

“Strong at the Broken Places”:***A History of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville, 1992-2019***

Content Warning: Discussion of sexual abuse, bullying, ministerial misconduct, etc.

In 2015, I had my heart broken. I'd gotten engaged to my college girlfriend and we'd moved to Nashville, but the engagement didn't survive the move. I became desperate enough for the solace of community that I wandered into the last place that I, a young, queer, Latina atheist, would ever have expected to find it: a church. Impressed by the openness and vitality I was witnessing, I became a member in the spring of 2016. Almost immediately, they hired me as their Membership Coordinator. For a wonderful year and a half, it was my job to welcome new members and teach them about the church's fraught but fertile history. The congregation had experienced ministerial misconduct and had worked hard to heal and grow. What they didn't tell me, what perhaps they did not know, was that while doing so, the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville had completely transformed the practices of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) regarding responses to abuse of power. By experiencing the history of this incredible congregation, I too have been transformed.

When religious leaders abuse their power, it can cause psychological, physical, financial, and spiritual harm. That harm is not limited to the individuals directly involved, but can indirectly harm the entire community. To maintain this power and conceal their misconduct, abusers frequently exert control and impose secrecy over the flow of information. Institutional structures of power can cause secondary trauma by mishandling the aftermath of abuse. Once their mistakes are discovered, abusers and institutional structures have offered words of contrition and commitment to change, but often fail to follow-through. Honest communication, with confidentiality for the vulnerable, and the decentralized power of shared ministry are both the vaccine and antidote to secrecy and abuse of power. This paper will showcase how prophetic networks of women, one congregation, and even one determined individual have shifted Unitarian Universalism towards healthier practices. It will do so by exploring the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville's history of and response to abuses of power, through the events of the "Great Unpleasantness" in 1993, the advocacy of Safety Net since 2005, Rev. Gail Seavey's Berry Street Essay in 2016, and the Icarian downfall of Jason Shelton in 2019.

Part 1: The Great Unpleasantness

In the mid-1990s, the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville (known as “FUUN” rather than “FUUCN”) experienced massive upheaval centered around the professional, financial, and sexual misconduct of their minister, Rev. David More Maynard. Church leaders manipulated power through secrecy. Members of the church traumatized each other. A faction in support of the minister split off to form a new congregation. At FUUN, this excruciating period is known as the Great Unpleasantness, a phrase which is also a Southern euphemism for the United States Civil War.

Yet in 1992, FUUN appeared to be strong and happy. That March, Rev. Maynard was put on mock trial at his 10-year anniversary commemorative roast. He was jokingly “found guilty of behaving like a Unitarian Universalist minister and sentenced to ten more years”.¹ Around the same time at the Board’s invitation, Mid-South District Executive Roger Comstock evaluated FUUN. He reported that it was, “an excellent church organization...blessed with an outstanding minister, an excellent staff...a fine (although crowded) building, and a welcoming church community”.² In diagnosing some issues, he noted: “board members are somewhat removed from actual operations”.³ Six out of thirty-five interviewees had mentioned harmful conflicts with the church and the minister.⁴ Power in the knowledge of the way things worked was held almost exclusively by three staff members: Rev. Maynard, the church Administrator Pam Hughes, and the Director of Religious Education Rev. Michael “Redhawk” Rice-Sauer.⁵

After Comstock’s Evaluation, power dynamics began to shift. Within months, the Board realized that Maynard could and regularly did access church funds without prior approval.⁶ As the Board began to take a more active role by adjusting the minister’s control, the stress on key volunteers became too much. Treasurer Tom Cruse resigned in August.⁷ His immediate successor resigned in December.⁸ Both ex-treasurers wrote open letters to the Board about the “stress of dealing with David Maynard about financial matters”.⁹ Cruse pointed out that part of the problem was lack of clarity about procedures, the role of the Board, and the minister’s nearly limitless authority. According to a member: “At a Board meeting to discuss this, David shouted, ‘Shut up!’ at Cruse,” who soon resigned his church membership and pledge.¹⁰

The control of information became paramount in the struggle for power. The Board held an emergency meeting to discuss Maynard’s behavior and the resulting resignations. DRE Redhawk was not informed of the meeting. Rev. Maynard wrote the minutes, though he was a key subject of discussion.¹¹ Redhawk named the narrative control Maynard was exercising: “It astounds me that David would take the minutes at this meeting”.¹² An anonymous open letter demanded Redhawk’s

resignation.¹³ At the following official Board meeting, Maynard's minutes needed substantial correction.¹⁴ District Executive Roger Comstock was called to revisit FUUN, and submitted a note for the newsletter mentioning the "considerable controversy".¹⁵

Maynard's abuse of power and control was not limited to volunteers. Redhawk submitted both a formal complaint and another letter to the Board, detailing the "emotional abuse" and "fear of David Maynard".¹⁶ Redhawk wrote, "I believe we are being steered away from the truth at many turns in this process," imploring church leadership to take control of information and awaken to abuses of power.¹⁷ A special Board meeting was called during Comstock's visit and, in the presence of an authority figure greater than himself, Maynard offered words of contrition and committed to change.¹⁸ Yet less than a week later, Redhawk resigned, followed shortly by the on-staff youth advisor.¹⁹ In Redhawk's resignation letter, he implored once again: "tell the stories that must be told".²⁰ He diagnosed the underlying problem of secrecy and recommended the cure of honest communication.

Two days later, District Executive Comstock sent his "intervention" visit report, which presented an extensive recap of the many threads, factions, and events up to this point.²¹ He re-asserted his diagnosis from the previous spring that the church was going through what should have been a fairly normal transition from pastoral to programmatic size and format.²² This transition necessitated a power shift, from a history of ministers who "dominate the leadership" to instead "share the leadership" with lay people.²³ Because Maynard refused to share his power and control, "we must then look at his leadership style as being at the center of the current controversy".²⁴ Comstock also implored a halt of the practices of antagonistic letter-writing amongst the congregation (although this researcher must admit gratitude for it).²⁵ The District Executive also found that misuse of control and miscommunication were the key factors. Yet overall, Comstock did not consider this to be an intractable conflict. He suggested that it could be resolved with professional development training for Maynard and clear, direct communication by all involved.²⁶

Contemporaneously in the broader American culture, awareness of sexual abuses of power had begun to rise, due in part to the high profile testimony of Anita Hill of sexual harassment by Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas.²⁷ Right as FUUN began their aforementioned power struggles, the *UU World* published its Jan/Feb 1993 issue, entirely focused on clergy sexual abuse. The lead article reported on a major incident of sexual abuse at a different, unnamed UU congregation, aiming to illustrate the "complex of manipulation and secrecy that abusive clergy orchestrate".²⁸ Yet the *UU World*, an in-house pseudo-journalistic entity, was itself restrained to

protective secrecy. It used pseudonyms “in the interest of fairness...because the minister resigned before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee could hold a formal investigation (consequently the charges against the minister involved were never adjudicated)”.²⁹ Even as UU culture tried to shine a light on the secrecy of power abuse, its luminosity was limited by fears of legal retribution and the ability of ministers accused of misconduct to evade accountability by simply resigning from fellowship. If a minister does this before or during a Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) investigation, nothing more is done by Unitarian Universalism.³⁰ This is as true now as it was then.

