

Saying Good-Bye Well

(Version 1a)

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

Presented on Rev. Mike's Final Sunday – June 11, 2017, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Our Flaming Chalice is symbol of Community,

Compassion, Truth and Justice.

Lighting it every Sunday is a ritual we share

With Unitarian Universalists around the country.

It is a moment that touches us in our hearts,

And it reminds us that we are here together,

As a community, perhaps even as a family,

Sharing in all of our joys and sorrows...

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS

[Acknowledge the death of Simon Hoover.]

Funeral service at 11am tomorrow (Monday), June 12, at

Trefz & Bowser Funeral Home, 114 W Main St,

Hummelstown.

Saying Good-Bye Well

Reverend Michael Walker

Perhaps it is cliché, but it seems *just like yesterday* that I was saying ‘hello’ to you all. The last two years have quickly passed us by and now it’s time to say ‘good-bye.’ This part of the job isn’t easy for me, because I have grown attached to the church and so many of you that I’ve had the chance to work with. It occurs to me that saying good-bye might not be all that easy for some you, as well. Saying good-bye, especially when it means facing an unknown future, can be worrisome. So let us try to dispel any worry, today.

I’ve been honored to walk with you during this interim ministry. It has been interesting and a bit satisfying to note just how far the congregation has come since facing some challenges in past years. I regularly hear people talk about how good it feels to be here, which I credit to the dedication of many lay leaders, as well as the church board and staff. I’ve been impressed by so many people here that are creating avenues of religious exploration and discernment, offering care and seeking justice. These folks offer these things as their ministry to longtime members and newcomers, alike.

There are so many ways in which you, as a community, are ministering to others. I know I’ve mentioned several in recent weeks. Today, what I’d like to convey is that it’s important to remember that we share

the ministry of the church – it is not just simply the work of the minister, but, rather, it is the work of us all. We each come to church to be a person receiving ministrations, but we also each minister to others. We are not here for ourselves, alone. This is why ministers so often talk about *shared ministry*, which at UCH we've been calling *collaborative ministry* instead.

When I first got here, the Board and I met for a retreat at this lovely retreat center – well, it was actually the Conners' back patio, but it was still lovely. We were there to set goals for my work here and in that conversation, I mentioned the phrase 'shared ministry' several times and I kept noticing puzzled expressions. Finally, someone reminded me that there used to be a congregation by that name in the Market St building. So,

every time I used this very common expression about our collective work, I confused folks who thought I was talking about a former church, instead. To prevent confusion, we started using the phrase *collaborative ministry*. And this phrase has really grown on me. I think the idea of *collaboration* is so much more meaningful than the word *sharing*.

Let me give you an example to illustrate then and now. As I was planning to come here, I asked some folks to organize a Worship Retreat – you may be noticing a pattern: *I love retreats* – and we tried to invite all kinds of folks who have been involved in worship. Once I was here and we held that retreat, I learned several things. One, there wasn't much collaboration; a few people made most of the decisions. And two, there was a big rift

running down the center of Harrisburg, deeper than I had imagined. It was never more apparent than the day I managed to get Market St and Clover Ln folks in the same room. I watched as some folks came into room that day and intentionally sat themselves in a way that their backs would be towards the others. I learned so much that day, just by observing body language.

Fast forward to now, I have to say that I count this among the successes of this collaborative ministry. That day, we formed an actual Worship Team – I’m told there hadn’t been one for many years – and we eventually appointed lay leaders to lead the Lay Liturgists group. [One of them is right here.] The staff and lay leaders now co-create the worship experience, and we hear many voices from this pulpit, which I have always felt is so

powerful. I don’t know about you, but I have been deeply moved and learned so much from the various Member Reflections that our Lay Liturgists have offered.

Let’s move on and consider the powerful work being led by other members of the congregation... Whether it is encouraging young people to go to college and providing scholarships from the Oliver La Grone fund, or coming together to protest injustices on the Capitol steps, or silently holding vigil after a shooting, members of this community have taken our UU values out of those doors and out into the world. All of these things were done by many of you, not by me. Again, the work of ministry is shared, and not done by the minister alone. It feels to me like this congregation really gets

that, and I imagine that you will continue to be a force for good in this area and beyond.

