

Charge to the Congregation

March 30, 2014

Installation of the Rev. Mara Dowdall

I am so grateful and honored to be here today, with you,
My **first** home congregation.

As a young person growing up, this community was my **sanctuary**.
This community, **you**, taught me what it meant to live out my faith,
to **serve**, to **care**, and to **belong**.

And, I know, somewhere inside of me
that church of my childhood still lives,
with all the voices and rituals that I remember so **vividly**.

But... you all have come a long way in the last thirty years!
You have lived through many joys, some sadness, separations,
disappointment, and anxiety.
You said **goodbye** to a beloved senior minister,
you lived through some turbulent changes,
and you **embraced** the challenging yet **fruitful** time
of interim ministry with Reverend Roberta.

You said **goodbye** also to some **beloved** members of this community,
which I know was painful.

For some of you, maybe it still is.

Yet, in the midst of all this, you found a way to hold on to your strength.

You kept to your **shared vision** and you moved forward.

You have grown **so much** in the past few decades since I have been here –
with a strong and thriving religious education program,

and an active **campus** UU group.

You are a **model** for vibrant social justice programming,
and enriching small group **ministry**.

You have **strong** lay leaders who have proven and tested their skills
through the sometimes **harrowing** storms of the past few years.

Here you are today... on the brink of a new, **historic** chapter...

Today, on this historic occasion,

you **covenant** with your new... settled... minister.

Let's take a moment to **really** let that sink in.

(Pause.)

Do not underestimate the **power** of this covenant that you undertake today.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith, at its core, is about this:

A **covenant** in which we make promises to one another

about how we will **be together**,

how we will **walk together**

to do the work of building community,

and the work of binding up

the **wounds** of the world.

One of our **ancestor** theologians, James Luther Adams,

reminds us that the **basis** of every covenant is **not** law, but **love**.

The **love** that you have for Mara and Ben and Dean

is love for them

as **persons**, yes,

but it is more than that.

The **love** that is the foundation of this covenant
is your **love** for the **ministry** you share together.

It is a **fierce** love that can **move mountains**.

It is a creative, **transforming** love
that **empowers** those of us gathered here today,
and will empower those gathered here **100 years** from now,
and 100 years after **that**.

As a congregation you have worked **hard** for this covenant with Mara.

Throughout your extended search process,
you **painstakingly** analyzed all your strengths and weaknesses –
or, as we say in ministry, your **growing edges!**

You **struggled** to know yourself more **deeply** as a community.
You struggled to **let go** of what no longer served you,
to become even more **vibrant** and **faithful**.

I know that at times it was pretty **demanding**,
especially that part about **the growing edges!**

But through it all, you have dug **deep**.
You have become **stronger**.

And you know what?

This is **very** similar to the rigorous **self-reflection**
that we **require** of our ministers in training!

And as a “child” of this congregation, I am **really proud** of you!
(Pause.)

Now, some of you out there are **gardeners**, I am sure of it.

In northern California, of course,
our planting season began a **bit earlier** than here
(and I’m trying not to gloat!).

As an **urban** gardener,
I am always trying to **enhance** the soil
in my little plot along the side of my house in Oakland.

And this is an **urban church**, so you guys get it – right?

The first year we tried to garden, we found a lot of **rocks**.

The second year, we found a lot of **rusty nails**.

The next year, we found a lot of **broken glass**, and on it went.

(You see where I’m going!)

Finally, **this year**, when we stuck our trowels in the dirt,

I almost **cried** with **joy**, because...

up came a big mass of **squirming, juicy... earthworms!**

The soil was **rich** and **dark**, and smelled amazing!

And so, too, is the soil of your **congregational life**.

You may still be unearthing some **rocks** that you did not anticipate.
Your trowels may **scrape** against some **unexpected** shards of glass.
But... your **soil** is **rich**.

And just as seeds need a balance of nutrients, light, and water to grow,
Mara brings **exceptional gifts**
that provide balance and richness
to your **already fertile** soil.

This is part of what I respect about her so deeply.

Mara knows well the world of political and social action,
and she **shares** your **deep** commitment to **justice**.

At the same time, she **models** a **unique** rootedness
in faith.

Mara knows **wisely** that as UUs the **power** of our actions **must rest**
on the **foundation** of spirit.

She brings a strong intellect and deep **wisdom**,
balanced by her loving and **expansive** heart.

Mara's ministry embodies a **respect** for structure **and** openness,
for action **and** reflection.

This is such a **rare gift!**

In my work of training chaplains, we have a saying: "**trust the process.**"

And wow, can that be hard to do.

But my charge, my **advice**, to you, boils down to this:

trust your process of building ministry and community with Mara.
You both have invested **so much** in being here together.
You both have earned – and been **blessed** –
with this covenant you share.
Be **honest** about your growing edges as a community,
and **trust** that your **many** strengths will carry you through.
Give Mara **both** the **roots** she needs to ground herself in community here,
and the **wings** that allow her to try something **new**.

You have **courageously** chosen as your covenant **partner**
a minister who **respects** the past, and is **ready** to shape the **future**.

You have called a minister who **honors** the **best** of who you are,
and yet who calls on you to **bring forth**
what is **within you** to **transform** and **bless** the world.

Remember, too, that covenant – **like gardening** – is a discipline!
Remember the **good lessons** of your successful interim ministry
and remind each other **often** of that **learning**.

As we can imagine (*smile!*) the first signs of **spring**,
we see around us the **paradox**:

We honor what is **most precious**
by **embracing** the **change** that brings an **upwelling** of new life.

You have **worked hard** to prepare this **soil** of shared ministry with Mara.
And **so has she**.

And now, **those juicy worms are wriggling!**

Together, you are planting **powerful seeds** of a new ministry
that will extend throughout the generations to come,
beyond even your **wildest** imaginations.

May you **trust** the process of this **sacred** unfolding.

Amen and Blessed Be.