

Congregational Resilience and Continuity
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
February 8, 2026

A Request from former Intern, Jennifer Springsteen

Hi there. It's Jennifer Springsteen. I'm your former Intern Minister. I served UUCVan from 2022 to 2023, including the months when Rev. Kathryn went on Sabbatical. Since my time with you, I've moved my family to Virginia, to be closer to my mom, my sister, and her family. I spent a year in Clinical Pastoral Education. It was a chaplaincy residency, a year-long residency. And during that time, I discerned that the Divine was leading me to a path of hospital chaplaincy. I am now a full-time chaplain at Inova Loudoun Hospital in Leesburg, Virginia, and I am so blessed to be at this hospital with this care team dedicated to their craft and who truly see chaplaincy as integral part of family and patient care. I have my work cut out for me, though: I am the only staff chaplain in this 300+ bed hospital. My heart tells me this is where I need to be.

I am videoing in to ask if you, the members of UUCVan, would jointly ordain me into ministry this summer along with First Unitarian Church of Portland, my former home church. They have agreed to be a part of my ordination and we've set the date for June 13th, a Saturday. I know you've heard the term "ordination," and many of you have probably referred to someone as "an ordained minister" but I want to just let you know that ordination is one of the most important traditions in our faith. A congregation's decision to ordain someone represents the congregation's faith in and support for that person's ministry. It recognizes that person's calling to ministry. In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, the ritual of ordination allows the minister to use that title of "Reverend." And also in our tradition, the authority to ordain ministers rests squarely with the congregation, with you. It's a communal transformation serving our faith into the world.

It feels important for this church to engage this holy threshold with me as I grew into my ministry during my time as an Intern with you. During that time I learned so much from Rev. Kathryn about systems of parish ministry, transparency within a system, and then leading with love, kindness and strength. I also learned how to stay organized: the way that she prepared for her time in Sabbatical allowed for the congregation to recognize its importance to her and for her and for the congregation to allow for this Sabbatical – this renewal, this regrowth – and it allowed the congregation to feel held and it laid the groundwork for my time with you. I am forever grateful to my Internship Committee. They supported me throughout my term and into Rev. Kathryn's sabbatical. And being with a strong Board, I learned how a church was run: the finances, all the committees, the groundwork, the building itself, all those who were employed. It was a lot! And I learned from them. I participated in several committees, including the Pastoral Care committee, the root of the work I now do as a Hospital Chaplain. The Annual Pledge Campaign committee taught me the importance of a well-organized campaign, putting fun and excitement into asking our members to support the work of their church that they are currently doing and then what that support looks like into the future. I recall with deep honor the Beloved Community Working Group whose learning of social justice and their kind way of working with one another expanded out into the congregation widening that circle of love ever larger. It was such a joy to witness! And I loved the art and spirit of the Worship team: Hearing the voices of the teams' reflections they

offered to the congregation. How wonderful it was to collaborate and weave together on our Sunday services. I learned that worship is a co-creation of talented wisdom. I learned when the minister moves into the forefront and when she steps back and allows for other voices and theologies and opinions to come forward. And what a gift it was to work with Allison King: her beautiful voice, her strength, the choirs' joyous singing. I loved being introduced to new hymns that were unfamiliar to me. And I recall during our preparation meetings, Allison singing a few bars to get me acquainted. I'm so grateful that Allison has agreed to be the Music Director for my ordination. And also during Rev. Kathryn's sabbatical, I offered the memorial service to a beloved member. That experience brought me closer to the congregation. Even though it was painful, I felt so much closer. And all that leads me to recognize again what an honor it would be for the church to jointly ordain me. This ritual happens only once in a minister's life within their chosen faith. I am so moved considering this journey into ministry and this holy ordination ceremony. Won't you join me?

I am sending you peace and love and gratitude. Thank-you.

Congregational Resilience and Continuity© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

I am strong when I am on your shoulders

You raise me up to more than I can be (You Raise Me Up, by Rølf Lovland, lyrics by Brendan Graham, Paul Chandler, piano and vocal)

That's rather the point of congregational life, don't you think? That we raise each other up to more than we can possibly be as individuals. Last Sunday, we heard stories of personal resilience, and this morning, I want to talk about our institutional resilience. But I do want to start with the reflection that Bradon gave when he talked about how to survive his upbringing, that he had to learn to do things on his own, but that to begin a life with Kelly, to start a family of his own, he had to rely on others and not be so fiercely independent. He had to let others in. Congregational life is about letting others in, and working together toward goals that are not accomplishable alone. Congregations operate as a collective, and are not dependent on any single individual within the system. They continue beyond the life of the individuals.

