

Charge to the Lay Minister: Diane Ullius
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, VA
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This homily is much more of a charge than a reflection. A charge to the minister and a charge to this congregation.

The word ‘charge’ has, in modern times, been taken over by transactional interests: a bank charge, for example; or the scientific: an electrical charge. This charge, however, is not something that you will have to pay for or something that will make your hair stand on end. Your hair already stands on end.

The dictionary offers some definitions of charge: to order something done, ask a price, supervisory responsibility. Some synonyms it offers are to exhort, require, test, warn, adjure, bid, command, exhort, direct, entrust, enjoin, instruct, solicit. The word exhort here comes closest to my intent and this longstanding ministerial tradition. But I’m going to reflect on a few of those others as part of this as well.

Diane, you have gone through extraordinary lengths to both learn and prove yourself worthy of this designation. We all know you’ve been worthy of it from the beginning, and I hope the learning part was useful. So back to our definitions of charge, you knew there were things required of you to do, and you took those requirements seriously, going above and beyond the expectations of the program. You took them seriously because you truly wanted to learn and so, Diane, one of my charges to you is that you continue to hold yourself open to learning. I know you will, as every time we talk you ask me to reflect upon what you are doing and make suggestions, and every once in a while I say something that maybe, just maybe, you haven’t already thought of. But it’s tempting for ministers to believe that once they have passed the first hurdle of preparation and receive their accreditation that they are done. And we are far from done. Ever, really. To engage in faithful ministry is to know that we have lifelong learning to do.

And the lifelong learning does not come out of books, though they can be useful at times: it comes from the people that you serve. Every interaction you have requires something different from you and everyone deserves your full attention as individuals. Everyone has something to teach you, just as everyone has something really important to learn from you. Even though you have known these people for many years, your relationship to them now changes, because you bear a special responsibility to serve them and the mission of this congregation, that regular membership does not entail.

Entering into ministry asks you to engage in that service, to these people and this mission, but it also calls you into something larger as well. It calls you into service to the values of Unitarian Universalism in the largest sense, what I would call service to God. This kind of service asks you not to serve blindly, but to bring what you know of our larger tradition. Sometimes that means gently questioning people's intent. Sometimes that means calling people back to our covenant. Sometimes that even means standing up to your ministerial colleagues if you have a concern. That is now your right, and your responsibility.

And the last definition of charge that I want to talk with you about: that of supervisory responsibility. For you have charges in your care: these are all your charges. Not in the patronizing sense that these are your children. But the recognition that you must hold their needs as much as you hold your own. And the most important need of everyone that you must hold is to help everyone grow. I always say that the first task of leadership is to develop the leadership of those around you. Leadership is not a noun: a person that is A Leader. Leadership is a verb. It is about understanding what the work of the congregation is and using your gifts to help everyone make progress on that work. It won't help the congregation if you take on every job and every task for them. I know you've already tried to do that and look where it got you! Your job is not to 'do for' people. It is to help them discover their own gifts and callings and then to 'do with' them.

This is important for the health of the congregation. And it is especially important for your own health. You cannot do everything. It is just as important that you tend to yourself and to your relationship with Rhonda and to your many other life pursuits. This church is not your life. Its needs are endless. Don't let it take over, or overtake, your time, energy or spirit.

And now I turn my attention to your charges: all of you in loving and appreciative attendance. And don't worry, I'm not going to make your hair stand on end. There can be only one Diane Ullius.

While there, indeed, can only be one Diane Ullius, that doesn't not mean that you have now given the work of the church over to her. While she understands her role as that of servant / leader, that does not mean she is your servant. Her work is to serve the mission of this church. And that is the job of all of us, in whatever way we choose to engage in it. Hopefully this ceremony today has inspired you to think about how you might undertake some service. Diane feels particularly called to do ministry with our elders: to keep them connected, to ease their transitions, to honor their service. What do you feel called to do? What stirs in your spirit here? What intrigues you, excites you, stokes your curiosity? Whatever speaks to you, don't wait for it to come to you. Do as Diane has done and step up and step forward to take your place in this shared ministry.

Much of church work feels like a duty and an obligation and many of you take on those responsibilities diligently. Sarah Masters shared with me that it takes over 200 volunteers per Sunday to make all of what we do possible. Between ushers and RE teachers and coffee makers and worship associates, and many more roles, many of you do your part to help out. I honor that and am grateful for it. And I also want you to think about what you could do that would deepen that sense of connection. If there is something stirring in you please talk to any of us up here or on staff or on the nominating committee to help facilitate your calling.

At this moment in the life of this congregation, its health and wellbeing lie within you, not just within your ministers. No minister, lay or ordained, can make this church what it needs to be and can be: a beacon of hope in a troubled world. Only the collective effort of all of us can make that vision come alive.

And just as I asked Diane not to just serve this membership, but to serve the values of Unitarian Universalism, I want to ask you to not let your imagination stop with just what is in front of you. I don't ask you to step into leadership just to maintain what we have. I ask you to plumb your deepest dreams and imagine new ways of being. Engage in experiments and let yourselves play with possibilities.

Diane loves this church deeply. It has been truly inspiring to me to see how deep her commitment goes. I know it's not possible to have hundreds of Dianes able to serve this church (a minister can dream, though?) But I know so many of you love this church just as deeply. And I hope this time today has helped inspire you to think about how you might make that love manifest in a new way.

Diane, thank you for your love. Thank you for your service. Thank you for your model of leadership. I think I can speak for all us in pledging that we will do all we can to support your ministry. May it continue. And may it begin. Amen.