

Getting to Know the Reverend Peggy Clarke

During the UUA ministerial search process, the CCNY search committee reviewed presentations from all the candidates who expressed an interest in becoming our new Senior Minister.

These initial applications included responses to a standardized written questionnaire. The answers are written in the expectation that they will be held in confidence, and in Rev. Peggy's case they marked the only start of a long conversation with the search committee.

It is unusual to release these reports. But with some minor redactions, and with the approval of both the Director of Transitions at the UUA, Rev. Keith Kron, in addition to Rev. Peggy Clarke herself, we are sharing this report with members of the Congregation.

We are doing so because we believe you will find her answers as inspiring and illuminating as we did. And we also hope this helps your preparations for Candidating Week (Sunday May 5 to May 12) when we will all have the chance to meet and get to know Rev. Peggy in person.

The CCNY Search Committee

Rev. Peggy Clarke: Some Thoughts and Reflections

Please tell us a story that embodies your ministry:

One story?!? (Puts hands over face and laughs.) I've been in ministry my entire adult life. I'm not sure I have a single story that embodies it all. I have a thousand moments of love and heartbreak and companionship that all add up to a joyful life in ministry. Here's something that comes to mind:

I was the Campus Minister in the 90s in a very conservative Catholic college. Matthew Shepherd had been murdered and the mood for LGBTQ folks on campus was dire. The only "out" gay man on campus came to me asking if I would be willing to start a student group. He told me there were others on campus but they felt afraid and he thought if a campus minister would visibly support them, they'd be more willing to be who they are. Long story (very long story) short, that's what I did. On the first day of the group, a young man stood in my doorway. He wasn't sure he was going to come in to join the other students. I saw him standing there and said, "Come in or stay out." He said, "If I come in, I'm out." "Yes, that's right. Come in to come out." He stood for a while and stepped inside. Later that year he came out to his father which was a massive step for him and one he allowed me to accompany him in. Years later, he looked me up and called me at home to tell me that my uncompromising acceptance of him was transformative. He was married and had children and was happier than he could have imagined. That's an early story and minor in my own life, but that man is one of the many people I carry with me. My ministry is one of love and open arms and his life is a testament to both the simplicity and the power of real ministry.

What ministry do you hope is ahead for you?

Unitarian Universalism is in an exciting place. We are desperately needed and are poised to respond to the issues confronting our nation. In a country that has shifted toward nationalism, we welcome people with open arms; in a moment of increased violence, we offer an oasis of peace; in a time of global climate change, we are shifting our practices to live sustainably; as people are feeling more isolated and afraid, we gather in community to find strength. We are necessary. I am hoping to partner with a congregation that is also excited about what's next for our faith and willing to move forward together to become a healing balm for a hurting world.

Describe your call to ministry:

To make it very brief, I fell in love. Head over heels in love, but not with a person. (That came later.) I fell in love with life and all the beings who participate to make it all so wonderful. I was without religion at the time (I was 19) and was raised in a non-religious home, but I knew it was a spiritual awakening. I knew I was waking up

to Beauty. I followed what made sense to me which was to study religion which also lead me to peace studies and I continued to study theology until, well...I suppose I'm still studying theology. I got my first job in ministry in college as a youth minister and have essentially been in ministry ever since, albeit in different contexts. Of course, there's more to this story and if you're interested, I'm happy to tell it all!

Ministerial Roles & Functions

Share your ministerial presence and leadership style:

I once read an evaluation of my early congregational ministry by a member of the board who said I had a "powerful signature silence". I've often wondered what that meant, but I think I'm coming to understand it. I stay quiet, watching others find their way to solutions. I provide a moral compass so that even when I'm not weighing in, folks use my presence as a guide. I have faith in congregational polity, in a board of elected leaders. And I know it's my job to help us all make the ethical choices, sometimes the harder choices. I have vision, I have ideas, I'm willing and able to be a strong leader, but even more than that, I have faith in a process of shared wisdom.

How do you function with church staff? What are your thoughts on staff relations and supervision?

