

# Exit Interview

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*A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico  
By Christine Robinson August 6, 2017*

## INTRODUCTION

Everybody leaving a job should have an exit interview! It's a good exercise for the employee and for the organization....a way to think about what has happened. There's too much to think about in a 25 minute sermon about a 29 year long job, but I wanted to hit the highlights...and to remind us all in these heady days, that nothing that happened here was done alone. This is not the end of my ministry, it is the end of OUR ministry, and WE have a lot to remember and celebrate. So I'll be joined by some of the leaders of different eras of my ministry. This second to last sermon of mine is also going to be the longest, but don't worry. It will all work out.

## Part I: The Congregation in Search

So...in the beginning, there was a search committee. Ken Harper was on that search committee, and he is going to tell us a little bit about what was going on.

*Ken Harper: That was a long time ago. Ronald Regan was president, a presidential campaign was going on. The Iran Contra affair was raging. Our committee did its work by phone call and paper and letters with postage on them, because there was no email or internet.*

*One thing our committee knew was that the congregation had a wide range of tastes. In particular, some were very happy with the intellectual sermons and classical music which had been the congregation's style of worship...not much singing, meditating, or ritual of any sort, and there was a substantial group of ...mostly women...who had been introduced by the past ministers' wife to women's spirituality and the more emotional side of worship and who were very keen to have that expressed in the worship service. We also knew we had a kind of head strong congregation and staff, and knew we needed a strong leader. Christine seemed to us to fit*

*the bill because her sermons were very strongly intellectual but she had worked with her first congregation on a worship service that was more like worship than a lecture or concert.*

*We worked hard to convince her to interview with us. She didn't want to move west of the Mississippi, and she wasn't sure we were really ready to change our worship style. We convinced her to interview with us on her way to the General Assembly in California, though, and that was the first step in what turned out to be 29 years of ministry.*

*So, Christine, what really changed your mind? What did you see in us?*

Christine: Well, first of all, I was impressed by such a determined search committee! And because I've always found that going with the flow rather than stubbornly following one's own plans keeps life interesting, I agreed to visit. And when I got off the plane...and in those days you descended stairs and walked on the tarmac, I was just dumbstruck by the beauty of the view, and I thought, "What a beautiful place! I'm so glad I came to visit!" And then I thought, "I could LIVE here?"

And then I was impressed by the committee's stories of a congregation which seemed able to negotiate change. They told me about a conflict between people who were perfectly happy with the habit of applauding the musicians...mostly symphony players...who played for the services, and those who found that off-putting...creating the feel of what they called, "the concert lecture show". They told me about a congregational meeting in which this dispute was hashed out and a compromise arrived at: There would be applause for the first couple of pieces of music, then the chalice would be lit....this was another recent innovation... and after that there would be no applause. I was really impressed by a community that could honor different needs that way.

And then, well.... I fell in love. Though I still had some questions....

When I left here after the weekend and went to GA, The UUA staff person in the position of the Regional Lead, who had known this congregation from its beginnings in the 1950's, told me in detail, about how each of the previous ministers had, well, let's say, missed the mark. He was a little over the top about it, frankly. I figured there was another side to the story, and even if all the fault

lay with the ministers, after all these years with all those difficulties, the congregation was not likely to be in a good place. At the end of his recitation, he leaned in and said to this 35 year old youngster, “Do you know what all this means?” “Yes, “ I said, means it will take some time for them to trust me.” He got this surprised look on his face, then said, “If you understand that, then I think you should go. I think you just might be able to do something there. It was such a promising church at the beginning. Yes! You go! And when you get your feet on the ground, give me a call and I’ll tell you the rest.”

It was years and years later, remembering that first conversation, that I thought three things. First, I realized that I had been somewhat foolish to think that he really knew much about my skills and abilities after talking at me for an hour, and I shouldn’t have assumed that just because the great Russ Lockwood said he thought I was up to this job, that clinched it.

Secondly, I came to wonder what he thought I meant by “some time”. Because I’d been thinking about three years. In reality, it took almost 15.

And thirdly, I remembered what a relief it had been to know that I would have an advisor to help me navigate the difficulties which were very easy to anticipate, and I remembered what a shock it was to hear, two weeks later, that he had died suddenly.

So, I came knowing that it was possible...even likely....that I would run into enough issues with all that past history and mixed expectations that it would be a short ministry, and if that’s what the congregation needed, I figured I could supply it and go my way. And it nearly turned out that way...more than once! But I was going to learn that a congregation that had stolidly weathered issues with all of its ministers was not only prone to act like the foster child always testing the foster parent’s love, but that it was sturdy, street-wise, and had a will to live. And that’s what kept us going for...well...quite a while.

The first 13 years of my ministry were....interesting....hard work....and we went through several pretty miserable conflicts. Rod and Judy Groves were two of many lay leaders who weathered those with me. We all have our scars!

