

A Brief History of Unitarian Universalist Clergy Sexual Misconduct

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## **Introduction**

For me, this history is a story of heroes, or rather, it is a story of heroines. Some of these heroines are named in this tale. Most are not. They are the women, children, and men who came forward despite social pressure with stories of Unitarian Universalist ministers harassing and abusing them. They are also the UU lay people and ministers who fought for years and years and years and who fight still for better practices and understanding around clergy sexual misconduct. This legacy of work and pain and healing and struggle should not be underestimated or forgotten. I am writing this history to remember this precious heritage as the fight continues. I am writing with deep gratitude for all those who have done and are doing the work. With this gratitude as my foundation, here is my history of Unitarian Universalist clergy sexual misconduct from the beginning of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in 1961 until today.

### **The 1960's through the 1980's: Normalizing Sexual (Mis)conduct and Turning Points**

In the early 1960's, acts that would now be understood as clergy sexual misconduct happened. People living at the time understood that they happened and often disapproved of them. However, people would also ignore the misbehavior or ignore the severity of the behavior. As one minister who entered UU ministry in this time states,

When I entered the ministry it was virtually all male. Sexual involvement with parishioners was not honored or approved, but neither was it openly confronted. There was much talk about ministers who had engaged in sexual behavior with parishioners,

but, interestingly, it was not considered “misconduct.” More a matter of the slightly scandalous, a good subject for gossip.<sup>1</sup>

This quote demonstrates the ways in which ministers’ behaviors were often seen as problematic enough to be worth commenting on, but not such a problem as to be worth any sort of reprimand. Ministers were occasionally punished by getting pushed out of congregations. However, their departure was often characterized as a “resignation” with no mention of their misconduct.<sup>2</sup> After doing a series of interviews with ministers, Rev. Sylvia Howe and Rev. Paul L’Herrou characterize this time period in this way, “Prior to the Sexual Revolution, there was a Puritanical approach to the sexuality of ministers. There were clear external rules, which were flaunted amid an attitude of looking the other way or excusing the behavior as being only human.”<sup>3</sup> These rules defined sex as exclusively happening between married, heterosexual partners.<sup>4</sup> Clergy sexual misconduct in the early 1960’s, then, was understood as ministers breaking the rules of married heterosexuality rather than as a question of power differential between ministers and congregants. Since these sexual rules were widely broken, misconduct was an open secret.

Howe and L’Herrou’s words also point to a cultural shift that impacted UU understandings of ministerial sexual misconduct in the 60’s and 70’s: the sexual revolution. They mark the beginning of the sexual revolution in 1960, when the Food and Drug Administration approved the pill, or oral birth control.<sup>5</sup> With greater access to birth control, sexual acts carried less consequences. At its best, this revolution allowed for greater freedom and flexibility in social ideas about sexuality. Women in particular gained more socially acceptable narratives

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Howe and Paul L’Herrou. “The Law and the Spirit: Power, Sexuality, and Ministry,” in *Unitarian Universalism Selected Essays 2001*, ed. Kristen B. Payson (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Ministers’ Association, 2001), 68-69.

<sup>2</sup> Gail Seavey (UU minister) in discussion with the author, April 1, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Howe and L’Herrou, “Law and Spirit,” 75-76.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 74.

around sexuality, and space was opened for those who identified with or practiced a sexuality other than monogamous heterosexuality. In the best light for UU ministers, they were simply people swept up in the excitement and confusion of this revolution. From Howe and L’Herrou, “UUs joined the sexual revolution with all the enthusiasm and excitement we had given to other social causes. Many wanted to be on the cutting edge of this free and casual exercise of sexuality... As the professional leaders of congregations, ministers were not exempt from being swept up in this sexual tide, and sometimes were in the forefront.”<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the remaking of social boundaries around sex allowed for those with greater social privilege to make full use of this privilege without even the mild social deterrents of disapproving gossip or negotiated resignation. As Howe and L’Herrou write, “With the advent of the Sexual Revolution, sexual Puritanism and the rules based upon it were discarded, and to a large extent we were left without guidelines. Sexual acting out by male colleagues seemed at times to become a sport. The consequences of this game were widely ignored.”<sup>7</sup> At its worst, then, the sexual revolution and the loosening of boundaries that accompanied it gave free reign to those who chose to take sexual advantage of their congregants. Rev. Deborah Pope Lance, a long-time UU minister and champion of understanding clergy misconduct as a public safety issue, remarks, “I know ministers in the 60s when you indicated you were having trouble in your marriage they arrived at your house the next week with their massage oil and incense sticks.”<sup>8</sup> In this time period ministers caused real pain by their actions to congregants and whole church communities. Some of them caused this harm inadvertently, by not thinking through the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 74-75.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Qiyamah A. Rahman, “By the Shores of Babylon We Wept: An Exploration of the Institutional Response of the Unitarian Universalist Association to Clergy Sexual Misconduct Between 1991-2005” (doctoral dissertation, Clark Atlanta University, 2006), 107-108.

importance of boundaries in a time of social sexual upheaval. Others were less naïve in their actions. Regardless of their intentions, a hallmark of this time period is that the consequences of ministers' actions were borne by people other than the clergy themselves.

In the 70's and 80's, the number of female UU ministers began to rise. As a baseline, in 1974 the UU Women's Federation reported that there were 40 women amongst the 750 fellowshipped<sup>9</sup> clergy, totaling 5% of UU ministers. Of those 40, only 5 women had pulpits, and they were working for very low wages.<sup>10</sup> However, the percentage of women ministerial students was expanding. In 1976, women accounted for 38% of all UU ministerial students. By 1979 the percentage of women studying to be UU ministers had risen to 51%. Ten years later in 1989, women made up 63% of UU ministerial students.<sup>11</sup> However, these incoming women ministers faced sexual harassment by their colleagues and congregants. Rev. Deborah Pope Lance states about the atmosphere in the 1970's,

One colleague, a minister I had known when a child in the church, expressed delight that now that I was an adult and ordained, he could pursue his long interest in seducing me.

