

The Spire

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Uncertainty and Mystery

Several weeks ago at the library I saw some bookmarks labeled “Mystery” and “Cozy Mystery.” I glanced at the author lists, recognized only a few, and wondered what a Cozy Mystery would be. Does it come with a blanket? Then I started thinking about uncertainty.

Is there such a thing as Cozy Uncertainty?

Can uncertainty be warm, snug, comfortable, or light? When we experience mystery, who do we share it with to feel more secure?

As a community we turn to each other in times of doubt or when the waters are running murkier than usual. In our search for a settled minister, who can help us turn mystery into cozy mystery? Who will help us through the cloudiness and lead us toward clarity?

Here are some quotes and questions to ponder, by yourself or with a friend or two:

“We demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty!”

– Douglas Adams,
The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy

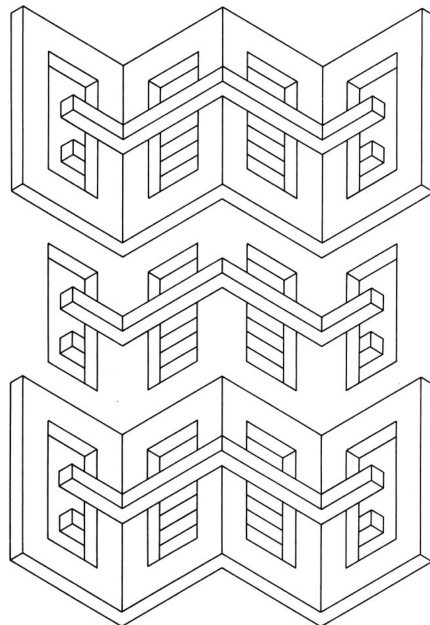
“I wanted a perfect ending. Now I’ve learned, the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what’s going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity.” – Gilda Radner

“Very few beings really seek knowledge in this world. Mortal or immortal, few really ask. On the contrary, they try to wring from the unknown the answers they have already shaped in their own minds – justifications, confirmations, forms of consolation – without which they can’t go on. To really ask is to open the door to the whirlwind.

The answer may annihilate the question and the questioner.” – Anne Rice, *The Vampire Lestat*

And perhaps most fittingly for this moment in our community’s journey, “*Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*” Traveler, there is no path; the path is made by walking. – Antonio Machado

Here are some ways to explore these ideas:



> Describe a time in your life when things felt particularly uncertain. How were you supported, or how did you wish you were supported? What did you do to take care of yourself?

> Where in your life do you find it easiest to embrace the unstructured or unknown?

> To what extent have you tried to “wring” answers “from the unknown”?

> Make up a question of your own based on the quotes or the theme of uncertainty.

As we move from our latest series of Listening Circles to selecting the members of our Settled Minister Search Committee at our Annual

Meeting, how can we challenge ourselves to be present to the “delicious ambiguity” in which we find ourselves (thank you, Gilda Radner)?

The Transition Team has worked tirelessly leading us in activities such as Listening Circles. The Parish Committee extends heartfelt thanks to Marilyn Downs for her leadership and everyone else on the team: Lois Fine, Marc Jacobson, Julie Garry, Lida Junghans, and Kay Snowden. Our recent event on covenanting helped us share current and future goals, hear feedback from the Listening Circle groups, and consider staffing structure and right relations. As we continue our journey, may we lean in towards each other and embrace some cozy mystery.

In faith, Joanna Pushee, Clerk

Our Church Finances

As we close this program year, First Parish continues to enjoy financial stability, thanks to our staff, members, and volunteers. This has not been without challenges. We are grateful that First Parish has retained earnings from previous years to provide stability and cover rising health-care costs for our employees, as well as inflation increases in utilities and other areas.

This coming year, the challenges will be even greater as costs continue to rise, and our Stewardship pledges remain short of our planning goal. Our deficit will be even greater next year, and although we still have retained earnings, they are finite. A Treasurer's report and financial information can be found in the Annual Meeting packet. If you missed it, we are happy to provide information upon request.