*Judy: Rod and I moved to Albuquerque in 1995. We were birthright UU's coming from a small fellowship in Illinois and we looked forward to joining a big congregation where we could sit back and watch everything run smoothly. Then we started hearing things--about a big fight, about how a significant number of members had followed an administrator or a music director (maybe both) out of the church in a huff with the new, young, woman minister. Not surprisingly all this was replete with a bunch of unpleasantness, difficult congregational meetings, and formation of a separate Fellowship which met Downtown.*

*Rod: But it seemed to us that the congregation was comparatively healthy, even robust. We liked Christine and the services she offered. The congregation had actually grown quite a bit in recent years, about 25%. That in itself might have caused a lot of stresses and strains, something that a consultant who had come to help work through the crisis pointed out. She encouraged the congregation to turn its attention to what we wanted to be, where we wanted to go, in other words to long range planning. So a long-range planning committee had been formed and it boiled down our mission issue to two alternatives: 'Shall we move to a location that will better serve the whole metro area, including the west side? Or, shall we stay where we are--renovate, and help a new congregation to form on the West Side?' In the end, we decided to stay, renovate the property, and help start a new congregation.*

*Asked to be on the Board, that's where I came in. My thoughts? "surely such a mission wouldn't be much of a task of a congregation of 500." An architect was hired and a plan developed calling for remodeling our decrepit RE space, building a new administrative facility and, in addition, a new Social Hall. And then we kicked off a capital fund drive. Turned out that the congregation had not raised capital funds in a long time and our efforts fell short, far short. So we held another drive and that too left us short. What to do? Christine and Board Chair, Sara Friederich seized the bull by the horns, proposing that half a loaf was better than no loaf at all. We got a mortgage, scaled back the project to the Administrative quarters and RE Building and then cobbled together enough "nickels and dimes" to remodel our original sanctuary into a very modest but functional Social Hall. Less than what we wanted but "not bad" considering all the limitations!*

*Judy: But that wasn't the totality of our challenges during that period--not by a long shot! Our administrator of six years, who had many friends in the congregation, seemed less and less able to manage the ever more complex church operations and, to make a long story short, we had to let him go. In a lot of people's mind, Christine was to blame. It was a very painful process. More angry people. More meetings. And on top of that we were broke. With no funds we couldn't afford to hire a new administrator right away--so I stepped forward. No sooner had I done that than Christine became seriously ill and was out of the office, the parttime accountant resigned, others left, etc., etc. But the congregation had my back. Member after member volunteered to*

*help out with this job or that--not just answering telephones but in setting up a new accounting system, getting out the newsletter, putting together office procedures and opening and closing the church on Sundays, and in supervising outside workmen. Frankly, getting the office organized again was a pretty big job and I breathed a sigh of relief when a new administrator was hired and I could step down.*

*Rod: Of course, all the tumult caused us once again to consult the UUA. A consultant told us that we had to figure out a better way of managing our staff: That Boards of churches our size just couldn't supervise staff. He told us that we should trust our minister to do that, and, if that was problematic we should bring in an Associate Minister to be head of staff. But...we were broke--we couldn't even afford an administrator at that point. So I (I'd been "promoted" to Board Chair at that time) and two other board members formed an Administrative Council and, working with Christine, tried to supervise the staff. Yikes! What misery! Even when we made all the decisions, if a staff person left unhappy, or even left, the mumblings started again about Christine creating an impossible work environment. Two steps forward, one step back--some days, the reverse!*

*And on top of it all Christine was sick. But I'll let her tell that part. Anyway Christine, how did you get through all that?*

Well...not always well. It wasn't easy and the stress was at least one part of a set of health challenges I had in the late 90's...three cancer scares, one of which turned out to be real, a serious illness, and four surgeries in four and a half years. Yikes Again! And for a while, I felt like I was walking around angry all the time, and then I felt like I was walking around depressed all the time. It was time to get some help, which I did. A good thing, to, because we had one final go around about staff management.

Sometime in those years, I came across my watchwords, by the Czech politician, Valclav Haval. I share them with you...they do seem relevant these days to our larger world.

There is only one way to strive for decency, reason, responsibility, sincerity, civility and tolerance, and that is decently, reasonably, responsibly, sincerely, civilly and tolerantly. I am aware that, in everyday politics, this is not seen as the most practical way. –Valclav Haval

In the end, we had three rounds of conflict about staff management. But you know, in between, we had times of really good work together. We restructured to support our growth from 400 to 500 members. The Mission Covenant process resulted in a useful document which has guided us ever since. We dealt with those long time building issues and learned to raise money. I was so impressed and touched that this congregation was willing to extend itself financially to start the West Side Congregation...we supported their first minister to the tune of \$35,000. And besides all that good ministry, the congregation was...when it wasn't mad at me...genuinely loving towards me. They celebrated Kevin's birth and showered him with love. They brought casseroles after all those surgeries. They...you...filled my mailbox with cards when I was diagnosed with cancer. And never...not once, no matter how much tension there was with me, did anybody ever take it out on William and Kevin.

There were times when I thought I really should leave, for the sake of the congregation....it's not good for congregations to fight like this...not to mention for me and my family, and each time...there were three....I realized that it would be really hard to leave. I had an infant. I was uninsurable...remember those days? Thank You Mr. Obama!

And in about 2001, that fateful year, the tide really started to turn. We had a flood of visitors and new members after 9/11. By 2003, we had 600 members and really were a different congregation from the one I'd come to 15 years earlier. And that's when both the sustained work and the sustained fun, really started. But before year 15....well, it was checkered and uncertain and I discovered my inner resilience. Maybe I learned it from the church which had endured so much over the years and was still here to tell the tale. And with all that in mind, this song we're about to sing means a lot to me.