Another, on the walk over to the Service of the Living Tradition, pointed to a woman colleague walking ahead and remarked, "I wonder what she's like in bed."<sup>12</sup>

Rev. Howe and Rev. L'Herrou affirm this account, writing that, "Many female colleagues [in the late 1970's] report ministerial gatherings as being highly sexually charged and that being 'hit on'

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<sup>9</sup> While anyone can be ordained by a congregation in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, fellowshipped UU ministers are those who have gone through the UUA ministerial process and are recognized by the denomination.

<sup>10</sup> Everything from the UUWF report from Cynthia G. Tucker, "Women and the Unitarian-Universalist Ministry: A Historical Overview," in *"Leaping From Our Spheres" The Impact of Women on Unitarian Universalist Ministry*, ed. Gretchen Woods (UUMA CENTER Committee, 1998), 47.

<sup>11</sup> All information about the number of women in ministry taken from *ibid.* Actual numbers are 57 women and 93 men in 1976, 97 women to 92 men in 1979, and 233 women to 136 men in 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah J. Pope Lance, "Whence We Come and How, and Whither," Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, accessed May 10, 2018. <http://www.uuma.org/mpage/BSE2011>.

was the generally accepted norm.”<sup>13</sup> Pope Lance links this sexualization of professional peer relationships to the sexualization of congregants, or clergy sexual misconduct.<sup>14</sup>

While UU women clergy can and have misconducted sexually, those who lived through this era credit the influx of women into the ministry as a primary reason for the reduction of this sexualized atmosphere. One person told Rev. Qiyamah Rahman for her dissertation examination of UU misconduct, “...women coming into the ministry changed things, for example, dirty jokes ceased after women were present.”<sup>15</sup> Another, former UUA Executive Vice President Kay Montgomery, recounted in an interview with Rahman, “so that the habit, that is, ‘old boy behavior’ was no longer acceptable. . . I used to regularly meet with clergy chapters and large church ministers and the change in those groups was quite dramatically different (as a result of women coming into the ministry.)”<sup>16</sup> Women coming into the ministry did not end clergy sexual misconduct. However, before the influx of women, the mostly male clergy felt free to sexualize their colleagues and profession. There was also more of an incentive, perhaps, to protect fellow clergy over the people they hurt, as Montgomery notes in her words about the “old boy behavior.” The higher percentage of women did not end the problem of misconduct, but it did influence these parts of UU ministerial culture.

Finally, in the late 1980’s, the UU Ministers’ Association (UUMA) added language for the first time to its guidelines about clergy sexual misconduct. The UUMA Guidelines for the Conduct of Ministry were first adopted in 1965 after the UUA merger.<sup>17</sup> Around twenty years later, a number of UUMA chapters struggled with cases of clergy sexual misconduct.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> Howe and L’Herrou, “Law and Spirit,” 75.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Lance, “Whence We Come.”

<sup>15</sup> Rahman, “By the Shores of Babylon,” 98.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 98-99.

<sup>17</sup> “UUMA Guidelines,” Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, accessed May 5, 2018.

[http://www.uuma.org/?page=guidelines#\\_Toc299361220](http://www.uuma.org/?page=guidelines#_Toc299361220).

<sup>18</sup> Rahman, “By the Shores of Babylon,” 85.

chapters in the Southeast and Pacific Northwest asked the UUMA executive committee to include language about sexual ethics in the ministerial guidelines.<sup>19</sup> The history of the guidelines on the UUMA website speaks to what happened next,

Amendments were proposed to the first three sections of our Code of Professional Practice - Self, Colleagues and Congregation. All but one amendment were approved at the Annual Meeting of 1987. The final amendment pertained specifically to the responsibilities of single ministers. It was reconsidered, recast and then approved in June 1988.<sup>20</sup>

These updates were particularly important as the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC), which is the body that adjudicates allegations of misconduct, used these guidelines in their decision process.<sup>21</sup>

The proposal and approval of these guidelines show the arc of the 60's, 70's, and 80's around this issue. In the early 60's, misconduct was a matter of breaking the sexual rules of married heterosexuality, and the correctives were gossip and at times resignation. Later in the 60's and 70's, clergy sexual misconduct was wrapped into narratives of sexual freedom and expression, without a deep grounding in power analysis and boundaries. By the late 70's and 80's, a rising tide of female ministers was beginning to change the sexualized cultural norms of the ministry, and eventually language specifically addressing sexual ethics was added to the guidelines of UU ministry. Of course, while this was the broad arc of the time, all of these understandings of misconduct overlapped and at times existed together in the same space. The individual experience depended on the specificities of a person's place and context.

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<sup>19</sup> Fredric Muir, et al. *Restorative Justice for All: Unitarian Universalists Responding to Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> "UUMA Guidelines."

<sup>21</sup> Muir et al., *Restorative Justice for All*.