Even when investigations are completed, it may be too little, too late. In a smaller op-ed column of the same *UU World* issue, a woman named Karen Braucher wrote “A Whistleblower’s Story,” detailing the painful saga of deposing her former minister, Mack Mitchell.³¹ After Braucher discovered that for years Mitchell had abused three Tibetan adolescent girls he had brought to live with him, she went to the police. He was arrested and convicted of six counts of rape, unnatural rape, indecent assault and battery.³² The MFC removed him from ministerial fellowship, six months later. Braucher wrote that the UUA’s “deafening silence...added to my sense of betrayal and abandonment”.³³ Abuse of power can harm those directly and indirectly involved. When the institution also fails to follow-up appropriately, it can cause secondary trauma.

Perhaps after having read this issue of the *UU World* and seeing some of their own experiences reflected in its pages, women at First UU Nashville began to bring “stories of inappropriate behavior on the part of the minister” to two female lay leaders.³⁴ These accounts included at least one affair Maynard had conducted with a congregant whom he had been counseling and the sexual harassment of several other individuals.³⁵ A network of women conveyed this information to the Board at roughly the same time as Maynard’s other misuses of power were being revealed. Days after Redhawk’s resignation and Comstock’s intervention report, sexual misconduct became the issue that tipped the scales. After the secret was out, Maynard went into narrative damage control. He disclosed to the Board and the congregation that he was “addicted to lust,” for which he was engaged in Sexaholics Anonymous and had been “sexually sober” for over four years.³⁶ The struggle against sexual addiction deserves sympathy and support; it is not the core of the problem. Likewise, the fact that Maynard was married is worth mentioning, but not central. More to the point, Maynard was in a position of power from which sexual misconduct of any kind, addicted or not, married or not, could cause unusual magnitudes of harm.

While some congregants were beginning to see through Maynard’s strategies of narrative defense, Board President Carl Gebuhr was not among them. He began to use his own power to

minimize, erase, and reframe Maynard's sexual misconduct. After Maynard's initial disclosure of sexual addiction, Gebuhr wrote to members, "in response to requests from some of those attending the board meeting on February 8, we have arranged a gathering for informational purposes," with no mention of the nature of the issue at hand.³⁷ In another letter, Gebuhr wrote, "There are members who have continuing concerns about their relationship with the minister...those who are yet dissatisfied with our evaluation process."³⁸ His phrasing puts the onus of ministerial relations on the concerned and/or harmed individuals rather than leadership and is dismissive of his concerned constituents. When a Board motion was made to ask Maynard to stop counseling female congregants, Gebuhr cast the tie vote against.³⁹

With leadership, congregants, and communications in disarray, something had to be done. The Board called in Constance LaFerriere, Pacific Southwest District Executive, who had experience dealing with congregational sexual ethics.⁴⁰ Her conclusion was that although David's misconduct was not clear-cut, the distress of the congregation called for action.⁴¹ She recommended a sexual ethics workshop, with an additional follow-up for staff and lay leadership about roles and responsibilities. This researcher found no evidence that either took place during this period.

Her report also highlights that members of the congregation were exhibiting abusive behaviors towards each other. Factions had begun to form. A vitriolic anonymous letter was circulated, repeating Maynard's narrative: advocating for his recovery from addiction, blaming critics, and omitting the abuse of power altogether.⁴² A female Board member was screamed at in the parking lot and called a Nazi.⁴³ Two others recall these months as a "personal hell" and "the single biggest trauma of my adult life".⁴⁴ The church administrator Pam Hughes was hospitalized and resigned. The conflict also impacted the church financially, with pledges almost \$10,000 less than the previous year.⁴⁵ When a community leader abuses an individual, their actions can cause psychological, physical, financial, and spiritual harm to the entire community.

The women Maynard had directly harmed were afraid to take action. Six individuals complained of misconduct, such as "flirting, philandering, etc. 4-5 years ago extending into activity (i.e. sexual reminders, 'sexualizing' incidents, etc.) within the past year".⁴⁶ No action could be taken without a "signed formal complaint for use with the UUA Ministerial Fellowship Committee," yet the complainants were afraid to "risk wrath and hostility if nothing was going to be done".⁴⁷ Finally, in April, Anna Belle Leiserson submitted a complaint to the MFC. She notified the FUUN Board in an anonymous letter and asked that her identity be kept confidential.⁴⁸ Her trust was broken. The members of the congregation began to harass and bully her. She was called "mentally unbalanced,"

“puppet,” and “man-hater”.⁴⁹ When church members today tell the story of the Great Unpleasantness, they note that Leiserson’s hair turned pure white that year. She has since said, “the attempts to exile her from the congregation were even more painful than the original betrayal by the minister”.⁵⁰ The community’s mishandling of misconduct, particularly the prioritization of the powerful over the vulnerable, added layers of trauma.

Two long months after Leiserson submitted her complaint, MFC investigators arrived without notice and engaged in a two-day investigation. The day after they departed, the congregation had its annual meeting. Unusually, the election for President was contested. One candidate, Bill Lewis, sent out a six-page letter detailing events up to this point in resistance to the “secretive approach” that others had taken.⁵¹ He was not elected. One elected leader whose term was safely ending implored the congregation to “abolish ‘secrecy’”.⁵² Ironically, Board President Carl Gebuhr’s Annual Presidential Report made no mention of the conflict whatsoever. In his Annual Minister’s Report, Maynard framed the conflict minimally as “concerns about the impact of my personal life on my ministry.”⁵³ He also apologized for the strife of the community by saying, “In whatever ways I contributed to the distress, I was wrong. I ask your forgiveness...I commit myself to change”.⁵⁴ Again, we see words of contrition and change, without clear understanding of the problem or plans for follow-through.

