

## Go in Peace

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First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
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This is it.

I look out at your beautiful faces and I will *miss* you.

On this last precious Sunday,

here in the pulpit that you have entrusted to me,

I don't want to waste any time. There's so much I want to tell you.

I want to lift up what we've accomplished together  
over these last five years.

I want to give you a suggestion for your future.

And I want to tell you about all the blessings and gifts

I see in this congregation,

things about you that I will miss very much

and *you* will carry forward.

Accomplishments, a suggestion,

and we should always end with blessings.

I think back to when I first got here.

You had been through a bit of a rough time.

You were mourning a ministry

that had ended a lot sooner than you'd hoped.

In 10 years, you'd had six different ministers.

You were longing for stability,

for a minister who would come and stay long enough

to make a difference,

to help you believe in yourselves.

We've had five years now, and we can be proud of that.

It's not forever, and it feels sad to be leaving.

But every ministry must come to an end someday.

I've heard it said, you can either leave too soon or too late,

and it's better to leave too soon. I think that's true.

And in the meantime, we've done a lot of good together.  
Those of you who've worked with me  
on the board or on committees know  
I get a little wonky about organizational development.  
I am so proud of what we've done to strengthen this church  
as an organization. It might not be the most glamorous,  
but it matters!  
Five years ago, our adult education program was entirely minister-led.  
Today, we have a thriving Adult Religious Education group  
that works with the minister.  
We've put together a multi-year plan for classes and workshops  
that will help people learn and grow their faith.  
Now you have the power to keep this going.  
You don't have to wait for a minister to run the show.  
It's in *your* hands.  
We've also made a commitment  
to continuing education for our leaders.  
Our board of trustees now devotes a half an hour each meeting  
to continuing education so that they can keep learning  
how to serve this congregation even better.

Five years ago, our children were being taught  
by a group of faithful but tired volunteers.  
There was such a hunger for stability there too.  
When we hired a new Director of Religious Education  
we had that stability once more.  
We've been able to offer classes for all ages,  
service projects,  
sexuality education—  
programs that really make a difference for our kids.  
In this moment, of course, we're between staff members once again,  
but in less than a month your new Director of Religious Education  
is going to bring to you a level of experience and excitement  
I hope and trust will be wonderful for you.

Five years ago, we didn't have anybody to help our treasurer manage our church finances.

She has always done a great job,

but it was a very heavy weight for one person to carry.

Today we have a Finance Committee to support our board and our treasurer.

We have a much better understanding of what's sustainable and what's not.

Their stewardship has been invaluable, especially since the recession kicked in.

I could go on. The bottom line is,

as a result of this organizational work we've done,

you, our lay leaders, are better equipped to do the work of leadership.

Of course, leadership training and committee structures mean very little if they're not actually changing lives.

I'm so proud of what we've done together to make a difference in our community.

Remember that beautiful summer of 2008 when California legalized same-sex marriage.

That whole summer long,

we celebrated the weddings of couples in this church and all around the community.

As the Proposition 8 campaign heated up,

that was the year we decided to start flying the rainbow flag not just on Sunday mornings, but every day.

We worried about vandalism, but we moved through our fears to do what we thought was right.

And today we are known all over Stockton

as "that church with the rainbow flag out front."

Countless people find their way to our doors

because they recognize this sign that says,

here you are welcome!

Over the years, we've given thousands of dollars  
to community organizations that do work we believe in.  
We've celebrated the justice work our church members are doing  
every day—camping out at Kids In A Box  
to raise money for homeless shelters;  
working for health-care reform;  
donating food for the Food Bank,  
sheets and towels and toasters and shoes  
for families who need help getting back on their feet—  
countless other actions both small and large  
that make a real difference to our neighbors and our world.

Have we done everything we've dreamed of?  
No. There are always things left undone,  
great ideas that we just didn't have energy to pursue.  
But we've done pretty good.  
It's been an honor to be a part of it all.

Now, as you move forward,  
I do want to offer you one suggestion for the future.  
This congregation has a long history,  
and like any organization that goes back a long way,  
you've picked up your share of pain and trauma  
as well as joys and achievements.  
Over the years I've been here, now and again I've heard stories  
of times when ministers in your past have not been very good to you.  
The details are not mine to share,  
but it seems pretty clear to me  
that there are some painful chapters in your history  
that maybe never found a healing way to be resolved.  
It's only natural not to want to dwell on that stuff.  
But I do think history tends to stick around,  
even when we're not aware of it.  
And it may be affecting your relationship with ministers even today.