### The Early 1990's: High-Profile Cases and Institutional Response

Many of the cultural and policy shifts that had happened in the preceding two decades emerged more fully in the early 1990's. Reporting and recognition of clergy sexual misconduct greatly increased. As Rev. Qiyamah Rahman writes,

Records from the UUA reveal that only one incident of clergy sexual misconduct occurred between 1968 and 1978. However, a dramatic rise was noted between 1984 and 1994 when there were 22 complaints of clergy "ethics issues" Thirteen of these incidents took place between 1990 and 1993 according to John Weston, Settlement Director for the UUA.<sup>22</sup>

Another place this greater awareness found expression was in the public accountability faced by some high-profile UU ministers. Rev. Tony Perrino, Rev. Forrest Church, and Rev. Mack Mitchell were each successively brought into accountability structures of varying levels. In 1990, Rev. Tony Mitchell was removed from ministerial fellowship after it became public that he had slept with multiple congregants at the churches in which he served.<sup>23</sup> Then in 1991, Rev. Forrest Church's affair with a married congregant led to contention within his congregation and the UUMA.<sup>24</sup> Finally, in 1992, Rev. Mack Mitchell was convicted in court of raping a teenager who was a Tibetan immigrant.<sup>25</sup> These three cases are worth examining in more detail, as they show the state of the Unitarian Universalist response to the problem of clergy sexual misconduct at this time.

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<sup>22</sup> Rahman, "By the Shores of Babylon," 85.

<sup>23</sup> Kimberly French, "Reforms Take Aim at Clergy Misconduct," *UU World*, December 1, 2014. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/reforms-aim-clergy-misconduct> and Dan Cryer, *Being Alive and Having to Die* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 215.

<sup>24</sup> Cryer, *Being Alive*, 190-218.

<sup>25</sup> French, "Reforms Take Aim."



The misconduct case of Rev. Tony Perrino was the first example in recent UU history of a minister who was held publicly accountable for sexual misconduct. His case both marked and created a shift in the way UU ministers and ministerial misconduct were viewed. As the UU minister Rev. Sam Trumbore wrote in 1993, “The issue [sexual abuse] broke open for U.U.'s several years ago when one of our well known ministers, Tony Perrino, was accused of having sex with several of his parishioners while he was in a counseling relationship with them.”<sup>26</sup> A minister who would later chair the UUA’s Safe Congregations Panel, Rev. Fred Muir, concurred. As he put it, “The Tony Perrino case was the ‘wakeup’ call - I remember the UUMA meeting when I first heard about it.”<sup>27</sup> Perrino was a high-profile minister before his misconduct was made public. The website of the congregation in Santa Barbara where Perrino served before his misconduct was discovered notes, “He served as a well-known advocate of liberal causes in the area, communicating through his frequent newspaper columns and his moderating of a TV panel show, *Probe*.”<sup>28</sup> His misconduct itself also drew national press. As the *UU World* reports, “Fox Television’s *A Current Affair* aired a segment in 1991 in which a camera crew confronted the Rev. Tony Perrino in his driveway about accusations that he had sex with multiple parishioners from his California church.”<sup>29</sup> More than anything else, though, Rev. Perrino’s case was shocking to the Unitarian Universalist religious community because it was the first case to publicly penalize a UU minister.

The next nationally infamous misconduct case was that of Rev. Forrest Church. Rev. Church was a very high-profile minister as a prolific writer and the son of a famous U.S.

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<sup>26</sup> Sam Trumbore, “Setting the Boundaries,” *Mostly Mindful Minister* (blog), November 7, 1993. <http://www.uumin.org/sam/sermons/s3b1.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Fredric Muir, email message to author, February 24, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> David Weissbard, “History of the Unitarian Universalist Church,” The Unitarian Universalist Church, Rockford, accessed May 5, 2018. <https://www.uurockford.org/our-history.html>.

<sup>29</sup> French, “Reforms Take Aim.”

senator.<sup>30</sup> His misconduct also drew national U.S. press attention. News outlets from *The New York Times* to the *National Enquirer* covered the story.<sup>31</sup> Although in his case, much of this media attention focused more on the deep divides and conflict his misconduct created in the congregation he served than the misconduct itself.<sup>32</sup> Church also made public comments belittling the importance of the UUMA sexual ethics guidelines, even while he was scheduled to speak at General Assembly. As Rev. Gail Seavey writes,

In 1991, Forrest Church, widely considered to be one of our stars, was scheduled to preach at the Service of the Living Tradition. In an interview with *New York Magazine*, with pictures of him with his new wife who had been a congregant where he served, Church had told a reporter that the ethical guidelines prohibiting sexual relationships with congregants were “only guidelines”. On reading the interview, many of us were angry that he was given this honorable task after making these very public comments.<sup>33</sup>

Church’s case speaks to a number of dynamics happening at the time. His case shows the ways in which the response to misconduct had changed since the 1960’s – his story was debated in his home church, he faced national press scrutiny, and he did go before a UUMA committee. At the same time, his case also shows how ministers in this time were still not the ones most affected by the fallout from their actions and choices.

The Rev. Mack Mitchell misconduct case was qualitatively different in nature. The minister who served after Mitchell summarizes the case,

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<sup>30</sup> “In Memoriam: Rev. Dr. Forrest Church: Theologian, Author,” Unitarian Universalist Association, September 25, 2009. <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/news/news/memoriam-rev-dr-forrest-church-theologian-author>.

<sup>31</sup> Cryer, *Being Alive*, 212 and Peter Steinfelds, “Pastor’s Conduct Divides East Side Congregation,” *New York Times*, 1991. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/07/nyregion/pastor-s-conduct-divides-east-side-congregation.html>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Gail Seavey, “If Our Secrets Define Us,” Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, accessed May 10, 2018. <http://www.uuma.org/mpage/BSE2016>.

