Horizon – October 18, 2015

by David Green

I usually plan my sermon topics pretty far in advance, sometimes months in advance because it helps everyone else involved in worship to plan music and readings. But also just because I like to do advance planning. It's my thing. It's no secret I'm a little bit OCD.

But today doesn't fit into that category. I've always known at some point I would be leaving this Fellowship, because no minister stays at any church forever. But I certainly never made any plans far in advance for this particular day on the calendar.

I hope you've all had a chance to read the letter that was sent out this week and that's also on our website. In case you haven't, or you haven't heard the news, I've resigned, and my last Sunday will be November 8.

In a moment I'm going to talk more about that, and what I believe will happen in this Fellowship from that point on. But first I want to tell you a story.

When my older son Harry was young, he was in the Cub Scouts. His Cub Scout group met at a Lutheran church near our house, and occasionally I would attend the meetings or be there to drop him off or pick him up. One evening I was looking around in the large room where the Scouts met, the parish hall, and all around the walls of this room were framed photographs.

Each was the same size, and every one was a group portrait of a confirmation class. A group of adolescent boys and girls – usually about a dozen or so – were photographed standing with the parish minister. The same backdrop was in each picture and never changed. They had a photograph for every single year, starting in 1950 all the way to the present, which at the time was 1995.

It was fun to look at how the hairstyles the kids wore changed through the years. And the pictures themselves started out in black and white, and sometime during the 1970s they began using color film. I was about halfway through looking at these pictures, one after the other, and I suddenly realized the same minister was in all of them. I went back to the very first picture, from 1950, and sure enough, there he was, looking very young – not much older than the teenagers in the confirmation class.

In each picture, he was wearing the same ministerial outfit. His hair was jet black, and he wore the same smiling expression, never changing. Even standing in the same spot, right in the middle of the kids.

But as the photographs progressed, almost indiscernibly, the minister grew older. He started wearing glasses about 1962. His hair began turning gray about 1970. There would be several years where he didn't look like he'd changed a bit, almost as if he was a cardboard cutout they'd brought out of storage just to take the picture with. But then, I could see him growing older and older, his hair a little thinner, a little whiter, but still with that same happy expression. It was amazing.

I added up the years, and that same man had served one congregation his entire life in ministry; 45 years. That meant he must have performed – for any given family in that church – baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals for the same people – for generations of people.

That was his church, no doubt about it. His identity had to be so deeply enmeshed in that congregation. I had no idea whether the members of that church loved him or just put up with him or what. But can you imagine? The same guy is your minister your whole life, or for a very big part of your life? Up there every Sunday, preaching, for 45 years. That's over 2,100 sermons. Yeesh!

I imagined that when he left – and as far as I knew he was still serving there – but whenever he retired or resigned or died, the members would be left wondering what in the world to do. Should they just have him stuffed and prop him up in the pulpit? It would take them a while to reimagine what their church would even be like with that guy no longer playing that role.

On the one hand, I thought it was kind of cool the same person could be the minister at the same church for so long. But on the other hand I knew it was very, very unusual.

The average length of time a minister in a mainline Protestant denomination stays at a church is somewhere between five and seven years. And Unitarian Universalists fit that same typical length of tenure.

That's not to say I've ever thought, "Oh…I need to stay at this Fellowship between five and seven years and then move on."

But I've had some other thoughts, however, ever since I started here six years ago. I came here to play the role of consulting minister. That's a phrase Unitarians use to describe someone who's not going to be around very long, by design.

A consulting minister…consults. He or she helps the congregation through a rough patch, or helps during an interim period between long-term ministers. In my case, I was told by the leaders of the Fellowship there were some specific things they wanted to achieve. And they thought it'd be a good idea to hire a minister with some experience – like me – to help them reach those goals.

So, I said, "Okay, I think I can do that." And to a large extent, what that group of people six years ago hired me to do, I feel like we've either accomplished, or we're continuing to accomplish.

And I want to emphasize that word, "continue." Because you will.

A lot of people have very graciously given me credit for the growth of this Fellowship. But as I've always said, I just happened to be someone who was a good fit for this group, and anytime you have a minister who's a good fit who also stays for any length of time, good things will happen.

It might concern some members that I'm leaving. But it needs to be stressed: I am not this Fellowship. You are. Ministers come and go every day – even that Lutheran guy I was talking about eventually went. Ministers might play a role, but the members of a church are the true constant, and the true strength.

So, transitions like this can be stressful and weird, but they're very common. And it should not be seen as anything but that: a transition. And it should also be seen by everyone as a wonderful opportunity.

The other thought I've long had about my role at this Fellowship has been to help us reach a sustainable point where a bona-fide ordained Unitarian Universalist minister could serve here.

You might not realize it, but among UU congregations, this church is a rock star. We've grown at a rate, both in terms of members and operating budget, and have sustained that, and have a ratio of total members to average worship attendance that is the envy of UU churches everywhere.