You know, the other day, when I was packing up my books,  
I found a tiny chip of broken glass on one of the shelves.  
I knew right away where it had come from.  
It was three or four years ago now  
when I came to church one morning  
and found one of the windows in my office shattered.  
Glass was everywhere—all over the floor, all over the bookshelves,  
my reading chair—everywhere.  
I was scared.  
It looked like someone must have broken in.  
Oddly, we never did find anything missing except a few bus passes.  
As break-ins go, we made out pretty well.  
The cleanup was easy. We had a new window in by the next day.  
But it unsettled me. Knowing someone had been in here—  
I felt jumpy, uneasy.  
Those feelings passed.

But a few months later, I pulled out a book from my bookshelf  
and out flew a little piece of glass.  
We'd missed it in the cleanup—a piece from that broken window.  
And the memory of that experience came flooding back—  
the jolt of surprise, fear, wondering what was going on.  
Those feelings passed too.  
But those little pieces of glass keep turning up,  
little sparkly, sharp-edged reminders  
of that moment of fear and confusion.  
They've been popping up for a long time now,  
years after I thought they were all gone and cleaned up.

This is how trauma works, with congregations as well as individuals.  
It tends to pop up again and again,  
when you least expect it.  
It can haunt your relationships  
with projections from the past.

It can get in the way of how you want to be in the present.  
It can make it harder for good relationships  
to last and flourish in all the ways you so rightly dream of.  
But, as with everything else,  
the more you understand this stuff,  
the less power it has over you.  
So my hope for you is that you'll be able to take a good long look  
at your history with your ministers and make some peace with it.  
Because I want your future to be as beautiful and joyful  
as I know it can be.

But all that is work for the future.  
Now I want to tell you about the blessings and the gifts I see in you.  
I can't possibly name them all—so many good memories,  
being with you in worship,  
in classes, in meetings, at marches;  
so many moments of spiritual depth and power,  
growth and transformation that you've allowed me to witness.  
Words fail me.

But here is what rises up today, asking to be said out loud.  
I will cherish, first of all,  
your love for where you are—this congregation, this city, this land.  
There's a rootedness here which is so powerful.  
I feel it every time I walk into this sanctuary.  
This beautiful old place—  
you can almost feel all the hope and struggle and the love  
these walls have sheltered over the years.  
I know you love this beautiful building,  
but even more what I sense in you is a love for what it represents—  
a commitment to be here,  
a commitment to last and endure  
and keep alive, here in this community,  
a religion that honors the mind and body and spirit,  
which invites questions and loves diversity

and most of all seeks to practice love, the doctrine of this church,  
at all times and in all ways.

It's been my privilege to watch you manifest that love every day.  
We're none of us perfect, and sometimes we fall short,  
but I'll tell you this: in times of real trouble,  
I have never known a congregation to come together  
more naturally or with more generosity than this one.  
I can't tell you how much it has touched me  
to watch you come together to support one another  
when one of you needs help.  
You step up with cookies and casseroles and comfort,  
and money, too, if that's what's needed.  
The goodness of people here—it's overwhelming.  
I have witnessed moments of the most transcendent kindness  
and understanding as you minister to one another—  
a hand on a shoulder,  
the softness of eyes filled with compassionate tears,  
a hug at just the right time.  
The light of love has shone out here.  
Don't ever forget it.  
May you never lose it.

I leave you with a gift and one last story.  
My first Christmas here was my first Christmas ever  
in a place where roses could bloom outside.  
All my life, the old carol "Lo How a Rose E'er Blooming"  
told the story of a miracle, life and love growing out of the snow  
But here in this Valley, right outside these walls,  
I marveled to see roses budding and blooming  
even in the winter,  
even on the darkest night of the year.  
And though some might take it for granted,  
to me it will always be a miracle.  
So, for you, I've brought roses,

a sign and token of all the love and the life  
and the beauty I see in you.  
Let them say everything that remains unsaid.  
And maybe after all, the only thing that really needs saying is this:  
I believe in you.  
And I believe in your future.

I wish this congregation so much joy.  
It's been my honor to serve you.  
May you be forever blessed.

Amen.