I was called to Westborough in the summer of 1992 to succeed their former minister who was in prison after having been convicted several months earlier of sexual assault and rape. The victim was a young Tibetan woman in her early twenties who was 15 at the time the abuse began and one of several girls, all members of the same family, whom the minister had sponsored in this country beginning in 1985.<sup>34</sup>

The story unfolded as a young woman who had been in Mitchell's care expressed her fear for her cousins who had recently come to live with him to a member of the congregation. That member, and others from the church who they confided in, went to both district and national level UU authorities for help with their concerns. The district authorities' response was to inform the minister of the charges, in part as a result of a lack of denominational guidelines. At the national level, authorities advised the congregants to bring their charges to the police, which they then did. Soon after, the minister was arrested.<sup>35</sup> He was eventually convicted and removed from fellowship.<sup>36</sup>

While this essay has focused on these cases largely as discrete events, they really were unfolding in an ongoing way. Rev. Tony Perrino was removed from fellowship in 1990, and then a national segment on him aired in 1991.<sup>37</sup> The effects of his actions also lasted long after his expulsion. A minister who served in 2008 at Perrino's past congregation in Rockford noted the, "strangeness of the congregation around issues of sexuality and power."<sup>38</sup> There was a congregational announcement about Church and his wife separating in February of 1991. Then the UUMA held a hearing on the case in December of that same year. The congregational fallout

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<sup>34</sup> Helen C. Baylies, *Clergy Sexual Misconduct Transition Toward Healing*, from Safety Net file at Meadville Lombard Theological School library, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> French, "Reforms Take Aim."

<sup>37</sup> French, "Reforms Take Aim."

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Johnson, "Don't Fuck the Flock: Relational Context and Sin," Prairie Group, 2015, accessed May 12, 2018. [http://prairiegroupuu.org/images/2015.\\_Johnson.\\_Matthew.\\_Don\\_t\\_F\\_the\\_Flock.pdf](http://prairiegroupuu.org/images/2015._Johnson._Matthew._Don_t_F_the_Flock.pdf).

from the misconduct, however, happen before and beyond these dates.<sup>39</sup> Rev. Mack Mitchell wasn't sentenced until 1992, but this sentencing came after a long period where members of the congregation sought help and advice from UU district and national offices and eventually from the police.<sup>40</sup> Mitchell also left a legacy of pain that impacted the girls in his care, his congregation, and also Unitarian Universalism nationally and internationally.<sup>41</sup> In the UU setting, these public cases of clergy sexual misconduct changed the conversation, but reactions to the cases and rising awareness about the problem of misconduct were varied. In an interview, Rev. Alison Miller gives an account of finding out about all three misconduct cases at the 1991 General Assembly.<sup>42</sup> Rev. Deborah Pope Lance notes in response to Miller's story of the 1991 GA, "Having been around in, what was that, 1991?...it was still not credible to believe that a minister would engage in behavior which was an abuse of his or her power... people would look right straight at what you saw up close and personal and say, well no, that's not abuse, it's just the end of marriages."<sup>43</sup>

While some people still doubted the prevalence and importance of clergy misconduct, others were taking action. The institutional response to clergy sexual misconduct in the early 1990's started with the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation (UUWF). The UUWF is, according to their website home page, "[a] circle of liberal religious people working to advance

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<sup>39</sup> Cryer, *Being Alive*, 182-217

<sup>40</sup> Baylies, *Transition Toward Healing*, 1 and "Minister Sentenced for Raping Tibetan Teen," *United Press International*, June 3, 1992. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1992/06/03/Minister-sentenced-for-raping-Tibetan-teen/7299707544000/>.

<sup>41</sup> Rev. Mack Mitchell, before being arrested, also "interviewed" young women at the UU Church of the Philippines. His legacy still haunts that church, and those who later served it as ministers. This note on the Philippines is from Fredric Muir, email message to author, May 1, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> The details and timing of the cases Miller mentions suggest those of Rev. Forrest Church, Rev. Tony Perrino, and Rev. Mack Mitchell. Miller also mentions that the GA was 26 years ago during her interview, making it the 1991 GA. Alison Miller, interview by Deborah Pope Lance and Gail Seavey, *Conversations in the Spirit of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Margaret Fuller Ossily*, published on June 9, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLS4rkqM9v4>.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, interview.

justice for women and girls and promote their spiritual growth.”<sup>44</sup> A small subset of this group, acting in response to the public cases of misconduct and the UUA’s handling of these cases, began to spur the UUWF to action.<sup>45</sup> In 1991, at the Biennial Convention of the UUWF, women spoke out about the incidence of clergy sexual misconduct in their lives and the lives of their daughters.<sup>46</sup> In the words of one woman who was at this meeting,

What I remember was that at the Women’s Federation (meeting) in Fort Lauderdale . . . the issue came up and then some discussion from the floor. I remember women speaking about having been abused by clergy and it (the discussion) was deteriorating quickly and I remember [someone] standing up and saying, ‘good-bye innocence.’ And she probably said it far more theatrically. There was some clear drama. And she said ‘good-bye innocence’ about three times and people started sitting down.<sup>47</sup>

This quote shows the conflict of the time, reflected even in the heart of the organization that was to become a catalyst for action on the issue of clergy sexual misconduct.

In the wake of this 1991 UUWF meeting, the federation called together a different convening in November of that year.<sup>48</sup> This second meeting was also a result of conversations about misconduct happening at the 1991 GA.<sup>49</sup> The official name of this meeting was “Task Force on Clergy Sexual Misconduct.”<sup>50</sup> Eventually, this broad coalition meeting would become known as Task Force One.<sup>51</sup> The number of groups present at that first meeting is described in a later report,

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<sup>44</sup> “UU Women,” Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation, accessed May 10, 2018. <https://www.uuwf.org/>.

<sup>45</sup> Rahman, “By the Shores of Babylon,” 73.

<sup>46</sup> Phyllis Rickter, “UUWF and Women’s Safety,” *UU Women’s Federation: The Communicator*, 1995.

<sup>47</sup> Rahman, “By the Shores of Babylon,” 76.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Janis Elliot, et al. *Task Force on Congregational Response to Clergy Sexual Misconduct: Final Report to the Board of Trustees Unitarian Universalist Association* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1994), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Rickter, “UUWF.”