The new Board inherited the conflict. In August, the Ministerial Relations Panel (MRP) submitted a report to the Board.⁵⁵ It encouraged Maynard to reflect on “how he exerts and utilizes his personal and professional power and control over others”.⁵⁶ Because “meetings with various professional counselors call into question David’s ability to counsel on sexual issues,” the MRP recommended that Maynard should continue with his sexual addiction recovery program and therapy, as well as take a sabbatical.⁵⁷ Maynard exercised his remaining power in two final attempts at narrative control: he sent a letter to the MFC investigators detailing his reflection and changes, such as no longer counseling women with his office door closed, alone in the building, or regarding sexual issues⁵⁸; and he published a list of his ministerial accomplishments at FUUN to date.⁵⁹

After meeting with him in September, the MFC Executive Committee found Rev. David More Maynard:

...guilty of conduct unbecoming a minister, specifically in: participating in an affair within the past six years with a counselee and member of your congregation and acknowledging four or more affairs earlier in your ministry. Additionally, in the process of investigating the complaint of Anna Belle

*Leiserson, we have discovered a pattern of insensitivity, and lack of awareness of the impact of your behavior on some of the members of your congregation.*⁶⁰

Having proven ineffectual, Maynard's contrition evaporated. The pattern of insensitivity and anger reemerged. During the resulting FUUN Board meeting, Maynard did not accept responsibility, but contested the semantics of the MFC's letter, asserting that, "Person was not a member or counselee-should be 'a person in the congregation.' Also MFC does not go back more than 6 years as far as conduct - the 'four or more affairs' therefore should be deleted".⁶¹ The MFC revised their letter: removing the word "member," but leaving "a former counselee," and retaining "four or more affairs".⁶² The consequences of the MFC's findings were that Maynard must attend a psychological/career assessment program, provide written reports from his Sexaholics Anonymous sponsor and therapist, and apologize to Anna Belle Leiserson in writing with a copy sent to the UUA Department of Ministry.

With a guilty verdict from the UUA, the tortured congregation finally had clarity. After requesting feedback, the Board scheduled a congregational meeting for a dismissal vote in December of 1993.⁶³ Days before the vote and a year after the conflict had begun, Rev. David More Maynard resigned.⁶⁴ Maynard was "paid 12 months' salary, one month for each of the 12 years of service at FUUN, as suggested by UUA guidelines for a resignation made in conflict".⁶⁵ This financial decision was hotly contested and left the church "unable to financially support a minister until August of 1994".⁶⁶

Yet it seems, besides surrendering his job, Maynard experienced no further repercussions. Two years later, he had a follow-up meeting with the MFC. They found that he "neither cooperated with the MFC nor complied with the agreements he made," but the only action taken was to give him another year.⁶⁷ Further records about Maynard, or access to files of any living minister, are restricted.⁶⁸ The FUUN Search Committee members who had originally chosen Maynard to be FUUN's ministers later received, "verification about Maynard having the same issues at his other pastoral assignments. We were deceived, because we were not given this information about his past".⁶⁹ Restricting the records of a minister who has been found guilty of misconduct is an act of secrecy which protects, prioritizes, and potentially enables continuing patterns of manipulation and abuse. According to the myUUA directory, Maynard did not work at a congregation for six years, resuming ministry as a Consulting Minister in Seattle in 1999 and at Eastrose Fellowship UU in Portland, where he remains Minister Emeritus.

Because power and secrecy *beyond* that of the minister were key contributing factors to the Great Unpleasantness, strife did not dissipate upon his departure. Days after his resignation, FUUN held a congregational meeting so large it had to be held in the local high school's auditorium.⁷⁰ The purpose of this meeting was to address a petition, signed by 56 congregants including former Board President Carl Gebuhr, to recall the entire Board, which was defeated by a two-to-one margin. This group, who were avowedly "not in support of sexual addiction or extra-marital affairs but rather in support of a fair and open hearing for anyone under accusation of misconduct...eventually called themselves the Phoenix Group".⁷¹ According to FUUN's history book, the Phoenix Group later proposed a statement "to clear [Maynard's] name, get a written acknowledgement from the Board of injustice...After discussion, the Board did *not* approve the strong apologetic statement".⁷²

On July 3, 1994, 57 signatories submitted a letter of intention to found a new congregation. By the end of the year, Greater Nashville Unitarian Universalist Church (GNUUC) was founded, with FUUN covenanted as their sponsor.⁷³ GNUUC purchased their building in Bellevue, TN in 1999.⁷⁴ Later, around 2014-2015, they began the process of calling their first full-time minister. The interim minister at the time, Rev. Rachel Lonberg, described the congregation in a letter to applicants: "GNUUC is a congregation that was born in conflict. The group that became GNUUC initially named themselves The Phoenix Group. The phoenix is an apt metaphor for this congregation. Though there are still some aftereffects from that conflict, GNUUC, like the mythical bird, is in the process of regeneration".⁷⁵ As a result of that search process in 2015, they called their first minister, Rev. Carmen Emerson, who remained for four years.⁷⁶ Rev. Cynthia Cain is their current temporary contract minister.⁷⁷ Their registered membership as of January 2019 is 54.⁷⁸

FUUN moved on and grew, with a new commitment to justice work, open communication, and shared ministry. The congregation "held a 'Listening Process' that allowed congregants to talk about their varied experiences and feelings, which was then published in a report in which everyone's personal privacy was protected".⁷⁹ In an open letter from the Board, FUUN President Mark Floyd said, "We will never forget this part of the life of our congregation and we will hold it up and not hide it, in hopes that it will eventually be seen as a time in which we were able to mature, both personally and as a community. The events of our past provide the opportunities for our future".⁸⁰ After a succession of three interims, Rev. Mary Katherine Morn was called to become FUUN's minister in April 1997. She later recalled, "I knew the history of the congregation's experience of misconduct and the conflict that ensued. What I could not have known was how this experience affected the individuals involved

and the congregation as a whole”.⁸¹ She led what is widely acknowledged to be a period of healing for the congregation.

Part 2: “The Association has largely failed”

Over the next two decades, the First UU Church of Nashville became, in the words of Anna Belle Leiserson, “strong at the broken places”.⁸² The congregation followed through on its commitment to open communication and shared ministry. The work of FUUN in general and Leiserson in particular would become directly responsible for major transformations in the ways the Unitarian Universalist Association handles ministerial misconduct. This influence cannot be overstated. It showcases the possibility for one dedicated congregation or even a single tenacious individual to effect change.

