



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

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## “The Leadership Dance”

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### Centering Thoughts:

*He who cannot be a good follower cannot be a good leader. Aristotle*

*A person cannot dance on one leg only. African Proverb*

*It's never too late to be what you might have been. George Eliot*

*Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a team work,  
a company work, a society work, a civilization work. Vince Lombardi*

### Reflections:

*The Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen*

In a short while we'll be affirming the call to Lay Ministry of one of our members. Becoming a Lay Minister in this Fellowship includes making a commitment of time and talent to the Mission and Vision of this congregation and an affirmation of our Unitarian Universalist Principles and tradition. It also recognizes the person as a leader of this Fellowship.

Leaders in faith communities and in public office are servants. I imagine some of you are optimistic about our newest Presidential servant leader and what lies ahead for our country. But I also imagine some of you are anxious about where the newly inaugurated President will lead us. I imagine your anxiety comes from statements he has made that seem counter to our Seven Principles. I imagine he has not yet earned your trust, though he deserves respect, as all people, whatever their position, deserve respect.

I hope you hold no such anxiety about the leaders who serve this Fellowship. We are servant leaders who contribute our time and talent to help the community and the individuals within it to be and do their best. We serve, not because we wish for power or recognition, but because we believe in the ideals and institution we're serving.

In a dance, some of us are leaders and others followers. In this Fellowship because we share the ministry, we take turns leading and following. Every year new leaders rise and long-term leaders step aside to make space for them. This is the leadership dance.

Over the years we have been blessed by many valuable leaders who took their turn as committee chairs, board trustees, and in recent years as lay ministers. Not everyone has a chance to be a leader where they work, play, or live. But here, there is nothing to prevent you from developing your leadership skills. Quarterly we have a Leadership Council where we include some leadership training. And some people hone their skills by volunteering for committees or small projects. You are a blessing to this Fellowship if you have volunteered in a big or small way.

I know those who have been lay ministers in the past have spoken about how it was a blessing for them to serve this Fellowship. The spiritual growth and self-understanding that comes with trying something new and giving back to something you value highly cannot be underestimated.

My own call to ordained ministry came after serving my local congregation as a religious education teacher, worship assistant, President of the Board of Trustees, and later as a Director of Religious Education for a neighboring UU congregation. I don't expect everyone to become an ordained minister after serving as a lay leader, but I know that a few of you have talked to me about doing just that. Or, knowing you can't go to seminary, have chosen to be a lay leader instead. Both are noble, necessary vocations.

Sometimes leadership positions are difficult to give up. But if we are truly to share the ministry we must make space for new leadership. Term limits for U.S. Presidents and for U.U. Board Presidents, for example, makes sense. As I've said, changing leadership allows for new ideas and new energy to enter into a system and it allows for long-term leaders to step back, reenergize, and be served for a change. But if some leaders step down, others must step up. And that also means current leaders need to train future leaders, their successors.

Are you ready to jump up and shout "Here I am—send me!" as the prophet Isaiah responded when God asked, "Whom shall I send, who will speak for us?"

I am reminded of the way early American congregational church members would buy their church pew. No one but the pew owner was allowed to sit there. We don't buy pew seats (though we might if our capital campaign falls short) nor do we buy leadership positions here, as may seem to be happening with national leadership. We share the ministry here and that means sharing the leadership. Even I don't own this pulpit. I share it with you.

I will be sharing it with many when I leave on March 1<sup>st</sup> for a few months of a sabbatical. In the next month you'll get more details about the UU ministers and others who will be stepping in while I'm gone. We have a great line-up that will give you a chance to be inspired by someone new with different ideas or worship style. My sabbatical may also provide a time for additional lay leadership to emerge.

Whether you speak for God or Unitarian Universalism, I hope at some point you raise your hand and take on the mantle (or stole) of leadership. If you are interested in learning about lay ministry, see me or any of the esteemed lay ministers who have or are serving you. I'll be offering another training this Fall when I return from my sabbatical. I hope some of you will consider this opportunity to deepen your commitment to Unitarian Universalism and to this Fellowship, as well as your own spiritual practice and understanding.

Whatever your skills or ability to raise your hand, let's all stay on the dance floor. Let's all keep dancing, leading and following in turn. May it be so.

*Hilda Kurtz, incoming Lay Minister for Connections and Community Outreach*

Good morning. It is a good to be here with you this morning. Myrna, Aleta and Michelle leave some big shoes to step in to. Please bear with me as I step into a new role as Lay Minister of Connections and Outreach within our fellowship.

The lay minister training, roughly monthly meetings with Reverend Alison, and joined now and then by Herb West, Michelle Liebens-Mack and Karen Solheim, has been one of the more enjoyable experiences for me of membership in UUFA. And I've had many enjoyable experiences as a member of this faith community. But the time to read, think and talk about readings drawn from a well of knowledge about UU congregations, about how belief and faith and justice align with UUism, about congregational growth and outreach— has been enriching and eye-opening. My thanks to Reverend Alison for the opportunity.