I have a lot of experience supervising staff from past employment in addition to the position I'm currently holding and in each context, there's a staff culture that needs to be respected. In general, I like to start a year with a conversation with the staff member about the goals for the year. What are we trying to achieve? What would we like to see accomplished in the coming year? How does the work fit with the mission and vision of the congregation? We put those goals in writing which makes staff evaluation easy. We check in with that list periodically during the year and at the end of the year we have a more formal evaluation by looking at that list and asking what was successful, what wasn't, and why. We talk about how the staff person helped or hindered success and we talk about how other systems are at play. In our creation of the next year's goals, we include ways to address the things that got in the way of success. I've found this to be a very effective way to manage staff and to get us all where we want to go.

Regarding shared ministry what do you see as your work as minister? What do you see doing in partnership with the congregation? What do you see as the work of the congregation?

One of the things I love about being Unitarian Universalist is the concept of shared ministry. One of the keys is starting with a shared vision. The parts of traditional congregational ministry that I think are the work of the minister includes worship, pastoral care, social justice leadership and institutional presence. Here's a brief breakdown of what I mean:

Worship: It is my responsibility to create (or otherwise ensure) meaningful, inclusive, relevant worship each week. While I am responsible for the outcome, there should be opportunities for people who want to be part of worship leadership. I loved being a worship associate when I was a lay person and hope to have people in that role in every congregation. I appreciate a collaborative relationship with folks responsible for music and know that worship is the heart of our communal life. Therefore, while I know it to be my responsibility, I am always grateful when there are people who want to be part of the process and the outcome.

Pastoral Care: This is the grace of ministry. I am grateful to be able to be present to people in times of pain and anxiety.. And while I see this as a primary duty, I recognize that I can't be available to everyone all the time. I hope for skilled interns and pastoralcare associates who can assist as well as an authenticity among members who care for each other.

Social Justice Leadership: It is my job in my church to hold up the socially relevant issues of the day, to put them into context and to support direct action as needed. As the minister, my voice is often heard in public squares in a way others are not. It is therefore my responsibility to use that voice proactively with intentionality and clarity. It is also my job to be a non-anxious presence during difficult times and to help my congregation not to become reactive.

Institutional Presence: The minister is often the point person in a congregation. I see myself as accountable to the entire system- not responsible for it, but accountable to it. It is part of my work to know what's happening and who's taking care of a variety of issues. In addition, I am called to work with lay leaders to create and work toward our shared mission and vision.

What role would you see yourself playing in the larger community?

It is a joy as a minister to become part of the social fabric of a community. In my current settlement, the mayor called me when he realized there are no sanctuary churches in the county; he quickly recognized that I might be willing to work with my congregation to make that happen. When my congregants are outraged about the massacre in Orlando, it is part of my work to call the clergy in the area - with whom I've built relationships - to have a vigil as a clear response. When folks in my congregation are upset about the leveling of hundreds of trees to make room for a shopping center, I call the developer and local leadership and then local clergy to create a visible protest of that action. Part of my role as parish minister is being visible and present in the community, bringing our shared values to the public square.

Describe how you handle being in a conflicted situation:

I am well trained in conflict resolution, negotiation and mediation and yet...when someone is standing in front of me angry, I still get thrown. Sometimes I handle it well and sometimes I handle it badly and once I handled it well but it still went badly. If I'm not the person being yelled at, I'm actually very good in a crisis. I'm even-tempered and have a moderating presence. I'm less graceful when I feel like I'm being attacked. Fortunately, I'm old enough to know how to get clear before entering such a situation and how to be quiet when my instinct is to speak. These tools have come in handy more than a few times.

Tell a story that deepened your understanding of what ministry is:

There are many ways to minister in and with and to the world and my understanding of how to do that changes with time. I suppose part of that is my own learning and part is that culture shifts and what's needed changes in new circumstances. For instance, my experience of ministry deepened as a campus minister working with students in Immokalee, Florida. I accompanied people not only in a new learning about our food system but in an emotional awakening about the role they play in other people's suffering. But, even having had that experience, it felt new again when I was with congregants working on climate justice issues who seemed to slide into real grief over the state of planet and their own role in the suffering too many people are experiencing. Ministry feels new to me over and over again.

What needs do you have to strengthen your ministry and how might a congregation assist you in this?

I have always been an early adopter. I hear a good idea and I'm ready to move forward. I have learned that congregations rarely move at that same rate. I need to work on what was once deemed my "holy impatience". I see possibility and I want to make it manifest. Congregations are always useful in helping me temper my enthusiasm so that I can be more measured and careful.