Also, you have been a force for good for those who come here seeking community. Some of you have planned fun events, such as the annual picnic; you have pulled together for stewardship and the auction; and you've helped to celebrate happy and sad occasions in the lives of our members and friends. We have cried together at the memorials of those who have died, young and old. This week, we particularly grieve the unexpected death of one our youth. At other times, we have shed tears of a different kind, as we celebrated weddings and child dedications. Did you know...? It isn't often that interim ministers – like me – have enough time at one church to go through various life events with

a family. So, it was a great joy for me to officiate the wedding of two young people in our community, helping them start off their married life together, and a little over a year later, to lead us all in pledging our dedication to the collaborative upbringing of their new baby. Yes, there have been many joys and sorrows we have shared as a caring community. This has been, in my opinion, one of this church's greatest strengths – being a caring community.

I believe I have also benefited from all you have had to teach me. The complexity of juggling the needs of a large church, spread across two campuses, with what was formerly a very large staff to supervise, has caused me to grow in my understanding of congregational

dynamics and learn new ways of promoting congregational health. From my successes, and even more so from my mistakes, I have learned with you many things that I will take with me into my future ministry. And for this, I am very grateful to you all. This has been an experience of learning-by-doing, in response to the needs that have been voiced by members, as well as needs that were not voiced, but caused a sense of relief once those needs were identified and addressed. This growth experience has been as positive for me, as I hope it has been for this church.

I mentioned mistakes and I have some *mea culpas*. Those who have been here long know that I inherited a deficit budget that required decisive action at some point in my first year. After many long discussions with the

Board, as well as with staff and church members, too, I finally determined that the church staff was twice as big as we could afford. So, through several methods, I set about encouraging a process of downsizing. I tried to tread as lightly as I could, but I know that I hurt some feelings along the way. I don't know if it would have been possible to downsize so drastically and not hurt some feelings, but I'm sorry, all the same.

For the next thing, I need to give you some background. I previously served a church with a long conflicted history, in which the historically Humanist fellowship had basically driven out every long-term minister they had ever had. I should not have gone there – I was not experienced enough. By the time I finally left, I felt really beat up and questioned my own call to

ministry. Then I met you all, and we've done some really positive and affirming work together, and I cannot tell you how much that has meant to me.

But there was one day when I unthinkingly made a big mistake in one of the church board meetings here in Harrisburg. I've known several churches, including the one that had been so difficult for me, that manipulated their membership numbers in order to qualify for lower pay-scales for staff and lower dues to the denomination. Here, I heard some conversation about membership numbers, which had little to do with me or the issues that I just described, but I reacted poorly anyway. I don't know if it was PTSD from my last church, or what, but I fell short of the standard I hold myself to in that board meeting. I figured out later where and why I had erred,

and I made a point of reaching out to those I thought I had offended. And, today, I apologize again.

Why am I doing this? Why am I so publicly apologizing for mistakes? Because I want to be sure we all remember that ministers are human, just like you. Let us knock down any pedestals that we may visualize our ministers standing upon. Let us humanize the ministry, because it is by working within our common humanity that you will be most able to relate and develop good working relationships with your future ministers. Which you do, but it's helpful to be reminded, I think. When we place anyone, ministers or others, up on pedestals, then when that person does or says something unbecoming of their high pedestal, we can become so disappointed in them. But, when we approach people as fellow humans,

with all their foibles and abilities to occasionally make a mistake, we are more likely to be able to relate to them. As it turns out, this congregation has been very good about that, but I still felt it was important to say. If you treat your future minister as much a human as you've allowed *me* to be, and not as a being worthy of a high pedestal, then I believe you are more likely to have the successful long-term ministry that I know this congregation is capable of having. And, that *is* something I foresee in your future.

Let me also say that if you welcome your new ministers – your next interim minister and the settled minister a year later – if you welcome them half as warmly as you have welcomed me, I believe you are in

for a joyful time together. Let's recall my difficult previous ministry. I wondered if I had made a career mistake. Then I met all of you, and you have lifted me up and helped me to find my way in ministry again. I hope I have helped you find your way, as well.

As we come to a close for my final sermon to you, I'm reminded of some words by Shakespeare: "*parting is such sweet sorrow.*" That saying has endured because, I believe, it is so true. The blessing in this parting is that we shall each have learned and grown from our time together, and shall each part ways to go and find ourselves again. In fact, this is **your** work now, going forward. As a community and church, your job is to continue nurturing the burning coal at the heart of this community, to further develop your mission and vision,

to once again determine who you are and how you will be of service to the world, going forward. You bring to the altar of humanity so many gifts; I encourage to share those gifts freely.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Although our paths may not cross often, or maybe never, let us remember each other fondly.

My wish for you is that the years ahead be full of discovery and wonder, dedication and encouragement.

May you continue being a caring community of kind and thoughtful souls, taking in those in need.

May your time together be filled with joy, mutual respect, and a willingness to listen deeply.

And finally, may you know love, compassion and justice, and may you spread these values far and wide.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