Though your minister, that is, I am retiring at the end of July, this congregation will continue. It is a part of the collective plan. I have had the honor of companioning this congregation for nine years, though I handed over that stewardship to your former intern, Jennifer Springsteen, for a few months in 2023. But for the most part, we have spent 9 years together. Of course, some of you weren't yet here in 2017 when I was called, and many who were here in 2017 have since moved on or died. We reconstitute ourselves as a congregation each Sunday, and we're always slightly different than the Sunday before and Sunday to come. Nevertheless, there is an identity to the congregation that lies beyond the individuals who compose the congregation at any one moment in time. I think of those Transylvanians who kept their congregations and culture alive despite so many obstacles, "under regimes that wanted them erased." That concept once seemed more foreign than it does to me now...

This congregation is undergoing some big changes, but minor ones as compared to the history of the Transylvanian church, or the possibility of cultural erasure. I know that some of you have become anxious about the transitions ahead for this congregation, so I thought I'd share some information with

you today. Board co-president, Christine Deblock, will be in the library this morning following worship for any of you who would like to ask questions about the search for your next minister, or this question of ordaining Jennifer Springsteen. Please join her in the library, or online on Zoom – the link was in the Friday bulletin, if you'd like to ask her about these topics. But let me tell you that we are on track for finding an Interim Minister to begin with the congregation on August 1st. My last day is July 31st, so the transition should be seamless.

Here I want to insert a little vocabulary lesson – it is easy to confuse the terms Interim and Intern. These are very different things. Interim, the kind of minister you will have next, is a specialized minister – one who is provisional or temporary for the intervening period between two settled ministers.

An Intern is easy to understand as there are student interns everywhere. An intern is a student or trainee who works at a trade or occupation in order to gain work experience.

The Board is currently planning to search for an Interim Minister – a minister's whose time with the congregation is limited to two years, and whose specialty is helping a congregation with the transition between two settled ministers. Once that Interim Minister is in place, the process begins to elect a Search Team for the Settled Minister who won't start with the congregation until the fall of 2028 at the earliest. You don't do anything to find your next Settled Minister while your current Settled Minister – that's me – is still here. So we don't need to think about that at all yet. We are only concerned with finding the Interim Minister who will be with you for two years after I'm gone.

There is an Interim Ministry Search Calendar we consult, that we'll make available soon on a bulletin board in the entryway. But let me just go over a few dates so you know what to expect. You'll see how far ahead we are already. The calendar says that the current minister announces their departure between January and March. I told you in October, so we've taken care of that. Between February and April, the Board is to submit a Notice of Ministerial Transition to the UUA. Penny did that this last week, so again, we're ahead of the calendar. Also between February and April, the Board is to consult with Regional Staff about the transition – well, we did that in October when I announced my retirement and we had Sarah Gibb Millspaugh come work with the Board in retreat and speak to the congregation on Sunday. So, again, we're ahead of the calendar. Between January and April, the Board is to appoint an Interim Search Team. This is a 3-5 member team, mainly or exclusively Board members. The Board appointed Christine Deblock, Michael DeLeon, and Penny Slingerland to an Interim Search Team back in January, so we're set there. From here on out, the Interim Search Team does work in the background. They can't publish this opening until April 3rd. The Interim Search Team won't receive names of applicants until May 6th. They submit their choices to the UUA on May 18th and on May 21st an offer is extended to the minister who will begin on August 1.

This all happens rather behind the scenes and rather quickly because, as I mentioned, you are just finding a minister to be with you for a couple of years. Interim ministers like to say they are "pre-fired," that is, the end of their ministry is known and non-negotiable. The search for your next settled minister is a much longer process and will involve all of you in a very intentional way, because that is the minister you will hope to have with you for many years to come.

Because we have what is called "congregational polity" – that is, the congregation is in charge of major decisions like ordaining or calling a minister – we have to understand the process so that we make the best decisions. Just like democracy out there in our country, democracy, in here in our congregation, is

a lot of work, many decisions, and a transparent process. It may feel mundane but we live our lives in the every day.

You have been asked by your former intern, Jennifer, to ordain her. First Unitarian Church of Portland has already agreed to ordain her, so she technically doesn't need us to become ordained. But she wants us to participate, in recognition of our significant part in her formation as minister.

Because the congregation is in charge, because of this thing called "congregational polity", each congregation develops different rules about ordination. At First Church Portland, their bylaws allow for the Board of Trustees to vote to ordain someone in a regular Board meeting. They have already voted to do so, and so Jennifer's ordination is set for Saturday, June 13th at 2pm.