This was acknowledged as early as the 2000 General Assembly (GA), which was held in Nashville. At the Awards Breakfast, FUUN received the O. Eugene Pickett Award for, “the congregation that has made an outstanding contribution to the growth of UUism... which showed how it is possible to move through a serious conflict involving ministerial misconduct and emerge a stronger community”.⁸³ Anna Belle Leiserson and Mary Katherine Morn had become members of the UUA-appointed Safe Congregation Panel.^{84,85} There at the Nashville GA, the Panel delivered the “Muir Report” on ministerial misconduct. In response, UUA Executive Vice President Kay Montgomery made a public apology: “The Association has largely failed the people most hurt by sexual misconduct - the victims and survivors”.⁸⁶

Along with the apology, Montgomery began some institutional changes. She consulted with the president and moderator. She received requests from the chairs of the MFC and the Board of Review, which had been “struggling for a number of years with tensions between them”.⁸⁷ She then convened an Ad Hoc Task Force on Ethics and Congregational Life, to recommend clarifying positive changes in the UUA process for responding to complaints of ministerial misconduct. The Ad Hoc Task Force submitted its report in March 2001.⁸⁸ The two reports from the Panel and Task Force, along with those involved, helped to create the Office of Ethics and Safety in Congregational Life.⁸⁹

A decade after Anita Hill’s Supreme Court testimony, another high-profile scandal began to raise American consciousness on religious sexual abuse. In January 2002, the Boston Globe published the first of many revelatory articles on the institutional practice of the Catholic Church to protect and thus enable pedophilic, sexually-abusive clergy.⁹⁰ A month later, legislation was proposed requiring clergy to report allegations of sexual abuse, with a conspicuous loophole to bar any report

“provided by a person who reasonably expects it to remain confidential”.⁹¹ UUA President Bill Sinkford objected in the Boston Globe: “the inarguable value of protecting children outweighs the questionable value of confidential counseling for pedophiles”.⁹² Though the Globe and Sinkford use the term “confidential,” what they describe fits Deborah Pope-Lance’s definition of secrecy, which protects the abusers of power rather than their victims. Sinkford also published a letter on the UUA website saying, “I urge you to recognize that the changed world in which we live calls us to a new level of duty and care”.⁹³ Sinkford understood that the secrecy which protected perpetrators also sustained abusive behavior and that the UUA, as a religious organization not unlike the Catholic church, also held power and responsibility on this issue.

In 2004, First UU Nashville went through a change in ministerial leadership. Rev. Mary Katherine Morn had led seven successful and healing years at FUUN, during which she had overseen the ministerial internship of current UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray. The congregation had flourished. Yet, Mary Katherine and her husband made the decision to leave Nashville to pursue an opportunity in his career.⁹⁴ She went on to become the Director of Development at the UUA and is currently the President and CEO of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. FUUN sought new leadership with the intention to continue on the path of openness and shared ministry it had blazed.

After an interim minister, the church called Rev. Gail Seavey in August of 2005. All the way back to her ministerial internship in the mid-1980s, Seavey had found herself in the role of “an ‘after-pastor’: clergy who serve institutions with a history of power abuses, including using those they serve sexually, by a previous minister”.⁹⁵ Her internship supervising minister, Rev. Frederica Leigh, taught her how to have “impeccable boundaries” which “laid the foundation” for Seavey’s career.⁹⁶ The first congregation she was called to in White Bear Lake, MN, had developed the mistrust and imbalance from years with a minister who had relationships with congregants. Sensing secrecy during her interview week, Seavey insisted that the congregation be upfront with her about its history: “The congregation’s growth as religious people began by telling a secret... I started to pay attention to the murmuring of whispered secrets”.⁹⁷ So when she was called to FUUN, both parties resonated because “they were open about their history as a congregation that had suffered and healed from clergy misconduct”.⁹⁸

Also in 2005, Rev. Mary Katherine Morn asked Anna Belle Leiserson to support a new misconduct complainant.⁹⁹ They found that the UUA had not in fact followed through on many of the recommendations from its task forces, panels, and reports.¹⁰⁰ In shared ministry with Rev. Seavey, Leiserson created a congregational Social Justice Committee Action Team, called Safety Net. The

website for Safety Net, “warned people that policies from the Muir Report were not being followed and that one might feel abused a second time by the UUA if they reported clergy sexual misconduct”.¹⁰¹,
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Perhaps galvanized by Safety Net and the broader awareness of clergy sexual misconduct in American culture, the UUA began to generate reviews of their unimplemented reports and work to address them over the next few years.¹⁰³ The process of receiving complaints was shifted to “an intake person outside of the Ministries Department (now Ministries and Faith Development)...designated as a more neutral, safe person to report to” than the Director.¹⁰⁴ In 2002, the role of liaison had been “developed to provide support to victim/complainants when a complaint of professional misconduct is received”.¹⁰⁵ A liaison would be assigned after an official complaint was made. Yet, as was the case during Nashville’s Great Unpleasantness, even the choice to come forward with a complaint can be harrowing and dangerous. In 2005, liaisons were made available before a formal complaint was filed, so people might understand the process before they choose to utilize it.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, *The Safe Congregation Handbook* was published. The UUA began to engage the insurance company Church Mutual and posted their risk management materials on the UUA website. And in partnership with the Liberal Religious Educators’ Association (LREDA), a Safe Congregations Training was held online: “as far as we know this is the first time the web is being used as the delivery vehicle for this kind of training”.¹⁰⁷

The UUA process to recommend and finally enact these changes had been so messy, it was hard to understand exactly what had been said and what had been done. In 2010, the Religious Institute (co-founded by Rev. Debra Haffner, with support from the Veatch Program at Shelter Rock and the leadership of the UUA), undertook a massive systematic review of the UUA’s sexuality-related policies, including those for youth and LGBTQ+ people.¹⁰⁸ They advocated a change from institutional reactivity brought on by misconduct accusations and “Toward a Sexually Healthy and Responsible UUA”.¹⁰⁹ Haffner’s report named sexual harassment and misconduct as, “the weakest area of sexual health for our denomination, our congregations, and our religious professionals” and encouraged the UUA to “consider a separate, more in-depth assessment of this area...with the goals of creating a single definition/expectation of conduct and a process for investigating and responding to complaints”.¹¹⁰ As a result of this report, “the UUA became the first denomination to require its ministerial candidates to demonstrate competency in sexual health, education, and justice” via the MFC beginning in December 2010.¹¹¹ An institutional apology template was created to be sent from the UUA President to complainants. The UUA Human Resource Manual was completely updated,

with “both updated definitions of harassment and a much clearer policy that contains all the core elements of a sexual harassment policy”.¹¹²