<sup>51</sup> Rahman, “By the Shores of Babylon,” 75.

Membership in Task Force ‘One’ came from the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation (UUWF), the UU Women and Religion Committee, Ministerial Sisterhood UU (MSUU), Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA), Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA), the Department of Ministry, the UUA Administration and other interested groups and individuals. Task Force ‘One’ served as a clearing house for information on clergy sexual misconduct.<sup>52</sup>

Much later, this task force would become the group Unitarian Universalists for Right Relations.<sup>53</sup> It would continue to serve as a place to hold stories about and action around clergy sexual misconduct until the task force was disbanded in 2000. The task force dispersed then, according to one member, because they thought the work was done in the wake of a later UUA panel’s report and a public UUA apology to victims of clergy misconduct.<sup>54</sup>

The next major step in the early 1990’s institutional response to clergy sexual misconduct was the formation of what would come to be known as Task Force Two. As Rev. Qiyamah Rahman writes in her history of the time, “The Moderator of the UUA, Denny Davidoff, attended an early Task Force One meeting that transformed her understanding about the seriousness of clergy sexual misconduct. Consequently, she helped develop the UUA Board of Trustees Task Force, which became known as Task Force Two.”<sup>55</sup> Task Force Two was officially titled, “Task Force on Congregational Response to Clergy Sexual Misconduct,” and worked from the spring of 1992 until the fall of 1994.<sup>56</sup> As a task force, it was focused on the impact of clergy sexual misconduct on congregations.<sup>57</sup> The group solicited UU input from a

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<sup>52</sup> Janis Elliot, et al. *Task Force on Congregational Response to Clergy Sexual Misconduct: Final Report to the Board of Trustees Unitarian Universalist Association* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1994), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Rahman, “By the Shores of Babylon,” 75.

<sup>54</sup> Everything about the disbanding from Seavey, “Our Secrets.”

<sup>55</sup> Rahman, “By the Shores of Babylon,” 77.

<sup>56</sup> Elliot et al., *Task Force on Congregational Response*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

variety of sources and undertook three main projects: building a theological basis from which to undertake work on clergy sexual misconduct, bolstering the ability of districts to respond to misconduct cases by creating district response teams, and developing resources for congregations.<sup>58</sup> Task Force Two and the UUMA also both offered trainings during this time.<sup>59</sup> Between Task Force One and Task Force Two, clergy sexual misconduct was recognized as a problem and actions were taken to seriously address it at a national level.

### **The Late 1990's and the Early 2000's: Wins and New Horizons**

By the mid and late 1990's, there was a definite shift in UU public opinion around clergy sexual misconduct. The clearest indication of this shift was in a 1995 resolution passed by those at General Assembly. This resolution was titled, "Resolution Toward Safe Congregations and Right Relations." The language of the resolution specifically acknowledged, "Unitarian Universalists, along with many religious movements, have experienced incidents in which clergy or laypersons have acted in ways to jeopardize interpersonal safety within our congregations, causing pain and breach of trust..."<sup>60</sup> This phrase does not name clergy sexual misconduct outright, nor does it name particular behaviors as problematic. However, the resolution does state that UU clergy and laity can cause harm and endanger people in the congregations they serve. This language represents a clear departure from the reported ethos of the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's. As a note, the language of this GA resolution was drafted by Task Force One.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>60</sup> "Resolution Toward Safe Congregations and Right Relations," Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed May 10, 2018. <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/resolution-toward-safe-congregations-and-right-relations>.

<sup>61</sup> Rahman, "By the Shores of Babylon," 79.

In addition, Rev. Howe and Rev. L’Herrou report from their interviews with ministers about a shift in understanding of misconduct between clergy entering before and after 1990. They write, “Ministers of either gender who entered the ministry after about 1990 seemed certain that the lines of separation between minister and congregation were clear and that behavioral norms and accountability were a given and clearly understood. Ministers who entered the ministry prior to 1990 were not so united, nor so sure.”<sup>62</sup> This quote shows the impact of the work done in the late 1980’s and the early 1990’s on incoming ministers’ understandings of misconduct. At the same time, it paints a picture of an overall mixed clergy with people holding very different understandings of the topic based on when they entered the ministry. This mixture indicates progress made, and progress not yet made at the same time.

The framework for clergy sexual misconduct was also evolving in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. There was a shift from understanding the problem as one of clergy sexual misconduct to one of safe congregations. The safe congregations framing focused more on harm to children and the possibility of lay leader misconduct that the previous framing had. This new framework appears in a number of places. It appears in the 1995 General Assembly resolution, which includes the language of “Safe Congregations” in its title. It is also explicitly named in a 1995 UUWF article that states,

Recently, because of women sharing their experiences with us, the Task Force has also been forced to look at, not just clergy misconduct, but also other misconduct in our religious communities, conduct which endangers women and children. We have begun to talk about “Safe Congregations” and about the need for an ongoing discussion of what “right relations” are in our congregations.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Howe and L’Herrou, “Law and Spirit,” 67.

<sup>63</sup> Rickter, “UUWF.”



The task force named in this article is the ongoing UUWF Task Force One that had not yet been renamed to UU's for Right Relations. This different framework is also apparent in the UUA group that worked on misconduct during this time period, the Safe Congregations Panel.

After the end of Task Force Two, the next major UUA group to work on the topic of clergy sexual misconduct was the Safe Congregations Panel. This panel convened in Fall of 1998 and gave its final report to the UUA board and then to the 2000 General Assembly.<sup>64</sup> The Panel was initially formed in response to a call for a just and healing institutional response to alleged misconduct that Task Force Two articulated before it dissolved and in response to the 1995 GA resolution.<sup>65</sup> The focus of Task Force Two had been the effect of misconduct on congregations, rather than on victims or survivors.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, the mission of the Safe Congregations Panel was, “[t]o recommend to the Association a UUA response and ministry to victims/survivors of clergy sexual misconduct.”<sup>67</sup> The Panel included a self-identified victim of UU clergy sexual misconduct, Anna Belle Lieserson. One document from the Panel’s final report tells her story.<sup>68</sup> Many of the documents in the Panel’s report also speak specifically to victims/survivors, their needs, and their paths to healing. The panel’s focus on the needs of victims/survivors is clear throughout their report, “Restorative Justice for All.”

