

Called Ministry Letter from Rev. Lara Cowtan

This past year has been full — full of new faces in the pews, new energy in our programs, and new questions about who First U is and is becoming as a congregation. As we look toward our campus development project, our new partnerships and the ones we already share with Unitarian House and River Parkway Child Centre on our campus, the congregation is also exploring the question about calling me as your settled minister. With that are also asking what's the difference between a contract minister and a called minister, and why does it matter for our future together?

The answer is important to understand, because it touches something at the heart of who we are as Unitarian Universalists and at the heart of my own calling to ministry.

UU congregations govern themselves. We don't have a bishop or a hierarchy assigning ministers to churches — we practice what's called congregational polity, meaning this community determines its own direction, its own mission, and its own minister. That self-determination is sacred to us. It's also why the relationship between a “called” minister and a congregation isn't a contract; it's closer to a covenant, something entered into freely and renewed on purpose.

There are several ways that a ministry can take shape, depending on a congregation's needs and season of life: interim, developmental, contract, or called. Each serves a purpose. A contract ministry — which is where we've begun together — is a defined-term engagement. It lets a minister and a congregation get to know each other, do real work together, and discern whether a longer future makes sense. That's exactly what this year has been: getting to know one another, building trust, and laying groundwork.

A called ministry is different in kind, not just in length. It isn't a renewed contract between a Board and a minister — it's a vote of the whole congregation, an invitation extended by the membership and freely accepted by the minister, to enter an ongoing, ever-deepening relationship without a predetermined end date. It shifts the relationship from something more like a professional engagement into something more like a mutual, long-term commitment — one both sides keep choosing.

A contract minister's role can end up looking a bit like a consultant or a hospital chaplain's — present with people in a specific moment of need, but without the runway to build the kind of relationship that forms over years. A called minister, by contrast, can be there through the whole arc of a person's, and a congregation's, life — the ordinary days as well as the crises and celebrations — because there's no clock running out. Trust and the kind of care that lets people bring their whole selves — their questions, their grief, their growth — takes time to build, and a called ministry is structured for exactly that kind of long, patient companionship. A seed needs time to grow, and even a strong one- or two-year plan is more robust when it rests on a longer-term vision.

So what would change, concretely, if we moved from contract to call? In First U member's own words, the themes that matter most to you are spiritual growth, congregational care, leadership, activism, and values — and each is exactly where that shift would deepen what's possible.

Spiritually, a settled ministry lets worship and faith formation programs develop over years rather than months, building themes and practices that mature with the congregation instead of always starting fresh.

In congregational care, it means I could walk alongside people through the full arc of their lives here — long illnesses, long recoveries, the slow work of healing that only unfolds with time and trust.

In leadership, it means investing in volunteer pipelines and structures built for the long term, not just stabilizing what's urgent in a first year.

In activism, a contract ministry tends, naturally and appropriately, to focus inward on the congregation itself; a called minister can also turn outward, developing community relationships with justice-oriented and housing partners, like the Multifaith Housing Initiative and Flaming Chalice International, that our housing project and wider justice work will connect with for years to come.

And in values, it means having the time to listen to people, to collaborate, to plan, to connect and ensure our UU values are fully woven through the many aspects of our congregational life.

When I arrived, I identified three areas of focus for my first year of ministry based on what I heard in our Start-Up Workshop and what I observed in those early months: strengthening our visibility and relationships with campus and community partners; supporting volunteer leaders with the guidance, connection, and clarity that make ministry sustainable; and building accessibility, participation, and belonging for families and newcomers. Looking back over this year, I see real movement on all three: growing partnerships with Unitarian House, UUFO, and the Multifaith Housing Initiative; clearer Terms of Reference taking shape for our ministry teams; record Religious Education attendance, a new Children's Choir, and the lively Wednesday evening community dinners that became a genuine intergenerational hub. None of this was inevitable — it's the fruit of a congregation and a minister choosing, again and again, to show up for each other. This is shared ministry, a partnership, and this is just the beginning of what we can do together.

My hope for our future ministry together, if we choose to walk that road, is a congregation that keeps growing into the fullness of what it has always been: a spiritual home with room for more voices in shaping worship, a community that cares for its members through every season of life, a shared leadership culture that outlasts any one minister's tenure, a faithful and sustained presence in the housing and justice work unfolding right on our own campus, and a congregation whose values are visible not just in what we say on Sunday but in how we build, welcome, and care for our wider community all week long.

None of this is meant to suggest the outcome of any future conversation about call — that decision belongs to you, through the process our polity provides. What I hope this offers is clarity about what a contract ministry can and can't do, and why that choice carries real weight for the faithful work ahead of us. Whatever we discern together, I'm grateful for the trust already built this year, and for the chance to keep answering, together, the call of love that brought us here.

— Rev. Lara Cowtan, September 2026