Submit Committee Reimbursements

We encourage committees to review their financial activity reports. Please contact us now with questions to ensure we have time to provide information, research your questions, and resolve open issues.

If your committee or group has incurred expenses, please be sure your coordinators have submitted receipts for reimbursement **no later than June 30**. If it is not possible to meet this deadline, please contact the treasurer or our office staff to ensure that we have a record of any pending expense.

Make requests for reimbursement using this link on the church website: www.firstparish.info/about/how-to/reimbursement-request/

Update Your Credit Card in Realm

Many of us give to First Parish using Realm, with debit and credit cards. We'd like to save time by proactively ensuring correct details for the upcoming fiscal year (July 2026 to June 2027). "Automatic" still does not mean "auto-magic." Please review your Realm giving record for updated information as to amount, card number, expiration date, and security code.

From time to time, we encounter transactions that are incomplete or unprocessed. Thank you for keeping watch and updating Realm with changing information and circumstances. Instructions for Realm are available at www.firstparish.info/connect/give/pledge-and-pay-options/



Join a Finance Team

We need additional volunteers to help keep the finances of First Parish running smoothly. Do you have financial expertise? Please consider joining one of our financial groups — Finance, Stewardship, Plate Counters. All offer a great experience working with kind and knowledgeable colleagues to support our community.

Thank you so much for your willingness to help ensure that we continue to thrive. Many hands make light work. If you have questions or need assistance, please call the First Parish office (781-648-3799) or reach us at treasurer@firstparish.info. With all of us providing "time, talent, and treasure" we can ensure that First Parish remains vibrant.

Carolyn Hodges, Treasurer
Annie Hewitt, Assistant Treasurer

Forging a Congregational Covenant

To support the work of finding our next lead minister, a Covenant Task Force has been formed to educate the congregation about the need for a congregational covenant to articulate our shared values, lift up our intentions for best behavior together, and create a tool for right relations should we falter.

We already have a mission statement, but a covenant is important to the search process because conflicts of varying degrees and complexities happen in congregational life. Ministers in search of a position know that this is true, and are eager to learn how we have chosen to plan for and resolve difficulties with love and intention, reflecting our mission and values.

The task force consists of our ministers and volunteers Tali Avery, Julie Garry (of the Transition Team), Anthony Fernandez, Amy Hadley, and Tina Schultz.

We shared our intent for next steps at a recent gathering after worship, and will do so again at an upcoming Zoom gathering. We began by reviewing data collected by the Transition Team, in which 12 congregations of our approximate size created their own unique covenants. Over the next few weeks these examples will be posted around the First Parish campus for folks to read and review. We will have suggestion boxes handy for people to comment on what resonated with them.

Rev. Stevie will offer a sermon on May 17 on the themes of the theology behind covenanting in our UU history, how they help us build strong communities, and how they help during conflict. We will hold a listening and discussion session after his sermon.

Over the next few months we will begin drafting our own covenant and have opportunities for congregation input. The ministers will continue to offer sermon topics related to this theme over the summer. In October we will have an all-congregation meeting to vote on the covenant.

All of us on the committee hope to see you at upcoming gatherings. We welcome your suggestions and thoughts, and look forward to supporting the work of our search committee to prepare for our next steps in ministry.

Tina Schultz, Covenant Task Force

Donate Household Goods

On Saturday, June 6, from 9:30 am to 12:30 pm, the Alliance will sponsor a drive for Household Goods, a group that provides items, free of charge, to 3,000 families each year. We are partnering with the Society of St. Vincent De Paul, the arm of social action for the combined churches of St. Camillus and St. Agnes, in this effort to help our neighbors in need.

Bring items to the parking lot at St. Camillus Church, 1185 Concord Turnpike, Arlington. They must be clean, complete, and in working order. Household Goods cannot offer their clients broken, chipped, torn, stained, incomplete, unusable, or recalled items. You can read the full guidelines at www.householdgoods.org.

To furnish some 50 homes a week, Household Goods needs a steady stream of donations, in good condition, including dressers, tables, chairs, and other furniture; mattresses and bed frames; dishes, flatware, and kitchen items; sheets, towels, and other bed linens.

