

“Shared Ministry At Its Finest”
A Sermon by the Rev. Alex Jensen
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada
Sunday, September 27, 2026

I want to begin with a story from my internship in Wayland, Massachusetts, about seven years ago. The minister emeritus there, the Rev. Ken Sawyer, had served the First Parish in Wayland for 38 years, supervising a LONG line of interns. I wasn't one of his interns, as I learned under the minister following him; however, Ken invited me into one of his favourite traditions for new interns: a winter drive around the frozen pond in town. Think of a Thomas Kinkade painting: Homes aglow with golden light, roofs heavy with snow and icicles. A beautiful scene.

Afterward, we stopped for lunch at the Chateau, known as “The Chat” to locals; a bar with a colourful past, now just a casual dining spot along the water. There, Ken pulled out an old, yellowed envelope bursting with clippings. Scrawled across the front, the words: “On Ministry.” He had been saving clippings and pieces for nearly four decades, and now that he was retired, he thought a new minister might be able to put them to use. As I leafed through this treasure trove, a pink half sheet caught my eye, titled “More About Ministers.” The following is what it had to say:

After hundreds of years, a model preacher has been found to suit everyone! This preacher speaks for exactly 20 minutes and then sits down. The preacher condemns wrongdoing but never hurts anyone's feelings. The preacher works from 8 AM until midnight each day, from offering pastoral care to serving as the church's janitor.

The preacher is 26 years old and has been preaching for 40. The preacher is both tall and short. Good looking... but not too good looking! The preacher makes 15 home visits a day, and is never outside of their office. This preacher always has time for every committee, and never misses a meeting.¹

I share this bit of humour because it illustrates just how much we can come to expect of our ministers. Not just the explicit expectations, like making visits and writing sermons, but also the implicit expectations: How some folks look up to us and think we lead perfect and spotless lives. How we can sometimes think of our ministers as having all the spiritually sound answers to life's questions, rather than actively being in the meaning making themselves.

People can sometimes see clergy as somehow more than human, or *super* human, or at least our expectations at times can be super human. And while my colleagues and I have many talents and gifts, taking flight or having laser vision are not yet a part of our seminary training...

I want to zoom out to what being a minister and what actively doing ministry is. How it's not as exclusive of a power as we might think. In Unitarian Universalism, we have this

¹ Words slightly adapted and edited for gender inclusivity within our ministry.

concept of “shared ministry”, meaning that ministry, all the ways we use resources to transform lives and to do the work of our values in the world—this ministry is *shared*.²

In many traditions, the power of ministry and ministerial authority is conferred on only a select few; on those who have either been anointed or appointed by those in power to do ministry. In Unitarian Universalism, the power of ministry comes from the *people*. It’s the people who call forth from amongst themselves leaders and servants to do the work of the church, both inside and outside of its walls.³

At my own ordination as a UU minister over five years ago, and at many other ordinations, there is a ritual called the “Laying on of Hands.”⁴ Rather than a priest or a bishop bestowing this blessing, all of the people gathered rest their hands on their shoulder, or on the shoulder of someone touching the person being ordained. This creates a beautiful web of connection, where everyone present joins in affirming someone’s call to ministry.

This is one of the best symbols in understanding how religious authority is bestowed and entrusted in our tradition. We are a democratic tradition at our core. It’s the people who decide who will minister to them, not a higher, outside authority.

But in our tradition, it’s not only the minister that does the work of ministry. Yes, the minister is someone who is appointed for certain roles in ministry, like officiating at funerals, weddings, and other rites of passage. Or serving as a representative of a greater Love to which you can pour out your heart and trust that it will be held close and in confidence.

There are certain things as a minister that I am trained and appointed to do that are distinct. It’s the minister that shows up at a person’s bedside when they are dying; the one who knows how to navigate networks of hospitals and institutions and carries the formal role of caregiver. It’s the minister who can at times help us to peel back the curtain of what we struggle with and help us to make meaning of life when meaning feels far from us.

However, there are also certain things that you all can do that I can’t do. You have the power to form teams and groups; to organize inside our walls and in the wider community for social justice and change. You have trusted relationships with one another that run deep. Relationships that are at times far beyond the depths that the role of the minister can even reach. Some of you, in fact, have been ministers to one another without even knowing it.

A main theme and principle in shared ministry is that each of us is a minister that is called to serve in ways that we sometimes don’t expect. Sometimes, in ways that we fear we are not enough. Ministry is that directional pull you feel when the gifts you have to offer

² [“Unitarian Universalist Congregations Are Breaking with Traditional Leadership Models and Thriving”](#), Elaine McArdle, *UUWorld*, UUA.

³ [“Congregational Governance”](#), UUA.

⁴ [“The Ordination of Alex Jensen – June 6, 2021”](#), *First Parish in Wayland*, YouTube.

compel you to share these gifts with the world. Not out of selfishness or needing to be recognized, but out of a genuine desire to serve.

I believe that each one of you is called as a minister toward some kind of ministry in the world, whether that's showing up as a listening ear or building up facilities and homes where people live and gather. Whether it's serving and caring for our beloved children or creating tools and resources that develop and transform our ways of thinking or even doing as a society. Sometimes, ministry is as simple as meeting someone face-to-face, offering your time and presence.

