of what it means to be a healthy congregation, which allowed you all to build on your successes and emphasize the aspects of church that feed your souls, and this has been a beautiful thing to behold. This work was done by the congregation in conjunction with me and the ministers before me, the UUA staff, and a consultant who specializes in building healthy congregational systems.

Outside of the church, various people here have

provided lay ministry and social justice leadership. We were reminded earlier that some in our movement call this Sunday, **Community Ministry Sunday**, to honor all of the community ministers, chaplains and lay ministers **walking their talk** while out in the wider community.

Some of our members work with women in prison, and help them to transition back into life outside. Others help to feed the hungry and clothe the poor. Some are working to protect our environment. We have also seen in recent weeks the millions of women from across America (and even the world!), including so many here, standing up for civil rights, non-violence and respect, in response to disrespectful and violent things said and done by certain powerful men in our society. For all the progress that we've made in civil rights, some among us

have just recently realized that our work is not yet done.

In church, we straddle a divide: we're called to **walk our talk** in the world, yet we often find ourselves focused on how we **walk our talk** within these walls. In his book, *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch said:²

If the church is to impart to the world a message of hope and love, of faith, justice, and peace, something of this should become visible, audible, and tangible in the church itself.

I must add that during this interim ministry, due to the limitations of interim work, I've needed to focus on the internal workings of the church. At the same time, I cannot stress enough how important it is for all of us to

² Bosch, David, *Transforming Mission*, quoted in *A Door Set Open*, Peter L. Steinke, (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2010), p. 47.

be involved in all that is happening in our country, and continue to raise our voices to champion those without voices in the halls of power.

Our final interim task is about: *enabling the church to renew its vision, strengthen stewardship, and otherwise prepare for the future.*

Not that long ago, some started talking about a need to re-visit the mission and vision of the church. In many ways, we have been clarifying and re-invigorating the current mission and vision over that last couple years. It also seems like a good idea for the congregation **as a whole** to re-visit its mission and vision, perhaps even re-write it. I believe that this is a good thing to do, although I have suggested to the Board that it may be

more productive if the church waits to do a visioning process with your next settled minister, so you can all do it together.

About stewardship: we've already lifted up that this church has a pretty good track record at maintaining levels of stewardship, so that the church is financially solvent. This has been great. There is also a need to address some deferred maintenance on both campuses in the future, so the church should probably plan to have a capital campaign in a couple of years.

Also in preparation for the future, our Market Street Implementation Team is assessing what we need to do and recruiting helpers to fulfill those needs, so that we can rent-out rooms in the building. We're talking about cleaning out the rooms, painting the walls, installing

phone lines, and so on. *Little details that they never taught us about in seminary!*

Finally, you are putting together a Ministerial Search Committee to find your next settled minister, after one more year interim ministry, next year. The extra year of interim is only needed because the ministerial search process is on an annual cycle, and UCH needs time to get everything ready for your search, next year. *These are exciting times for the church.* Considering what else is happening in the wider world, let's be grateful that things here are going so well.

So, **walking our talk**... I've described how we do that within our walls, which has been a pretty important thing for this church to focus on the last couple of years.

Of course, we all want to take this outside of the church walls. As a welcoming church built on a stable foundation and full of caring and hard-working members, we are able to turn our gaze outwards. As a congregation you **walk your talk** and will continue to do so, I'm sure. Especially when you start working with your next settled minister. You are ready, and I can't wait to see where you all go with it. Keep on **walking the talk**.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION

SLT # 704