So, it's a perfect moment, really, to have a Unitarian Universalist minister lead this church forward.

Several years ago I don't know if that would have been possible. But today, oh yes. This is a healthy, growing, fun congregation located in a nice town with a low cost of living. So you won't have any trouble finding a very good, qualified, minister.

You should know, however, it's not unusual for that process to take a while. It might take up to a year. But it's well worth it to find the right person. So don't let that timeframe bother you. It's also not unusual during an interim period between ministers for the attendance to go down a little bit. Don't let that bother you, either. Or, just don't let it happen. There's really no reason to let that happen.

And whoever you find – look forward to the fact that she or he won't be anything like me. You don't want me. You want someone who'll bring gifts and talents and ideas I never dreamed of. Someone who'll help take you to the next level.

And please don't get me wrong: just because I'm not an ordained UU minister, I have not been dishonest with you all these years about who I am and what I believe. I love the UU Principles. I support what this Fellowship is all about.

That being said, I am not an ordained UU minister. That may just seem like a technicality, but it's actually very important. I did look into gaining standing as a UU minister years ago, but the process would have been so costly and time-consuming, it honestly would've been more trouble than it was worth for you and me.

So, I've maintained my standing in the denomination I'm ordained in, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I think they've thought it was kind of odd I was serving a UU church, but I've always had the reputation as a liberal free-thinker in my denomination anyway.

The benefit of having a real-life UU minister serving here is, this church will have a much stronger connection to the broader Unitarian Universalist Association. And everyone should care about that. It will deepen this congregation's mission and purpose.

Even though I've learned as much as I can about UU history and beliefs and ways of being, there's no substitute for having someone who's been specifically trained and ordained as a UU. I could never be that minister for you. With a UU minister, you'll have a whole new perspective I could never bring.

I am very excited about that, and you should be, too. And I'm very happy to have played a role in helping make that happen.

There's an important dynamic I need to address: a minister actually has multiple role relationships with members. What a minister means to any member is unique and fluid. For instance, a minister may just be the person who you hear speak on Sundays, and you know they're involved in how the church runs. But that's pretty much it – that's your relationship with them.

And then, their relationship with you is suddenly on a whole new level. Because part of what they do is serve your needs, and help you journey through that loss.

In whatever way you primarily think of me or any minister, there's also the sense that it is not just a relationship between someone who's serving a professional function; the minister is also your friend. It's not the same as a relationship with a therapist or a dentist, with whom you'd probably never go out to dinner or a movie.

And that can make it hard to appreciate that when a minister leaves, it's important for the professional piece of that relationship to end. Every minister in any tradition worth its salt – including UU ministers and Disciples of Christ ministers – abides by a code of ethics.

A very important part of that code states that when a minister resigns or retires, it's not only unethical but inconsiderate for them to stick around as if nothing's changed. Something has indeed changed. A new minister – whether it's an interim minister or the minister who's called to serve indefinitely – has arrived.

And for that minister to be effective and to earn the trust and authority they need to function in that role, they cannot have the person who used to play that role – and who some members may still think of as their minister – sitting out there in the crowd. Put yourself in that new minister's shoes, and imagine how that would feel.

I've heard some of our members still want me and Ellen to be an active part of the Fellowship. That we need to have a church home. That our friends are here, and that's true. I deeply appreciate that concern. And trust me, we will continue to be your friends.

But because I've been the minister here, because I've not only been your friend but have also played those other roles, my being here – at least in the near future – actually puts me in an awkward position and it breaks the ethical promises I swore to uphold as a professional many years ago.

So, at least for a while you probably won't see much of me and Ellen on Sundays. That will be hard for us, but trust me: I've been through this before, and in the long run I know it is the right thing to do. For me and Ellen, for you, and for your new minister.

And again, it does not mean in any way that our friendship is over. That would be silly. It just means my role of being a minister is over. For all intents and purposes, I should be thought of as retired from ministry.

I'll be back…but only when the time is right and appropriate, and only just playing the role of member. The new minister will be my minister, too. And I'll do all I can to support him or her. And, I think I'll serve on the property committee. I can sit out on a chaise lounge, sipping iced tea and supervising Tad as he mows the yard in the summer!

It's still a funny mystery to me how I came here to be your minister. But sometimes things just flow together in ways that are mysterious. And maybe I should just let the mystery be.

I hope you know it's no mystery that I love this Fellowship and love you. I love the friendships I've made here. I've had a truly wonderful experience being your minister.

Every Sunday I start our service by saying I'm proud to be the minister here. I'm proud of the trust and confidence you've placed in me. I'm proud that you've shared your lives with me. And even though I won't be your minister, I'll continue to be very proud to be your friend.

The future of this congregation is bright, and full of hope. Amazing things are on the horizon, and I will always be grateful I was able to play a particular role in one step of that journey with you.

Thank you.