Next issue deadline
Sunday, November 28

# The Spire

November 1, 2026 — The First Sunday Record — Vol. 69, No. 3

*First Parish Unitarian Universalist of Arlington, 630 Massachusetts Avenue, Arlington, MA 02476 • Gathered 1733*

## Search Committee Update

It's been a busy fall, with remarkably broad participation in the search process from every corner of First Parish. To those of you who completed the congregational survey, participated in the B4 Workshop, took part in a focus group, cornered a Search Committee or Transition Committee member at coffee hour, or sent an e-mail with your thoughts, thank you! You've done our congregation proud!

Time now to take a well-deserved breather. The Settled Minister Search Committee won't ask much in the next few months, as we sort through all that thoughtful feedback. We will deliver it to the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) by December 2, and they will make it available to the pool of ministers in search.

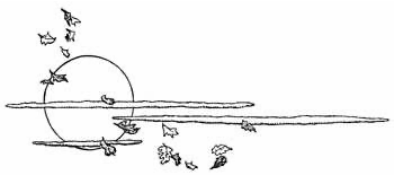
In early January, the UUA will send us applications from candidates. Once we have pared down a list of finalists, we'll meet with them in February and March. We will submit a ranked list of our choices (yes/no/maybe) to the UUA Transitions Team, and the UUA will merge our list with the candidates' ranked preferences and confirm a match.

If all goes well, we will select a candidate on March 26 and begin preparations for candidating week beginning April 25, leading to a congregational vote on Sunday, May 2. As always, we welcome your thoughts in person or at *settled-search@firstparish.info.*

Settled Minister Search Committee:
Amy Anderson, Genevieve Baldwin, Betsy Carlton-Gysan (co-chair), Katherine Fleming (co-chair), Sanjay Newton, Anne Quaadgras, David Whitford

## Staffing Possibilities

The Parish Committee and Transition Team recently hosted events to discuss how we might structure our staff in the future. Almost 90 people participated and shared their perspectives in small groups.



## Harvest Moon Fair

Saturday, November 21

It takes everyone to make our annual fair a success, and there are many ways to help beyond working a shift on fair day. Donations begin the Sunday before, and on Thursday and Friday we need LOTS of help to sort, arrange, and price. The kitchen is busy, and after the fair, cleanup needs many hands.

**Pick your spot and sign up early!**

Detailed information about what to donate and how to sign up are on our church website, at *www.firstparish.info.* Remember: Donated items must be in good enough shape that you yourself would pay money for them.

For more information contact our Fair King, Aaron Kitzmiller, at *fair@firstparish.info.*

Each session began with an overview from the Parish Committee, presenting our current budget, our finances, and the roles and workloads of both ministerial and non-ministerial staff.

Faced with sobering financial realities, participants demonstrated thoughtful, collective intelligence — moving from initial surprise and concern into pragmatic, generative problem-solving. A strong consensus emerged that First Parish cannot thrive by stretching an unsustainable model even thinner, and must consider possibilities that protect our spiritual core through structures that support the complex needs of our congregation.

**Economic Realities** Many participants had a stark financial wake-up call during the forums, realizing the extent of our deficit and how government loans have buffered our budget in the last few years. During the

pandemic, we benefited from the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), designed to help small businesses keep workers employed.

As one group aptly summarized the economic challenge, it feels like "a tablecloth that's too small to cover the table: If we pull it over this way, that part of the table is left bare." Participants urged reframing our Stewardship efforts around a forward-looking vision — year-round financial engagement, personal outreach, exploring grants, and reviving community events such as auctions and potlucks.

**Staff Transitions** There was disappointment, grief, and anxiety about Rev. Erica's departure, and questions about decision-making transparency and timing. Participants asked whether a half-time second minister is an option, and were surprised to learn that Office and Communications Associate Allison Sillers will leave at year's end.

**Workloads & Invisible Labor** Reviewing clergy hours fostered deep empathy, revealing how much time ministers spend on routine administration. Participants also expressed awe at the massive, invisible labor carried out by administrative staff, and warned that overtaxing staff risks turnover and the loss of essential operational knowledge, which ultimately forces administrative burdens back onto clergy.

**The Minister's Role** A central realization was that a single lead minister cannot and should not be expected to do everything. To attract and sustain a settled minister, the position must have a reasonable scope. Cohesive, inspiring Sunday worship and deep pastoral presence during major life transitions remain the non-negotiable spiritual core of First Parish. We discussed creative adjustments, such as exploring alternate sermon-writing rhythms, using guest preachers, or sharing pulpits.