As the report title indicates, the Safe Congregations Panel advocated for a restorative justice approach to clergy sexual misconduct. The report highlights this approach as opposed to a retributive or punitive model of justice. It describes this justice model in this way, “Restorative Justice recognizes clergy sexual misconduct as abuse of individuals and relationships; therefore,

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<sup>64</sup> Muir et al., *Restorative Justice for All*.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Elliot et al., *Task Force on Congregational Response*, 4 including annotations from Safety Net file, “How about victims????!!!!” on page 7 and “Victims! not just messengers” on page 11.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Anna Belle Lieserson, “Postscript: Redemption,” in *Restorative Justice for All: Unitarian Universalists Responding to Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000).

the ideal in the new paradigm is healing and restoration for individuals (victim/survivors, second circle victims, and offenders).”<sup>69</sup> The panel also called for a Restorative Justice Office to be established at the UUA to help handle cases of clergy sexual misconduct.<sup>70</sup> In addition to their written report, Rev. Fred Muir, chair of the Safe Congregations Panel, presented their findings at the 2001 General Assembly.<sup>71</sup> This presentation followed a public apology to the victims of UU clergy sexual misconduct at the 2000 General Assembly from UUA Executive Vice-President Kay Montgomery.<sup>72</sup> In her address, Kay Montgomery acknowledged that the Association had failed victims of misconduct in the past and apologized for this failure. She also pledged that the UUA would do better in the future.<sup>73</sup>

### **The 2000’s and 2010’s: Work Done and Still to Be Done**

The time between 2001 and 2010 was a period of some disappointment on the issue of clergy sexual misconduct. The work of the Safe Congregations Panel set the tone for this era, with some seeing it and Kay Montgomery’s apology as signs that the UUA was ready to take accountability for the issue and meet the needs of direct and secondary victims.<sup>74</sup> There were positive follow-up steps taken. The UUA Office of Ethics in Congregational Life was created in 2002 and served as the main point of reporting for issues of clergy misconduct and other ethical

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<sup>69</sup> Muir et al., *Restorative Justice for All*. Second circle victims include those such as congregation members and messengers who were hurt by ministers’ misconduct.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Also, while other recommendations of the report were carried out, that one never was, as reported in Tracey Robinson-Harris, Update on Recommendations in the Report: Restorative Justice for All. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2006, accessed May 11, 2018, 1-2. [https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/congservices/safecongs/0601\\_restorative\\_recs.pdf](https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/congservices/safecongs/0601_restorative_recs.pdf).

<sup>71</sup> “Plenary III, General Assembly 2001,” Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed May 10, 2018. <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2001/iii>.

<sup>72</sup> Muir et al., *Restorative Justice for All* and French, “Reforms Take Aim.”

<sup>73</sup> Muir et al., *Restorative Justice for All*.

<sup>74</sup> Seavey, “Our Secrets.”

questions.<sup>75</sup> The UUA also set up an Ethics and Safety website that contained resources such as, “a description of the process for handling complaints of professional misconduct, sample policies, sample limited access agreements, links to resources such as Balancing Acts and Responsible Staffing.”<sup>76</sup> The UUA also published *The Safe Congregation Handbook* in 2005 with a set of essays and workshops about clergy misconduct and other safe congregation issues like lay leader sexual abuse.<sup>77</sup> Finally, the UUA offered consultation for over 100 congregations through the ethic office.<sup>78</sup> However, the two major themes of the Panel report – centering victims/survivors and restorative justice – seemed to not be the focuses of the UUA in implementing the Panel’s recommendations.

The most heartbreaking example of this dissonance comes in the story of Amanda. A UU woman minister sexually assaulted Amanda when she was in her first year out of college. Initially, Amanda didn’t want to report the assault. However, she decided to make a report after the minister began a relationship with another young woman who she also served in a ministerial role. Amanda reported her story to the UUA in January of 2005.<sup>79</sup> Rev. Mary Katherine Morn, who had previously served on the Safe Congregations Panel, was assigned to help Amanda. As background, the UUA set up an “advocate/liaison” role with two people in the position in response to the Panel report.<sup>80</sup> However Morn, when brought in to help Amanda, was assigned the position of liaison rather than advocate. Rev. Seavey writes about this difference in titles,

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<sup>75</sup> Robinson-Harris, *Update on Recommendations* and Tracey Robinson-Harris, *Report on Safe Congregations: UUA Office for Ethics in Congregational Life 2002-2007* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2007), 1. [https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/congservices/safecongs/0704\\_ethics\\_summary\\_02-07.pdf](https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/congservices/safecongs/0704_ethics_summary_02-07.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Robinson-Harris, *Report on Safe Congregations*, 1.

<sup>77</sup> “Contents,” In *The Safe Congregation Handbook: Nurturing Healthy Boundaries in Our Faith Communities*, ed. Patricia Hoertdoerfer and Fredric Muir (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), v-vi. <https://www.uua.org/safe/handbook>.

<sup>78</sup> Robinson-Harris, *Report on Safe Congregations*, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Seavey, “Our Secrets.”

<sup>80</sup> Robinson-Harris, *Update on Recommendations*, 1.