Being a minister doesn't necessarily have to align with what you do professionally. You don't have to be ordained or go to seminary in order to do ministry. Your ministry does, however, have to align with where you feel that spark inside yourself calling you toward something deeper. Don't get me wrong, the work of ministry isn't always beautiful or romantic... It's often quite messy. Sometimes it involves doing roles and tasks that aren't all that exciting or appealing, yet we know they must be done anyway.

The history of this congregation points to a throughline of shared ministry. Founded in 1845 by fifteen British and Irish immigrants, our congregation met for years in a Wesleyan chapel before moving into its first Unitarian-built building on Jarvis Street.⁵

In its founding documents, this congregation adopted a constitution that proclaimed the equality of its male and female members; truly radical in its time. The first woman to practice medicine in Canada, Emily Stowe, was a member of our church. Though she was barred from studying medicine in Canada as a woman, this congregation was her spiritual home where she was already regarded as an equal.

In its years on Jarvis Street, members of this church built up the city of Toronto, from the first conductor of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra to the founder of the Royal Conservatory. Both were members here, with a cast of many others who ministered to our city in the broadest sense.

In the 1960s, our membership swelled to nearly nine hundred members, leading to the founding of sibling churches in Peel and Don Heights. The ministry of what we were doing here radiated outward.

After several deepening ministries, this congregation has grown in its commitments to social justice, radical love, and ever-widening inclusion. And, let's be honest, this most recent move from St. Clair to the building we gather at today on Oakwood Avenue simply wouldn't have happened without the work of shared ministry, especially the hard work of so many of you, and those select few who carried the heaviest loads. *Could we pause to give them all a hand?* In this church's over 180 years of history, ours is a success story in shared ministry.

⁵ ["Our History,"](#) *The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada.*

Our Time For All Ages showed you what happens when any one of us “ministers,” lay and ordained, tries to take on too much. *Inevitably, we lose our marbles! That’s no joke.* Ministry is an impossible task, especially when you’re measuring yourself against the “perfect” minister and what a person can reasonably do in one day. Doing too much all on our own is not just the *kryptonite* to every minister; it’s also the kryptonite that will destroy a ministry.

Shared ministry, on the other hand, is the antidote and remedy to taking on too much. It’s an expression of believing that each one of us ministers to a beautiful and hurting world. That it doesn’t take religious or clerical authority to love and serve your neighbour, or to set a wide table where all might be nourished and fed.

In my note to you in First Light, I shared a pause that I feel around calling what we do here “volunteering.”⁶ I bring this idea from the writer and pastor Erin Wathen, known by the screen name “Irreverin,” who argues that what we do together in congregational life is different.⁷ She reflects on how language of *volunteerism* itself is relatively new in the lexicon of congregational life. How, if you ask older generations, they might say they were never asked to volunteer. Rather, they were asked to serve in a ministry.

In closing, Wathen makes the point that *you don’t volunteer in a place that you call your own*. In the same way that you can’t babysit your own kid, you can’t volunteer at your own church. The ministries of the church belong to all of us. *This church doesn’t need more volunteers...* It needs people who know that this place is theirs.

There’s another key aspect in shared ministry. Just like no single one of us can do it all, we also must discern both what *is* and what *isn’t* our ministry to offer. This might seem counterintuitive, but each one of us, in doing the ministry of our congregation, must have a sense of what it is that we are called to do, and what it is that is beyond our capacity.

We must be willing to not just *lean in* to serve but also to *lean out* when we’re already overly committed. When we’ve already taken on so many responsibilities on our own two shoulders. This is advice that I am not just giving you, but advice that I’m actively trying to practice myself. Our shared ministry can’t function if any one of us is taking on too much and not enough other hands and hearts are invited to take over.

So, friends, I think it’s time for our capes to come off. While I wear the stole as your minister, I am also a flawed, finite, and imperfect human being. Much to your disappointment, I will never be the perfect preacher or pastor who can somehow find time to do everything and still have some semblance of an interesting and healthy personal life. To invoke the sacred and powerful words of the great spiritual teacher, Homer Simpson: *“I’m not running for Jesus.”*⁸

⁶ [“From the Pulpit,”](#) First Light, The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada.

⁷ [“Your Church Does Not Need Volunteers,”](#) Erin Wathen, Patheos.

⁸ [“The Simpsons – Not Running for Jesus,”](#) YouTube.

If that's what you've called me here to do, then I am destined to lose and fail. However, if we have called one another into the work of shared ministry: "Ministry... [that] affirms human dignity; [That] beckons forth hidden possibilities, invites us into deeper, more constant, reverent relationships,"⁹ then we have vitally important work ahead of us.

To close with the words of our Reading:

We who minister speak and live the best we know with full knowledge that it is never quite enough... And yet [we] are reassured by lostness found, [by] fragments reunited, [by] wounds healed, and [by] joys shared. Ministry is what we all do—together.¹⁰

What is the ministry that you are being called to offer in this moment? Go forth and offer this gift to the world. *Bless the world.*¹¹ As we learn to minister to one another, so we also learn to share our gifts with a wounded world.

Amen.

⁹ ["Ministry is All We Do"](#), The Rev. Dr. Gordon McKeeman, *WorshipWeb*, UUA.

¹⁰ ["Ministry is All We Do"](#), The Rev. Dr. Gordon McKeeman, *WorshipWeb*, UUA.

¹¹ ["Choose to Bless the World,"](#) Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker, *WorshipWeb*, UUA.