

# Exit Interview

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

*Dave: Mary and I joined the congregation in 2001 and I was on the board from 2003 to 2006. During those years, the congregation was living out a decision it had made in December 2001. The church was growing again. After trying various ways of managing with existing staff levels, the congregation took a risk: it voted to hire an Associate Minister, with an Administrative specialty. That involved drawing down every penny of the congregation's financial reserves, and increasing our pledging by 1/3 over three years. But we achieved that goal handily. We had Jim Zacharias with us for two years to establish the position.*

Christine: Ministers are mostly trained to be solo practitioners, and most congregations have only one, so two ministers is a learning curve for all parties. When Jim left as scheduled, we called David Grimm. Our first intern, Meredith Garmon, was with us in 2003 and we even had an ordained Director of Religious Education. And just in time, too. Suddenly we had 600 members and we learned that this is not just a matter of adjusting to growth, but of adjusting to bursting through a glass ceiling.

Mary: Your life must have changed. What were YOU learning?

Christine: Sometimes people ask me if I didn't get bored, staying with the same job for so long, and I tell them I've had at least three jobs, just all at the same address, and with some of the same people. Learning to work with colleagues was interesting. a spiritual discipline, really. I realized that you have to have what I think of as a Goldilocks Ego..not too big, not too small, just right. And something else happened which just seemed magic. All the scapegoating energy. the "it must be Christine's fault," which had really plagued us, plagued us so much that a friend even made me a little scapegoat of my own to take my frustrations out on.. It just evaporated when there were two ministers. I'm going to give this buy a decent burial sometime soon!

Mary: The congregation had a great experience with our first intern, and I was excited that we would be able to have at least 5 more! Dave and I each served on two intern committees. We found it very interesting to see how people become ministers, and very satisfying to feel we were helping with the progress. So, Christine, what were you teaching?

Christine: You know, ministry is one profession you bring your whole self to. An old fashioned name for minister is "parson", and "parson" in the end, means "person".one with a certain kind of authority. So there are things to teach about ministry, I did teach Andrew, our most scholarly preacher, to add humor to his sermons, for instance. But what young ministers need to learn most is not techniques, but how to be their own best kind of minister, and the only way to teach that is to be doing it yourself. What the interns did for me was to keep me growing in ministry, and I will be forever grateful to a congregation which embraced being a teaching congregation, and loved and supported all of our interns. Because another important thing that makes good ministers is good congregations.

Dave: The video ministry and branch projects were a part of those years, too.

Christine: We had a handful of members driving long distances to come to church, some from the same little towns, and when I came across the branch strategy, which the evangelical mega-churches were using for their own purposes, I thought, well, that would be a perfect way to give folks in the small towns around New Mexico a chance to be a part of a UU congregation in their own towns. I wasn't so surprised when everybody from our musicians to our geeky guys to our board was excited about the idea. A congregation which will make space for 200 new members and support a new congregation could take this on with enthusiasm. We got a grant from the UUA for start-up costs and now we have well developed branches in Edgewood and Socorro, and a model for others to follow. And we've discovered many uses for the videos we make each week.the family room and foyer, La Vida Llena, and they are used by many individuals and small congregations off of our YouTube site. Thanks, Video Team!

(offering)

Pat Diem *I was president and on the board 2012-2014, and we dealt a lot with our growth issues and in the end, with the transition of ministry that we're now undergoing. Our membership had continued to grow...into the high 700's. And when Ron left and we needed to bring on another second minister, Christine suggested that we start to come to terms with the fact that she would be retiring in the next decade and some longer term leadership transition thinking would be wise. She told us that we had become known in the ministry as a teaching congregation (largely due to Christine's mentoring as you have heard these last few Sundays)*

*So we wondered if we might advertise our second ministry position as a residency in large church ministry, promising to let our candidate work in all aspects of ministry according to their learning needs, with the goal that after about 8 years of experience, they would be ready to be a senior minister, here or somewhere else. We had a really great set of applicants and chose Angela.*