We hope that you will be generous in this effort to support our community!

Cheri Minton, The Women's Alliance

Useful Comparisons

The Transition Team has contacted a dozen UU congregations of our size to see how they organize themselves. Seven of the nine churches that have more than 400 members have a second minister, all of whom are hired (rather than called) except for one much larger congregation that has three ministers.

First Parish's overall staffing is much like its peers, although we have more staff in religious education, fewer in administrative functions, and no paid community-engagement position.

About a third of the congregations are experiencing significant growth, a third moderate growth, and a third are stable or declining. Growth is driven by the vitality of a congregation, energetic ministers, a welcoming culture, and a strong religious-education program. Widespread offerings of small groups to foster connectedness are considered a critical practice among growing and larger congregations.

The way First Parish provides pastoral care, involving ministers, well-trained lay ministers, and small groups such as covenant groups, is the norm across other congregations.

Governing boards of 8 to 10 members are usual. Some who have experimented with separate operations councils, or shifting responsibility to senior staff, are pulling back because the workload is unsustainable.

All but one of the congregations with whom we spoke have a covenant, and that outlier is actively working on one after they created a mission statement. The covenants are central to their functioning, and a key element in how the congregation responds to conflict. Several have Right Relations committees or teams to train people or help address conflicts.

Last Call for Ferry Beach

There are still a few slots left for next fall's church retreat at Ferry Beach from September 25 to 27 in Saco, Maine. To register and find out more details, contact www.firstparish.info/event/ferry-beach-weekend-in-saco-maine/





Staff and Contact Information

Staff serve the members, leaders,
and mission of First Parish.

Rev. Jonipher Kwong Interim Lead Minister
leadminister@firstparish.info

Rev. Erica Richmond Parish Minister
parishminister@firstparish.info

Office 781-648-3799 *churchoffice@firstparish.info*
website: *www.firstparish.info*

Hours Monday to Friday, 10 am to 3 pm

Ebiere Omoregie Office Manager
officemanager@firstparish.info

Allison Sillers Office & Communications
Associate *office@firstparish.info*

Religious Education

Rev. Stevie Carmody, Minister of Religious
Education *mre@firstparish.info*

K. Milano Youth Program Coordinator
youthadvisor@firstparish.info

Music

Daniel Parsley Director of Music
daniel.parsleyr@firstparish.info

Kenneth Seitz Director of Music, Emeritus

Parish Committee *parishexec@firstparish.info*

Marie Meter (Chair), Kate Tranquada (Vice Chair),
Carolyn Hodges (Treasurer), Joanna Pushee (Clerk),
John Anderson, Jeff Keffer, Susan Moore,
Amy Speare, Allan Tosti

Finance Committee *finance@firstparish.info*
Lissa McBurney

Human Resources *humanresources@firstparish.info*
Sara Galantowicz

Lay Ministry *layministry@firstparish.info*
Carolyn Carlson

Leadership Development
leadership@firstparish.info Kiki Giatis

The Spire

Diane Shriver, Editor

Next issue: Sunday, June 7
Submissions due by Sunday, May 31
Items may be edited for space and clarity.

E-mail to *spire@firstparish.info*.
If you do not have e-mail, contact the office.

Time-sensitive details belong in the Weekly E-mail
Bulletin – send to *weekly@firstparish.info*
by Wednesday at noon.

Membership *membership@firstparish.info*
Amy Anderson

Music *music@firstparish.info*
Robin Baker, Bob Rowlands

Property *property@firstparish.info*
Mark Wilke

Religious Education *re@firstparish.info*
Betsy Carlton-Gyson

Social Justice *socialjustice@firstparish.info*
Melissa Berczuk

STAR Adult Education
Lyn Fulton-John *star@firstparish.info*

Stewardship *stewardship@firstparish.info*
Joel Carlton-Gysan

The Alliance *alliance@firstparish.info*
Andrea Winslow

Trustees of Trust Funds *trustees@firstparish.info*
Julie Dunn

Worship Associates
worshipassociates@firstparish.info
Loren Gomez