“Amanda needed more than just an intermediary between her and the UUA; she needed an advocate.”<sup>81</sup> Rev. Gail Seavey also notes the many ways in which the UUA failed to treat Amanda with respect and dignity through the complainant process,

[T]he UUA kept Amanda in the dark about the status of her case – including when and whether it would be resolved... Amanda was being repeatedly dismissed by staff and told to keep all details of her story and the complaint secret because the minister could respond by suing her. Amanda felt silenced, shut out, disrespected and manipulated by the UUA staff; keeping secrets seemed to be at the heart of their response. To this day Amanda has never been officially told the results of the investigation.<sup>82</sup>

Rev. Mary Katharine Morn had brought former victim Anna Belle Lieserson into Amanda’s process early on. When Lieserson witnessed these problematic UUA responses, she was motivated to start a new organization: Safety Net.<sup>83</sup>

Safety Net began in 2007 and ended in 2017.<sup>84</sup> The group was a website and a Congregational Social Justice Committee Action Team.<sup>85</sup> It advocated on national and congregational levels about the issue of UU clergy sexual misconduct and the complainant process at the UUA while being locally based at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville (FUUN).<sup>86</sup> Most notably on the national scale, the group made a Change.org petition in 2013. This petition called on the two candidates for UUA Moderator to start a new national conversation about UU clergy misconduct, to use the powers of the UUA board to commit to the

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<sup>81</sup> Seavey, “Our Secrets.”

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Catherine Thiemann, “Unitarian Universalist Association: Awakened by One Bold Survivor,” *SurvivorsAwakenTheChurch* (blog), August 6, 2015. <https://survivorsawakenthechurch.com/2015/08/06/unitarian-universalist-church-awakened-by-one-bold-survivor/>. and Gail Seavey (UU minister) in discussion with the author, April 1, 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Seavey, “Our Secrets.”

<sup>86</sup> Gail Seavey (UU minister) in discussion with the author, April 1, 2018 and Seavey, “Our Secrets.”

Safe Congregations Panel report, and to reexamine the complainant process at the UUA.<sup>87</sup> This petition was an important factor in the then-elected UUA Moderator Jim Key's public apology to victims at the 2014 General Assembly.<sup>88</sup> In the apology, Key names that victims were apologized to and disappointed by UUA leaders in the past. He also states that the apology was part of a longer process of listening and examination of the issue by the UUA board and staff.<sup>89</sup> In addition to this petition, Safety Net started conversations at FUUN and made sure the congregation had model policies and procedures around the issue of misconduct. The members also advocated for a better complainant process with the MFC, and worked with a congregation in Reston, VA to help them in the process of healing from misconduct. Finally, the group members supported each other, healed, and cried.<sup>90</sup>

During the time Safety Net was active, the final major UUA examination of clergy sexual misconduct to date took place. Starting in July of 2009 and ending in August of 2010, Rev. Debra W. Haffner of the Religious Institute undertook this review and assessment.<sup>91</sup> Whereas the Task Force Two and the Safe Congregations Panel had both been comprised of groups of UU's examining the topic, the Religious Institute acted more in the capacity of an outside consultant and evaluator. The final report for this examination uses the framework and language of sexual health. In that framework, the report includes recommendations about the UU sexuality education program *Our Whole Lives*, UU inclusion of BGLTQI people, and UU inclusion of

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<sup>87</sup> First UU Church of Nashville Safety Net, "UUA Candidates for Board and Moderator: Open a National Conversation on Clergy Misconduct," *Change.org*, last modified August 14, 2003. <https://www.change.org/p/uua-candidates-for-board-and-moderator-open-a-national-conversation-on-clergy-misconduct>.

<sup>88</sup> Jim Key, "Moderator's Report, General Assembly 2014," Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed May 10, 2018. <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2014/business/iii/296122.shtml>.

<sup>89</sup> Both sentences about apology are *ibid*.

<sup>90</sup> Sentences about Safety Net from Gail Seavey (UU minister) in discussion with the author, April 1, 2018. and Seavey, "Our Secrets."

<sup>91</sup> Debra W. Haffner, *Toward a Sexually Healthy and Responsible Unitarian Universalist Association* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2010), accessed May 11, 2018, 0 and 2. [https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/haffnerdebra/sex\\_health\\_responsible.pdf](https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/haffnerdebra/sex_health_responsible.pdf).

women in addition to its recommendations about clergy sexual misconduct.<sup>92</sup> Rev. Haffner's report includes a number of recommendations, including policy change, the development of learning materials for ministers, and changes at the two UU ministerial schools.<sup>93</sup> One major step the UUA took during the process of the Religious Institute report was that in December 2009 it required ministerial candidates to show competency in sexual health, education, and justice. In doing so, the UUA became the first denomination to have this requirement.<sup>94</sup> Rev. Sarah Lammert names the broader impact of this assessment in her report to the UUA board four years later, "[the] effort led by the Rev. Debra Haffner of the Religious Institute served to broaden the framework of the conversation from focusing on responding to misconduct to a more comprehensive plan for building a 'Sexually Healthy and Responsible UUA.'"<sup>95</sup>

In addition to this institutional response, there were more grassroots efforts at popularizing information around UU clergy sexual misconduct. In 2011, Rev. Deborah Pope Lance wrote a Berry Street essay called, "Whence We Come and How, and Whither." The Berry Street essay is a lecture given to collected UU ministers.<sup>96</sup> While the practice dates back to 1820<sup>97</sup>, in the modern day the lecture is given during the UUMA Ministry Days when UU ministers gather together in the days before the broader UUA General Assembly. Rev. Deborah Pope Lance's essay examined the history of clergy sexual misconduct and its effect on ministerial relationships, congregations, and afterpastors. It also called on current ministers to

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>95</sup> Sarah Lammert, Report to the UUA Board: Reviewing UUA Policies and Procedures for Working with Victims of Misconduct by UU Religious Professionals: a Gap Analysis (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2014), accessed May 11, 2018. [https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/boardtrustees/140410\\_csm\\_gap\\_analysis.pdf](https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/boardtrustees/140410_csm_gap_analysis.pdf).