*It was a busy time..... building a building and moving into it. It was easier to raise money the second time, but still hard work ... remember that April 1 Miracle SUNDAY. And we had done another glass ceiling thing and had to ramp up our operations. New by-laws, a complete policy re-write, shift to an expanded governance model, grow our music program. More staff. Lots more staff..*

*Christine, was anything about these last 8 years fun? Or are you finally giving up in exhaustion.....?*

Christine: Mentoring Angela was fun. And satisfying. And we had great interns...that was fun..and interesting. And suddenly, it seemed obvious to everyone that the senior minister should be head of staff, and that was a quietly satisfying triumph for me. Finally the ghosts of the past were buried! However, nobody finds supervision easy, and I have to tell you that one of my goals for retirement is to never again have to manage other people's work...overtly or otherwise.

I can't say that writing bylaws or policies was fun...but it's great to have done it. By that time, so much of "how we do things around here" was in my head, where it wasn't available to anybody but me and even more problematic, couldn't be changed. Now it's all on paper, has had at least two passes through congregational committees and it's yours to change. I hope you do. Then it will really be yours.

I was very glad to hand over the financial management to Paul when he got here, and to quit worrying about building management when Mark was hired to help him with that aspect of things. I have to admit that I was skeptical of the need for a full time music director, but having promised Angela that she could take the lead on things that mattered to her, she got Susan here and, well, I'm sold.

Was it fun, these last few years? Not fun...not nearly as much fun as the heady time that Dave and Mary talked about, but always interesting and deeply satisfying.

*Angela: So, Christine, what advice do you have for your successor?*

Christine: Oh, gosh.... Let's see.

You know, you came here at about the same age I came, and right out of school, whereas I'd had some experience in ministry. But I remember thinking over and over during those first years, 'Damn, but she's so much smarter than I was at that age!' It's probably still true. So I know you'll do fine.

But oh well, who can resist giving advice?

You've been here 8 years already, so you're way into a mid-length ministry, and I know you want a long ministry here. Here's what I learned about long ministries: They are wonderful and productive as long as the congregation and the minister continue to grow. Not necessarily in size, but in depth, in diversity, in service... It is not easy to quantify congregational growth like that, and it is even harder to put your finger on personal growth like that. But you do have to give it time....time alone, time reading, time with colleagues and advisors, time in meditation and prayer. It kept me going. I commend that to you.

I went into the ministry in the first place out of a sense that I'd spent the Viet Nam War in practicing my oboe, and wanted to be of greater service to the world than a musician of my modest talent could be. And then I spent the major part of my career in a congregation that had so many internal challenges of health and growth, that that didn't play out as I had imagined it would. I needed to keep my focus on this congregation and what it needed. I always understood that that was

a ministry to the world; that a vibrant and healthy congregation can be of service to its neighbors and an important civic influence in really important ways, and that building the congregation's internal strength to do that was important. But under your leadership, and with your passions, I can see that the congregation is about to take some major steps in the direction of being a civic force for justice, equality, and compassion. I'm so glad! So proud.

Altogether I feel like this ministry was almost fated, graced, guided. I didn't intend to come here, I didn't mean to stay long, but it turned out that this congregation had even more hidden strengths than it had obvious issues. And then I couldn't leave when I thought I should, and then it all turned wonderfully productive. When I needed help, it was there, from the UUA, from a coach, from my colleagues, from you. When it seemed time to start thinking about how to end it, I was ready, and so were you, and the right successor was here. It's hard to imagine how a minister could have experienced a better career. Even the newest of you, even the most inactive of you, have been a part of this, and I thank you. Those of you who have been leaders, resisters, helpers, and guides, I thank you.

In a few weeks, after some good celebrating, we will all of us, hunker down to the work of change...and that's what this next song is about.

### Benediction

We build on foundations, we did not lay,  
sit in the shade of trees, we did not plant,  
and drink from wells, we did not dig.  
And in our turn, we build, we plant, we dig, for those who come after us.

May all your digging and building and planting, be in joy.

Amen