Our bylaws, however, are quite different. Not only do we need to hold a congregational vote, which is pretty standard, but we have to gather a quorum of 40% of our membership to take that vote. At 250 members, that means we need 100 people in the room to take this vote! We are lucky if we get 50 people at a congregational meeting, which is the standard quorum of 20% that most votes require. Perhaps that bylaw was written because the writers of the bylaws only expected the congregation to ordain ministers they called – that is new ministers, such as your first two ministers were when you first called them to serve. Your bylaws also require a 40% quorum to call a minister. That is usually easier to fulfill because people are so excited to meet the new minister and make their own decision about a match. However, when ordaining someone whose service to the congregation has already ended, there isn't the same kind of motivation to show up for a meeting.... So, we're going to try an experiment in a couple of weeks. Christine wrote all about it in the bulletin on Friday so I won't bore you with the details here. However, I invite you to attend church in two weeks, especially if you're a member, so that you might participate in this vote. There will be a provision for absentee voting, but we still need 100 members to show up in person that Sunday.

Congregational resilience, institutional resilience, is about embracing change and recovering from setbacks. It is about moving forward despite the challenges. This is a resilient congregation – we survived the shut-down of COVID together, which I dare say was a pretty sizeable setback and challenge. Congregations across the denomination and in the world are shrinking. We are growing. And I think it is because we are resilient.

In fact, I told you I was retiring so early and I asked our regional contact, Sarah Gibb Millspaugh in to meet you because I had heard how many congregations were struggling to find ministers. However, speaking with Sarah, I learned that it is the congregations of 150 members or fewer that are struggling, and that most congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association have 150 or fewer members. She was quite clear that she thought this congregation of 250 had all the qualities that would attract a qualified minister. Her assurance relieved my concerns and, I hope, emboldened the Board to be picky in who they hire as your interim.

There's a quote circulated on Facebook that has been attributed to both Aime Van Ausdall and Michael Moore, but regardless of the source, it speaks truth. One of them wrote:

"This morning I have been pondering a nearly forgotten lesson I learned in high school music. Sometimes in band or choir, music requires players or singers to hold a note longer than they actually can hold a note. In those cases, we were taught to mindfully stagger when we took a breath so the

sound appeared uninterrupted. Everyone got to breathe, and the music stayed strong and vibrant. So, take a breath. The rest of the chorus will sing. The rest of the band will play. Rejoin so others can breathe. Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time. You don't have to do it all, but you must add your voice to the song."

Church or congregational life is like a choir or a band. It is not the soloist or star. It goes on despite the death of members, retirement of its minister, or people moving away. We breathe together and we take turns at breathing so that the institution is sustained over time.

This is why we understand when new members join us and aren't yet ready to volunteer. It is sometimes a crisis in our life that brings us to risk the community of church, and we are not ready to jump in. But this is also why we ask everyone to volunteer at some point, because this volunteer organization doesn't work if people just show up and never contribute to the work. In truth, over time, some congregations have increased their budgets to hire more staff because the volunteer base isn't there the way it used to be when one-income families with two adults were more common. But that money has to come from somewhere, and congregations who welcome everyone, like ours, don't always have the richest of members who can forgo volunteering by donating large sums of money. So, we remain a volunteer organization, and try to stagger our volunteering like choirs stagger their breathing – to sustain that very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time.

It's my time to step back and to rest, and to let you all continue the song. Well, end of July, it will be my time. I promise to keep at it until then. But August 1st, there will a new minister among you, helping you continue the song.

I am grateful for the two interns we've had while I've been here – cristy cardinal, who served us remotely, from Michigan, during the pandemic, and Jennifer Springsteen, from First Unitarian, who was able to be here with us in the building. That Jennifer wishes to recognize her learning from us by asking us to ordain her is an honor I hope you will embrace. The Board has called a congregational meeting on February 22nd, during worship – so feel free to attend the worship service you usually attend – so that you may lend your vote and voice to the chorus.

I have always believed the church to be a microcosm of our larger world. If we can find resilience here in this institution, it is my belief we can bring it out into the world – a world that is needing our help so much right now. Our resilience is terrifying to systems that would keep us isolated, afraid, and angry. We have examples of Unitarian Universalist historical embodiments of resilience, such as the 450+ year history of the Transylvanian church, and we have theological embodiments of resilience – beliefs like the long-view eschatology mentioned in the reading. Eschatology is a theological term referring to the end-times or the final destination of the soul. Our long-view eschatology, articulated by Unitarian and abolitionist minister, Theodore Parker in 1853. He said: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice." Dr. King used this quote many times, and made it his own, more succinct and precise. How long will it take for us to see social justice? Replied King on the march from Selma in 1965:

"How long? Not long because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long."