Even so, there remained serious institutional confusion about ethical standards. The Religious Institute report concurred with Safety Net that “many of the recommendations of previous task forces were never implemented”.¹¹³ It noted that “processes for investigating and resolving complaints differ for the UUA staff, ministers through the MFC, and ministers through the UUMA.... The lack of clarity around these issues also exists at the congregational level”.¹¹⁴ Even this extensive study admits, “there was not the time to interview enough people to completely understand the history of the many complicated reports and the many recommendations that have been made over the past 10 years that have not been adopted”.¹¹⁵ In 2011, Rev. Dr. Deborah Pope-Lance gave the Berry Street Essay, titled “Whence We Come and How and Whither”. She called on her peers to, “find our way clear to be of one mind about ethical standards of practice”.¹¹⁶ Also at the 2011 General Assembly, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers’ Association (UUMA) Code of Conduct was amended to add: “I will not engage in sexual contact, sexualized behavior, or a sexual relationship with any person I serve as a minister”.¹¹⁷

Yet meaningful implementation still lagged behind aspirational talk from the UUA. In 2013, FUUN’s Safety Net noted this disparity’s appearance in the General Assembly tagline: “This theme [“From Promise to Commitment”], while admirable in many respects, has served to underscore the pain of those who have gone unheard and un-cared for in the wake of clergy misconduct”.¹¹⁸ They published a Change.org petition: “UUA candidates for board and moderator: Open a national conversation on clergy misconduct.” Safety Net’s efficacy continued to be as strong as it had been nearly ten years earlier. Jim Key, the candidate who would go on to become moderator, signed their petition, saying “secrets and conflicts not spoken of and not addressed chill a congregation’s health and growth...As an association, we need to ensure that resources are available to support our congregations during these periods of reconciliation”.¹¹⁹ UUA Board candidate Rob Eller-Isaacs also signed and included a written pledge on the petition webpage.

In explicit response to Safety Net’s petition, Director of Ministries and Faith Development Rev. Sarah Lammert submitted the “Report to the UUA Board: Reviewing UUA Policies and Procedures for working with Victims of Misconduct by UU Religious Professionals: a Gap Analysis.”¹²⁰ This Gap Analysis listed some report recommendations that had been implemented (many of which have already been discussed above). The gaps in implementation included that no training of liaisons/advocates had been held since the initial group 14 years earlier, MFC and UUA staff lacked

knowledge about current laws regarding sexual abuse, and that, “there continues to be a greater emphasis on the process of adjudicating the complaint than on pastoral care of the victim and congregation, or on addressing public safety”.¹²¹

After having signed Safety Net’s petition, Jim Key followed through, becoming one of the few effective officials on this issue. Once Jim Key was elected moderator, he created a Board Working Group on Congregational Boundaries.¹²² He “went to Nashville for a town meeting and worship service about misconduct, sponsored by First Unitarian Universalist Church and its Safety Net social justice project”.¹²³ At the GA in Providence, RI the following month, 14 years after Kay Montgomery’s apology in Nashville, Jim Key “issued a formal apology from the UUA to survivors and pledged the board’s attention to the issue”.¹²⁴ At the 2015 GA, Jim Key, Sarah Lammert, Rev. Dr. Muir of the “Muir Report”, and “Rev. Gail Seavey of the First UU Church of Nashville, which has been a leader on this issue through UU Safety Net” appeared together in a panel workshop title, “Building Restorative Justice in Cases of Clergy Sexual Misconduct”.¹²⁵

During the panel, Key noted some recent institutional changes. Communication with complainants had been regularly dismissive or nonexistent, but was now corrected: language such as “alleged victim” was cleaned up and assurances were made that “complainants will be kept informed of procedures and outcomes”.¹²⁶ An advocate training was finally being planned for later that year, with the intention of ongoing training and support. Previously, a minister accused of misconduct would come before the MFC in person during an investigation, while the complainant would be represented only through written statements. Because of Safety Net’s influence on Key, the MFC changed this rule to finally give complainants “the right to be heard in person”.¹²⁷ Yet well-deserved skepticism remained. During the panel with Key and Lammert, Seavey responded to vocal skepticism from survivors in the audience by affirming that she and Safety Net were “not going to believe...until we see major changes”.¹²⁸

Part 3: If Secrets Define Us

In the first 15 years of the millennium, the UUA had repeatedly apologized and voiced an intention to make those major changes. Yet more often than not, it formed task forces to report on the reports of past task forces. Given another chance to protect truth and vulnerability instead of secrets and power, would our institution follow through?

At the 2016 GA, Rev. Gail Seavey presented her Berry Street Essay, “If Secrets Define Us.”¹²⁹ She spoke about ministerial sexual misconduct, institutional secrecy, power analysis, and post-

traumatic stress disorder. During her speech, Seavey practiced what she preached by offering vulnerable and challenging truths to her audience, including her experience with sexual assault, PTSD, and her own negative behaviors resulting from unexamined wounds and power. She shared the ministry of the moment by crediting a network of other women. The *UU World* wrote that she “received a standing ovation, and a line of women UU ministers encircled the stage, holding hands, in support”.¹³⁰ When we spoke about the Essay, Seavey said that she felt “The Goddess was there in that room”.¹³¹

Rev. David Pyle affirmed the vast majority of Seavey’s message in his Response to the Berry Street Essay: “it is time, past time, for us to accept the fact that Clergy Professional Misconduct has damaged our congregations, our Association, and our religious mission in the world.” In a second article on the Essay, *UU World* editor Elaine McArdle noted, “the Nashville church has led denominational efforts to address the problem”.¹³² The UUA responded with another report: a “History of UUA Task Forces (2000-2016) on Misconduct and Sexual Health” with prefacing comments by Rev. Sarah Lammert.¹³³ This history explicitly acknowledged the role of Safety Net in these improvements. Indeed, almost every positive change the UUA has made on this issue has been a result of pressure from the shared ministry of the First UU Church of Nashville.