Describe briefly your ministerial approach to the following:

Adult religious education: Because I taught college for many years, my original approach to ARE was academic. There are some people who really like that (as do I) but I learned quickly that what many people want is something that speaks more to their hearts than their heads. It's been my experience that people appreciate having the minister lead these discussions, but I'm always open to others doing it as well. In general, ARE is an opportunity for all of us to deepen our faith lives and our connections with each other. To me, that's all good.

Incorporating music, the arts, and creativity into congregational life: I require art. When life is hectic or stressful or the world feels heavy, I go to the

Met or the Cloisters to regroup. Liturgy is an art form, albeit less frequently recognized. The movement and music and language all become a poetic dance when done well. Sometimes music is our common language; there should be plenty of music in worship and it should hold with the rest of the service to create a single piece. And since for me, art fills a deep spiritual need, I appreciate when congregations are willing to be open to art shows, the practice of art as adult RE, and plenty of social events that celebrate theatre, dance, music and poetry.

Community building / facilitation skills / coffee hour and social times: One of the three ways congregations live their missions is by nurturing community. Our shared spiritual path is communal and we are often saved by community. I think the question is about my approach to these things which is a huge question (like so many of these) but I can say that I see these as critical to congregational life and my role is to be present and fully supportive.

Committee / Task force work: The trend is to move away from committees and to break jobs down into concrete steps for individuals to accomplish on their own. When folks are willing to meet in committees, it's wonderful, but modern life doesn't always afford us the opportunity to do that. I've found Zoom to work in some cases, usually with groups already established.

Leadership development: I was once part of a volunteer organization that had a process every spring during which a member of the nominating committee met with every member of the organization to ask her what her goals were for the year and how the organization could help her meet them. Each person was then placed in a position that served her and the organization well. As a minister, I spend a good deal of time meeting with people asking this question and I am especially attuned to new people so as to help them find their way in the congregation. I think it's worth our time to support members in their own vision of where they'd like to see themselves in congregational life.

Long range planning / mission / vision / covenant: I'm an odd bird in that I love, love, love visioning work. I find it inspiring and I'm even more thrilled when we are intentional about creating a vision that ensures the long life of our mission. As a covenantal faith, it's critical that we recognize that we are committed, each to the other. I'm a fan of relational covenants that are less about specific behavior we expect and more about what it means to act in love for one another.

Social justice / social action: I was raised thinking religion was irrelevant. It was in college that I discovered Liberation Theology, the theology grounded in an option for the poor. My mind was blown. I converted to Catholicism because of the power of the gospel when read through those eyes. It remains true for me; if theology isn't speaking to those most in need, it shouldn't be speaking at all. My social justice and social action work have included but are not limited to:

teaching liberation theology with a law professor teaching business law on the Mexican border and in a Mexican squatters village; running a cultural exchange program with a Lakota elder on Lake Traverse Reservation; working with migrant workers in Immokalee, Florida; ongoing protests to end child separation; primary organizer for UUs during the People's Climate March in NYC; answering the clergy call at Standing Rock; countless Midnight Runs and other charity based activity. This is a partial list but it gives you a sense of my work.

Interfaith / community work: There are several different interfaith circles in which I run. In Westchester county, there's an interfaith social justice clergy group with whom I have attended rallies, organized protests and attended lobbying calls. There are also two interfaith racial justice groups of which I am a part. One focuses on training congregations and the other on solidarity with people of color in the county. When I arrived at First Unitarian, there was a loose association of local clergy. I became a point person to boost those relationships and we now meet quarterly which has been very helpful in the current political climate. Most importantly, I have been in close relationship with a Conservative rabbi and a Presbyterian minister and together we have run a variety of environmental and immigration programs.

Denominational activities: I have been active in our denomination in a variety of ways. I was active in the crafting of the Statement of Conscience on Environmental Justice and Ethical Eating. I later became the chair of our Food Justice Ministry. I was also part of the Environmental Justice Collaboratory where I sat on the steering committee for several years. I chaired the steering committee for the multi-organizational partnership called Commit2Respond which included the UUA, the UUSC, the UUMA, LREDA, DRUUMM, and all other major UU groups. I was the primary organizer for UU involvement in the People's Climate March in NYC in 2014. In addition, I served in the NY Metro District as the Racial and Social Justice Consultant for 6 years and continue to serve the region as an Adjunct Consultant.