<sup>96</sup> "Ministerial Conference at Berry Street: History," Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, accessed May 10, 2018. <http://www.uuma.org/?page=berrystreetabout>.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

examine the ways in which they used power.<sup>98</sup> Five years later, Rev. Gail Seavey gave the 2016 Berry Street essay titled, “If Our Secrets Define Us.” Her essay focused on the negative effects of secret keeping, the healing process of the First UU Church of Nashville, the work of Safety Net, and UU ministerial power.<sup>99</sup> Importantly, these essays as lectures were aimed at an audience of ministers. They represent attempts to heighten awareness of the topic within the closed collegial world of Ministry Days. At the same time, in part because of the public availability of the essays, they also heightened awareness of the issue amongst Unitarian Universalists more broadly.

There is an additional important note about the reception of Rev. Gail Seavey’s Berry Street essay. In the essay, Rev. Seavey named the minister who had misconducted at the First UU Church of Nashville. However, in the later public posting of the essay that name was redacted. The UUMA describes the redaction in this way, “The editing was done by agreement because a person claimed they were described inaccurately. To avoid any disputes, and without any party changing their personally held views, the person and all parties related to the authorship or publication of the Berry Street Essay agreed to the editing and redactions.”<sup>100</sup> In addition to these Berry Street lectures and Safety Net, there is a blog called the Emerson Avenger, which is run by Robin Edgar. This blog started in August of 2005 and is still active today. The tone of the blog is often belligerent and combative. The site mixes known cases of misconduct with rumor and unsubstantiated accusations. At the same time, it is probably one of the most comprehensive public resources on UU clergy sexual misconduct, particularly around the naming of individual ministers who have misconducted. There is clear danger in this

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<sup>98</sup> Pope Lance, “Whence We Come.”

<sup>99</sup> Seavey, “Our Secrets.”

<sup>100</sup> Kate Walker, Cheryl Walker, Gail Seavey, “2016 Berry Street Essay,” Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, published on April 27, 2017. <http://www.uuma.org/news/342627/2016-Berry-Street-Essay.htm>.

situation. Together, the redaction of Rev. Gail Seavey's essay and the dynamics of the Emerson Avenger blog point towards the still ongoing problem of secrecy around clergy sexual misconduct.

There are many reasons for this secrecy. Part of it is the fear of lawsuit. As Rev. Gail Seavey noted in her Berry Street lecture,

As recently as two years ago, Amanda was warned against going public for fear of a lawsuit. UU lay people considered informing the institution for which that minister works about this history for the sake of public safety, but decided not to, also anxious about possible lawsuits. When the present staff at the Department of Ministries looked for the file on Amanda's case, they discovered that there were skeletal and missing files reporting ministerial misconduct, creating gaps in the record from the previous decade. Previous employees told them that some records were removed at the advice of a lawyer because a minister had threatened to sue them.<sup>101</sup>

An alternative vision for the intersection of lawsuits and misconduct was suggested by UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray. In an interview, she said that her work with immigration justice in Arizona has brought her into contact with movement lawyers. She wondered about the possibility of connecting with lawyers who want to work on policies of transparency around clergy misconduct, or who are willing to join the UUA in fighting someone who is suing the UUA to silence those speaking about their misconduct.<sup>102</sup>

There is also a continuing lack of awareness amongst Unitarian Universalists about misconduct. In 2014, Rev. Sarah Lammert noted that UUA staff and MFC representatives were

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<sup>101</sup> Seavey, "Our Secrets."

<sup>102</sup> Susan Frederick-Gray, Susan, interview by Deborah Pope Lance and Gail Seavey, *Conversations in the Spirit of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Margaret Fuller Ossily*, published on June 9, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vu6-2GnImx0>.



not educated enough about laws around professional practice and sexual assault. District staff were not trained in how to help victims or congregations in the wake of misconduct.

Congregations were lacking in understanding about ethical standards of ministry and unhealthy secrecy. At the same time, Rev. Lammert also noted that trainings for congregations in safe congregation practices were available online, in districts and at General Assembly.<sup>103</sup> Policies around complainants had been updated and, “[t]he MFC Executive Secretary keeps complainants informed when there are disciplinary hearings, and shares the outcomes of those hearings with the complainant. The MFC and Secretary inform congregation leaders about such outcomes and keep key district staff in the loop.”<sup>104</sup> Rev. Lammert also wrote in 2016 that the UUA was continuing in its work – creating a complaint procedure manual and examining what restitution and vindication for victims/survivors might mean.<sup>105</sup> These visions present both the current truth of the UU Association and the truth that Unitarian Universalists might live into. Both exist in the current moment.

### Conclusion

How does this history speak to the current time, May of 2018? It tells a history of our people. It hints at the many personal stories underlying this essay – stories of pain and betrayal, and also sometimes of justice and healing. The journey is long. The way forward is not always clear. In the face of these truths, the touchstones we have are courage and the signs of those who have gone before us. With these touchstones, we lean into our faith. May the work to honor the

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<sup>103</sup> Lammert, *Reviewing UUA Policies*.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Sarah Lammert, “History of UUA Task Forces (2000-2016) on Misconduct and Sexual Health, and Institutional Response,” Unitarian Universalist Association, published July 2016. <https://www.uua.org/safe/misconduct/task-forces>.

needs and stories of victims and survivors of misconduct continue. May they and our communities find healing from the long-lasting wounds of UU ministerial misconduct. May we as UU ministers heal and acknowledge the sacred power of our role. May the work continue. May it be so.

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