While recounting the Great Unpleasantness in her speech, Seavey had praised FUUN’s healing, bravery, and growth after the misconduct of Rev. Maynard. But when Maynard himself encountered her Essay, he was not happy to hear that the congregation he’d harmed was healing. He heard only his own name. He filed a complaint against Seavey through the UUMA, asserting that nothing she said about him had occurred. A phone call between Maynard, Seavey, and their respective Good Officers took place as the initial step in the UUMA’s collegial reconciliation process.¹³⁴ But when engagement with the UUA’s accountability process did not seem to be working in his favor, Maynard halted it and instead engaged a lawyer to file a defamation lawsuit against Seavey and the UUMA.¹³⁵

In addition to Seavey, Maynard’s defamation suit letter was sent directly to UUMA Executive Director Don Southworth. According to Seavey and Pope-Lance, Don Southworth subsequently used his power to obscure information from the UUMA Board, advised Seavey incorrectly, and lied during this contentious process. Church Mutual, the UUA’s insurance company, contacted FUUN without notifying Seavey, even though the suit was against her and not the church. Incomplete information, miscommunication, and institutional monetary concerns “pressed [Seavey] to settle”.¹³⁶

Southworth was misusing his power and communication in other ways at the same time. In early 2017, he wrote a letter “as a concerned Unitarian Universalist” addressed to the UUA Board of Trustees, voicing his objection to actions surrounding the Racial Hiring Controversy.¹³⁷ Many voices immediately confronted him, including a leader of Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU) who called his letter, “the face of institutional white supremacy”.¹³⁸ The UUMA Board of Trustees published a letter distancing themselves from Southworth’s sentiments.¹³⁹

Roughly a week later, Seavey’s essay was reposted with redactions. The UUMA made the change and published a letter acknowledging “deep emotion” and ambivalence about the conflict.¹⁴⁰ Less than two months later, Don Southworth apologized for his Racial Hiring Controversy letter and resigned, using his power one last time to publish an apologetic letter to the UUMA membership.¹⁴¹ But for Seavey, the damage had been done. The censored, secretive version of her Essay remained up for about a year, before she decided to withdraw it entirely. In solidarity, Pope-Lance also withdrew hers. The full versions are accessible on Pope-Lance’s website and other online sources. These two celebrated Berry Street Essays have been used in multiple UU classes to teach ministerial students about misconduct, as required by the MFC. What does it say that they remain missing from the UUMA Berry Street Essay webpage?

In June 2017, 170 signatories took things into their own hands and filed a formal grievance against Rev. David Maynard. It cited that he had “used the adversarial mechanisms of the law” and “harnessed the inherent bias of the insurance industry, that is, its singular focus on risk reduction and cost saving rather than on truth and justice”.¹⁴² It asked that Maynard’s UUMA membership be terminated. In March 2018, the Committee on Ethics and Collegiality reported to the UUMA Board in concurrence with the grievance.¹⁴³ On May 8, Maynard resigned his UUMA membership and a note was placed in his file with the recommendation to future Boards that he not be allowed to rejoin.¹⁴⁴ Even so, with at least a two-decade track record of intimidation, bullying, and abuse, Maynard’s fellowship with the MFC, and thus his power as a Unitarian Universalist minister, remains intact.

Like Maynard, ministerial power structures had voiced many contrite sentiments when their failings have been discovered and publicized. But when Rev. Seavey needed them to go from promise to commitment to protect her, they held on to their power but abdicated their responsibility. She was abandoned, silenced, and harmed. As one of her employees at the time, I saw firsthand how deeply distressing these events were to her. I watched and I learned that Unitarian Universalism did not follow through on its commitments to protect truth and vulnerability over power or money.

Part 4: The Fire of Commitment

The First UU Church of Nashville has called only one other male minister since Maynard. In April of 1998, Jason Shelton and his fiancée began attending First UU Nashville.¹⁴⁵ Shelton had previously attended a Catholic seminary and lived as a Franciscan brother.¹⁴⁶ The Director of Music position was open at FUUN and after speaking with Rev. Morn, he applied and got the job in July. He received his Master's of Divinity from Vanderbilt Divinity School and was ordained by FUUN in 2004.¹⁴⁷

Shelton's star began a meteoric rise. His unique combination of musical and ministerial training led UUA President Bill Sinkford to appoint him to the New Hymn Resource Task Force. After Sinkford uttered a distinctive phrase in a meeting, Shelton had "one of the most powerful, sacred, creative moments [he'd] ever experienced" and immediately wrote "Standing on the Side of Love".¹⁴⁸ The UUA's public action campaign was named after the song, making it "the slogan our faith is known for".¹⁴⁹ At the 2016 GA, Rev. Theresa Soto challenged its ableist language by holding up a sign that read, "Ouch" every time "standing" or "walking metaphors were used."¹⁵⁰ Shelton responded thoughtfully by changing the lyrics to "Answering the Call of Love," (though other ableist metaphors remain part of that and many other UU hymns). In 2017, GA voted to accept Soto's responsive resolution to change the name of the UUA's public action campaign to "Side with Love".¹⁵¹

2005 was a banner year for Shelton as he continued his ascent to UU stardom. He and Rev. Mary Katherine Morn co-wrote "Fire of Commitment," for which the FUUN history book is named. He co-directed worship at the UU General Assembly. The *Singing the Journey* hymnal was published with 11 songs written and/or arranged by Shelton, more than any other single contributor. When the UU World published an article about the new hymnal, Shelton's "Fire of Commitment" was the only song excerpted.¹⁵² When Shelton was promoted to FUUN's Associate Minister for Music in 2008, he became the first ever UU music director to receive fellowship as a UU minister.^{153, 154} He remained in that role until 2017, when he resigned in order to become a music consultant for UU congregations across the country.¹⁵⁵

Before I continue and in the interest of full disclosure, let me briefly describe my own personal and professional relationship with Jason Shelton. I worked as FUUN's part-time Membership Coordinator from June 2016 to November 2017. As I arrived and he departed, Shelton and I were co-workers for about a year. We taught New Membership Classes together, including the history of FUUN and the Great Unpleasantness. Before I had even begun to consider the path of ministry for which I am now studying at Harvard Divinity School, he gave me a gift: a street sign which read, "No

Parking: Minister Only” with a post-it which said, “In case you should ever need it. <3 J”. A year or so later, I convened a Clearness Committee to help me in my career discernment; Shelton and Seavey were two of five trusted people in attendance. Suffice it to say, these matters are close to my heart.