Stewardship: I've been thinking quite a lot about stewardship recently. So much of our time seems to be in raising money to stay afloat. I'm also seeing that many of our congregations seem to have primary ministries to their aging buildings. I don't think the old models are working for us any more. I think it's time for us to find partners to share space in our buildings and to stop looking to our own members for all our funding. Our fundraisers are often fun but they can't be our primary means of raising the money we need, especially if those events are populated entirely by the same members who are pledging to create our operating budget. We need to think outside the box to outside revenue sources. What these are will depend on the congregation; the biggest hurdle is getting congregants to become willing to try something new.

Finances: In my current congregation, I attend all the Finance Committee

meetings so I'm aware of where our money is and how it's being used. I admit to not finding this work to be the most inspiring, but it's a good place for us to live our values.

How do you build trust with a congregation and individuals?

Time. It's my job to be trustworthy over and over again, to be patient and present, to be loving even when that might not be the expected response. I have to be worthy of trust in every situation, respectful of people's many emotions, accepting of a myriad of reactions. And it happens. With some it's quick and with some I have to work harder, but ultimately, we become partners in this work of ministry.

Describe your theology and the role of the ministry in a congregation that has multiple theologies:

I grew up with a Jewish mother (and a big Jewish family) and a Catholic father (and a big Italian, Catholic family). And, with that, both parents are atheists. My mother was never formally introduced to religion as the only girl in a generation of boys and my father suffered great loss as a child and found religion to be lacking when it was really needed. I experience life with an interfaith lens and hold in myself many ways of understanding the world. With that said, and maybe more in answer to the question, I believe that revelation continues to unfold, that no path is sure to be "right" and there is truth to be found in every corner of the world. As a minister, it's my job to help people follow the path they have discovered for themselves, to make room for many ways of knowing and believing, and to draw people closer to their own Sources.

What questions do you hope our congregations are asking themselves and discussing?

This is such a great question. I hope our congregations are wondering how they can respond to this unusual moment in history. With membership in religious institutions decreasing at the same time the need for connection and healing are increasing, how are congregations reaching beyond themselves and into this bruised and hurting world? What are they willing to let go of so they can grab on to those people who are floundering? What might they have to sacrifice to become more nimble or more effective? And, how are they connecting deeply with each other in this moment of alienation and disenfranchisement?

How do you give and receive feedback?

I give feedback in the same way I like to get it. Gently and clearly. I don't want to walk away feeling either beaten up or confused. In general, I ask a person how they think something is going. Sometimes that's all that's needed as the other person knows it's not going well. If they don't know that, I go deeper into the issue, asking more questions and then offering my own opinion. I am not shy about negative feedback, but I am careful. We are all working toward the same goals, so

the point of the conversation isn't to make someone feel badly but to help us all get where we want to go. I appreciate the same assumptions when receiving feedback. Let's assume I want to do the best I can and therefore am grateful for new information that might help me get there.

How do you suggest your ministry with the congregation is evaluated?

I spoke elsewhere about how I evaluate staff. I appreciate a similar process. I'd like a conversation in the beginning of the year about goals and shared visions and a conversation at the end of the year about how well those goals were met and why. I think regular conversations are good and healthy. I have really enjoyed my Committee on Ministry and find them to be a good source of feedback through the year. We've also engaged a process of working with all areas of the congregation and helping them each evaluate how they are working toward our shared mission. As part of that conversation, I encourage questions about how the minister is or isn't helping them in their ministry.

What do you hope for the future of Unitarian Universalism?

Plenty of people are telling us that things are changing and we're in danger of disappearing altogether if we don't change the way we do things. Many ministers are afraid, but I'm quite sure I was made for this time. In fact, I think we all were. I know that because we're the ones who are here. This is our time. This is our opportunity. As I said elsewhere, my hope for our future comes from this moment in time, from the necessity of who we are and what we have to offer. I believe that we can be the catalysts for transformation if we decide that's what we want to be. That's my hope for UUism. That we step into this moment with voices for inclusion and actions for justice and arms for healing that we use to embrace life in all its forms.