I look forward to working with UUs on Connections and Outreach efforts over the next two years. This seems an especially important time for Unitarian Universalists to be reaching out to fellow travelers, both within and without other faith communities, to affirm a shared commitment to the fundamental principles of justice, equity and compassion. UUFA already engages in many outreach efforts, more than I could list here, or we would be here all morning. Not all of these technically fall under the portfolio of Connections and Outreach, but I look forward to helping to support those efforts as well as working creatively with fellow UUs to imagine and enact wider circles of sharing and support across the Athens area community.

Thank you.

*Michelle Leebens-Mack, outgoing Lay Minister for Connections & Communications*

Good Morning, I am Michelle Leebens-Mack. You know, it is funny that Rev. Alison choose the title for this service "The Leadership Dance," because one at my first visits to First Unitarian Universalist of Nashville, they sang the song that we sang earlier this morning, "Let It Be A Dance." Imagine - now this is a true story- as everyone sang the song, this elderly gentleman stepped out of the pew and into the aisle. He took his wife by the hand and began to dance with her, spinning her around. It warmed my heart. It was then that I knew that this is the place I wanted to be.

I want to thank you, Alison, for inviting me along this journey as we learned together, building and growing what was to become the ministry council. "Like a willow in the wind," our little group had to learn to bend, to move, to share, to connect, to roll up our sleeves and dig in!

In our classes preparing to be installed, we had the opportunity to learn more about and dig deeper into our own beliefs and understanding in and about leadership, development of faith or

meaning, social justice, conflict, and caring communities, Unitarian Universalism history, and ourselves. As we would explore and discuss, we'd share and you would always say "Go Deeper," pushing us to not give simple banal statements.

I want to direct my final thoughts to you, the rest of the congregation, this beloved community. Being a lay minister for you has been a labor of love. One of the readings from our training was the report by the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal from 2005, entitled "Engaging Our Theological Diversity." In it, it said that our movement was one where we are

*"catching a wave - the wave of people hungry for a sense of belonging and meaning, people who want a place where they can safely pursue a spiritual path in the company of people who will support and challenge them; a place that embraces reason, yet transcends the rational and touches the soul."*

It is time, now, for me and these other lay ministers to step down and create space. A wise woman from the Alban Institute once told me that by stepping back you create the space for others to step in and to step up. So, I encourage you to do just that - "step up." It is your turn to dig in and, as Alison said, to serve! I invite you to go deep. It may not be easy, but I assure you that it will be truly rewarding.

And, as the words to the song said, "May I have this dance with you?" because I'm not going away.

*Aleta Turner, outgoing Lay Minister for Lifespan Development*

How to summarize four-and-a-half years in 3 minutes? I don't think I can. I can say it has been wonderful working with Rev. Alison, the other lay ministers, the staff, and volunteers to help keep things going here. Actually, not to keep things going here - we have so much going on - more to try to have keep things going with a sense of cohesion. There so many people dedicated to the programs of this Fellowship. It has been a pleasure working with Morgan and the RE committee on children and youth programming.

It's been a wonderful journey. We had no idea what we were doing when we started. We felt our way through it bit by bit. It has made me feel that much closer to much UUFA family. Through laughter, tears, and a lot of hard work, we have deepened our relationships with one another.

I'm actually going to miss meeting monthly with the Ministry Council... but we will all still have other opportunities to be together. I look forward to many more adventures and much love in the future here.

Thank you for letting me have this chance to serve. To Hilda, I wish you much luck, and I know you will have much love as you progress on your journey.

Rev. Alison asked the Lay Minister Emeritae to do the impossible—to sum up in 300 words what we have done, what we have learned and how we have grown. I decided to list some of my thoughts in no particular order. Some things on the following list are not new discoveries about either myself or Unitarian Universalism or UUFA, but were reinforced by my service as a Lay Minister.

Unitarian Universalism is an active faith. Ministry is hard work. There is never enough time. It takes a village. I am stronger than I think, but I can't do it by myself. There are no easy answers. Time flies when you're having fun, but sitting for three hours makes one grumpy. You can't please everyone, but sometimes you can please a few people. Challenge has its own rewards. Going deeper can make your brain hurt. Looking at the big picture means sometimes not getting what you want. Inventing the wheel of Lay Ministry is challenging, frustrating, exhausting and totally worth it. Discerning the Greater Good—and working toward it—makes one stronger. We are all stronger together. Process not product! Sometimes you should just say NO. And sometimes, when Rev. Alison asks for a volunteer, you should just look away. Herding UU cats is frustrating work, but independence is the nature of Unitarian Universalists.

Perhaps the hardest lesson of all was driven home to me this past Tuesday, when I watched Herb leave the house, without me, for the first Ministry Council of 2017. Letting go of the wheel—even if you helped invent it—alters one's perception of self but is necessary so that someone else can steer the boat, at least for a while.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve with you to make UUFA a beacon of liberal religion in Northeast Georgia.

**Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. Have you been a leader and/or a follower, and how did it feel to own the responsibilities of these roles? Which role feels more comfortable to you, and why?
2. Has there been a time when you could have stepped into leadership, but did not? What were the consequences to you personally or to others? Would you make the same decision now?
3. What qualities make a leader worth following? How do your leaders affirm or reveal these?