Shelton became beloved not only at FUUN, but across Unitarian Universalism. But while reflecting on the new hymnal in 2005, a UU World reporter had written his ambivalent impressions of the music which Shelton had influenced so deeply: “...I left GA hungering for restraint and thought. They whom the gods would punish, said Oscar Wilde, are granted their prayers”.¹⁵⁶ In the UU World in 2010, Shelton himself prayed, “What I hope is that our communities will be places where we hold one another accountable for doing the work that leads us to grow personally and spiritually, that leads us to the possibility of healing those old wounds”.¹⁵⁷ In her Berry Street Essay, Rev. Gail Seavey noted that, “any person in a position of power with undifferentiated boundaries, high self-involvement and charisma can easily fall into patterns of unethical sexual behavior.”¹⁵⁸ Shelton’s prestige and power within Unitarian Universalism had increased exponentially. While on staff at FUUN, he was part of a healthy network of shared ministerial power, with regular reminders of the community to which he was accountable. After he resigned and became an independent consultant, he relinquished most of that network’s influence and his power became his alone.

In August 2019, a man at FUUN informed Rev. Seavey of an extramarital sexual relationship between his wife and Jason Shelton.¹⁵⁹ This relationship broke Shelton’s covenant as an affiliated community minister and the UUMA Code of Conduct. Seavey met with Shelton, who confirmed. He was “removed from affiliated status” with the church.¹⁶⁰ Within days and of his own volition, Shelton resigned his ministerial fellowship with the MFC and withdrew “from all ministerial and professional functions within the UUA for the coming year”.¹⁶¹

Amid her final year before retirement, Rev. Gail Seavey was once again thrown into the role of after-pastor, caring for those directly and indirectly harmed. After speaking with Shelton’s wife, as well as the man who had initially reported the situation, Seavey and the FUUN Board decided to inform the congregation via paper letter and intentionally kept this news off the internet. The letter read simply that Shelton had broken his covenant with the church, was removed from affiliated status, and had resigned his MFC fellowship of his own volition, “which serves as a resignation from UU ministry,” particularly since he had been ordained by FUUN itself.¹⁶² Driven by the wishes of those harmed by the conflict and mindful of the two Shelton children, the letter explained that his family would remain active members of the congregation and asked that, “you do not engage [his wife] and the children in any conversations or questions about Mr. Shelton”.¹⁶³

Additionally, the husband who had reported the situation and his wife were directed to pastoral care resources.¹⁶⁴ I have chosen not to name them, which is an act of confidentiality to protect the vulnerable, rather than secrecy to protect the powerful. Shelton's wife asked that the woman not come to church when she or the Shelton children were there. Accounts differ as to how FUUN did or did not respond to the woman, but the eventual consequence was that she is no longer involved with the spiritual community in which she had been an active member.

The congregants had also been harmed by the betrayal of someone they had loved and trusted. The church prepared a "pastoral care emergency" team, composed of the ministers, trained lay leaders, two affiliated chaplains, as well as a contract counselor from outside of the church.¹⁶⁵ Congregants were welcomed to ask questions about what had happened, which were answered with complete honesty in person. According to Seavey, though this "deeply affected the church...we invented the best practices".¹⁶⁶ The most common sentiments expressed were: Anger, hurt, nostalgia for the 20 years of good ministry, the triggering of some people's own tender experiences with divorces and affairs, and finally, "this wasn't as bad as Maynard".¹⁶⁷ Unlike Shelton, Maynard had fought accountability and lost his temper every step of the way.

While this situation was certainly not as bad in that respect, FUUN's beloved former music minister who had been an integral leader of the community for 20 years, had violated one of the strongest boundaries around which the congregation had come to understand itself. Jason Shelton should have known better than anyone how much harm his misuse of power could cause. He was an even more powerful public figure who directly harmed several people and indirectly harmed hundreds of members of the Nashville congregation and his colleagues across Unitarian Universalism.

Yet his actions have been kept secret from Unitarian Universalist laity at large. To date, no public statement has been made about the sudden professional disappearance of one of UU's brightest stars. No cautionary tale has been told. No learning opportunity taken. In the back of the 2019 Winter issue of the *UU World*, under "resignations," Shelton's name is listed, with no further information. No articles have been published nor are planned to be. In fact, the *UU World* has "no information about Jason Shelton's resignation, as the UUMA, MFC, and Department of Ministry do not provide copies of their communications to clergy with the magazine".¹⁶⁸ The Association can be understood as a meta-congregation, in which this strategy of silence and secrecy is unhealthy.

Near the end of September 2019, Rev. Sarah Lammert, Co-Director of Ministries and Faith Development, sent an email about Shelton's actions "to active ministers and all Board presidents per the MFC's communication policy for when ministers are removed from fellowship".¹⁶⁹ The MFC has

no exact policy to follow for resignations resulting from a self-reporting minister with no complainant. Lammert's email included a message signed by Shelton, which apologizes, frames things sympathetically towards him, and includes a couple caveats: "while in the process of ending my marriage, I became intimately involved with a married member of the congregation. I should have recognized the necessity of maintaining appropriate ministerial boundaries, even though I was no longer a settled minister in the congregation...I am deeply sorry".¹⁷⁰ He also preempts the conversation about reconciliation, a process which should not be within a perpetrator's control: "I hope that in time the UUMA, the MFC, and I might be able to discern a path to restore right relationships with you and with our larger faith movement".¹⁷¹ Though he admits causing harm, apologizes, and relinquishes his power, he could not resist utilizing it one final time to attempt to control the narrative and consequences, a pattern which we have seen before.

The email prioritized a powerful minister who had self-reported as guilty of misconduct, giving him access to a powerful communication channel for his own apology. It is unclear whether the people who had been harmed by Shelton's abuse of power received notice or the opportunity to give feedback before the email was sent. Lammert's comments in her preface to Shelton's message also explicitly advocate secrecy: "ask you not copy or forward this email".¹⁷² Rev. Deborah Pope-Lance said it was "unprecedented...It struck me as regrettably wrong in so many ways".¹⁷³

A week later, after receiving "feedback of fury" over this communication, an email was sent from Lammert to a wider email list, including aspirants like myself.¹⁷⁴ It commented, "Recent cases that have come before the Committee have led us to realize that our policy for communicating to the wider UU world about ministerial misconduct is inadequate. Our goal is to be transparent in service of restorative justice".¹⁷⁵ It requested that recipients fill out a survey about this issue, though many would not be able to understand the full context to which they were being asked to respond, due to the secrecy of the previous letter. An opportunity for the UUA to lead by example was missed.

Instead, we see two different approaches to handling the same case of ministerial misconduct. On one hand, the email sent in the aftermath of Shelton's misconduct displays a lack of understanding about the core principles of harm reduction and trauma response: a secretive flow of information to a privileged group; centering the abuser and allowing him to control the narrative; and zero follow-up or pastoral care offered. This caused a secondary wave of harm and confusion.

On the other hand, the communication and care strategies of FUUN, led by Rev. Gail Seavey, showcase best practices: thoughtful and non-reactive communication methods and messaging, which upheld the confidentiality of those harmed without secrecy about the misconduct of the abuser;

centering those who had been harmed and allowing them to drive the narrative and response; and a prepared, varied, and accessible pastoral care team. The UUA still has a lot to learn from the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville. The fire of commitment can be warming when well-stewarded. But it burns when it's abused.

Conclusion: A Personal and Prophetic Network

In 2019, I had my heart broken. I hesitate to share the following, but it may be evident to the reader that this was far more than a class history project for me. As mentioned previously, Jason Shelton played a major role in my decision to pursue Unitarian Universalist ministry. The same month that I left Nashville to do so, this fresh controversy erupted behind me. Because I had just moved, I didn't receive the letter or pastoral care as the other FUUN congregants did. Instead, I found out about the most distressing congregational event in decades and the betrayal of a trusted mentor through rumors and hearsay, surrounded by strangers. One morning in late September, while working at my part-time job with the UUA New England Region, my new co-workers began to discuss rumblings they were hearing about Jason Shelton. Lammert and Shelton's email was neither actually secret nor openly shared, leaving it in the grey-area of gossip which quickly spread. When I finally figured out what had happened, I was distraught by Shelton's actions and by the fog of miscommunication in which I and many other UUs had been left. I turned to the UU student group at HDS for spiritual community. I wept while sharing my sorrow with my new classmates in the dim light of Divinity Hall. Rev. Seavey has since spoken with me and apologized for her part in the miscommunication. Even experts can make mistakes.

I began this research before Shelton's actions came to light and was originally focused solely on Maynard and the Great Unpleasantness. But as events unfolded, it became clear that these two men are part of the same story. My grief and frustration drove me to voraciously pursue the truth of these matters. I have invested dozens of hours of research, yet I confess that I still do not understand. I am left feeling more suspicious of male authority figures than I have ever been in my life. I am deeply unsure that the powers that be in our Association would be willing or able to protect me if I were to ever find myself in a situation of direct harm. I have already found myself in a situation of indirect harm and have witnessed mostly secrecy and silence. As a ministerial student I ask, are these the lessons the UUA wants to continue to teach?

I too have had a choice about whether to share this research, to err on the side of self-preservation and secrecy or to risk openness and vulnerability. It is only my own power as a Harvard ministerial student, former FUUN staff member, current UUA employee, with the Trojan horse of a history paper, which has granted me access to the information I have recounted. Still, there is much information behind institutional barriers that I could not reach. I have serious worries about repercussions, but my ethics instruct me that information must be shared and action taken. I lift up the painstaking work of the women who have done this before me. They have sacrificed so much to make this faith a modicum more safe. Yet in amplifying their efforts, I know I risk the same legal, collegial, and institutional retribution that has already been wielded against them. As a ministerial aspirant, my career is in the hands of the MFC and UUA. I take risk in openly critiquing them on such a sensitive topic. But by taking this paper beyond the classroom in which it originated and into the wider UU world, I am taking one small action I know to be right. The response to it is beyond my control. I hope to see positive changes and to be harmed no further.

Repeatedly during this research, I've felt like this story wants to be told. I feel immense spiritual resonance in the coincidences that have placed me in just the right times, places, and positions to witness and report this history:

On one hand, there is David Maynard, a man I have never met, whose abusive, litigious shadow preemptively threatens to silence me. There is the *UU World*, a journalistic entity rendered powerless by its dependence on the supposedly democratic institution it cannot investigate or critique. There is the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, which at best removes power from those who have already abused it, but at worst re-traumatizes survivors of abuse as they seek the protection which should have prevented harm in the first place. There is Jason Shelton, who had every obstacle and policy against ministerial sexual misconduct which Unitarian Universalism could construct blinking in his face for twenty years, and who made the harmful choice anyway.

Yet on the other hand, there is the resilience and determination of many UUs like Anna Belle Leiserson, Rev. Dr. Deborah Pope-Lance, and Rev. Gail Seavey. There is the undeniable evidence that one wounded congregation or one determined individual can shift the structures of power. There are histories of marginalized people pooling our collective power to confront injustice century after century, issue after issue. In her Berry Street Essay, "If Secrets Define Us", Rev. Seavey said:

I have seen the powers of love, violence, prestige, community, sex, charisma, intelligence, terror, creativity, healing, secrets and death. I have seen how those powers interact and overlap. I have

seen how we mix up one power for another, thinking that sex is prestige, or that terror is love. I have seen smart people, good people, fail to understand the impact of sexual misconduct, how pervasive and systemic it is, not just among us but throughout our culture. For years the system at the UUA and in many of our congregations has been to protect the privileged instead of the vulnerable.

Sadly, this still seems largely to be the case. All UU leaders, including those in power over our protective processes, have an opportunity to better understand the dynamics of ministerial power, the widespread shockwaves of its abuse, the distinction between secrecy and confidentiality, and how to center the vulnerable. When we act from fidelity to our promises rather than react when caught unfaithful, we can weave communities that are strong at the broken places. Perhaps most challengingly, we can begin to imagine what restorative justice could like in these situations. The heart of covenant is that it is possible to mend what's broken and return what's been lost. But if any kind of reconciliation is possible, it won't be until the people who are most harmed and affected can drive that process.

The Great Unpleasantness began when I was two years old, toddling around two hundred miles away in East Tennessee. The First UU Church of Nashville has been inventing best practices and speaking truth to power since before I could talk. Their way of life shows us that open, relational, respectful communication and the decentralized power of shared ministry are both the vaccine and antidote for ministerial misconduct. I am beyond grateful to have learned such important and tragically necessary lessons directly from them. I wish Unitarian Universalism more closely matched its contrite and aspirational rhetoric. Because the women of First UU Nashville have shown me how, I am determined to join their prophetic network to bring those aspirations closer to reality.

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