Trimming the minister's attendance at routine committee meetings was a strong suggestion. Rather than attend every meeting, the minister might come only at vital times or by invitation, and find other ways to maintain community.



General anxiety about a single minister providing pastoral care for over 400 members was widespread. Participants noted that pastoral care must be supported through a layered network.

**Creative Solutions** To meet our needs within budget constraints without burning out staff and volunteers, the group generated many ideas:

- **Professionalize and outsource operations:** An executive director or parish manager overseeing facilities, rentals, and staff would remove non-ministerial burdens. Contracting out office functions such as human resources and payroll, and conducting a cost-benefit review of building rentals, would further reduce administrative drag.
- **Protect staff and empower lay governance:** Establishing clear job descriptions and user-friendly request forms will give staff a predictable workflow and set healthy boundaries around member requests. Creating written how-to guides, training portals, structured volunteer rotations, and Parish Committee liaisons will lessen staff and ministerial oversight to prevent burnout.
- **Expand pastoral care and sequence transitions:** Suggestions included tapping local retired UU ministers, fee-for-service clergy, and expanding our Lay Ministry team. Advocating for bridge staffing (for example, a one-year contract assistant minister for Fall 2027) avoids locking in permanent staff so an incoming minister can help shape structures.
- **Sustain digital worship and onboard members:** Providing high-quality hybrid worship and ways to become involved in our community will help remote worshippers and newer members engage deeply in congregational life.

Many thanks to everyone who contributed their wisdom to this important congregational conversation. Feel free to contact us at *transitionteam@firstparish.info.*

The Transition Team:
Kay Snowden, Marc Jacobson, Elizabeth Hunter,
Lois Fine, Tom Estabrook, Marilyn Downs

## Break Barriers, Build Beliefs Workshop

Some 67 people joined the Break Barriers, Build Beliefs (B4) workshop led by UUA facilitator Rev. Micah Ma. The workshop helps congregations explore how putting people in categories interferes with choosing the best ministerial candidate.

Rev. Micah asked, "What is one story you would be glad for people to know about you?" and "What is one story you would hate for people to know about you?" What is it like to be known by a single, negative story? What are the unexamined assumptions — the single

stories — we sometimes tell ourselves about others? As Rev. Micah shared examples of bias and suggestions to counteract it, he reminded us that when we lack understanding of others, we need more and better stories to recall us to what we already know: We don't need proof of anyone's inherent worth and dignity.

In small groups we reflected on patterns of bias in our congregation, brainstorming how we might challenge them and reduce their impact. The conversations were rich and varied, and it was inspiring to see a willingness to be vulnerable. As Rev. Micah reminded us, "Humility is how love gets in." May love of the sacred in one another guide us to open our hearts and minds, and to widen our circles and make room for the stranger, our new minister, and each other.

## Fulfilling Our Promise

In 2024, First Parish adopted an Affirmation of Reckoning and Repair to acknowledge our entanglement with slavery and commit to a process of meaningful reparation. Part of that process is developing relationships with local, Black-led organizations, and we have made a three-year commitment to the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry's Roxbury Youth Programs (RYP), an after-school center that provides leadership, educational, and enrichment opportunities for Boston youth.

Last November, more than 67 First Parish households donated $27,000 to our fundraiser, money that will go to refurbish RYP's computer lab, classrooms, and dining hall. "This facelift will make a real difference in the spaces where our teens spend so much of their time," said Robert Jones, Director of Programming and Partnership. "Your support has helped us introduce our teens to new experiences and opportunities, and now it is helping us improve the spaces where they learn, create, and spend time together. I'm grateful for that partnership and look forward to building on it."

First Parish volunteers have offered three programs so far at RYP: hands-on blacksmithing, making board games, and videography. All were popular and may return this year, along with others.

Our deep thanks to all who made this possible as we look forward to your continued support for this most worthwhile initiative.

The Reckoning and Repair Group

## Online Meetings and Voting

Because every voice matters, we want all First Parish members to be able to participate in congregational meetings. Members cannot always attend in person, and because our bylaws do not allow them to vote online, the Parish Committee has appointed a committee to address this.

During the pandemic lockdown, Massachusetts let corporations hold meetings online even if that was banned by their bylaws. We are incorporated under Chapter 67 of the Massachusetts General Laws, so even though online meetings are not allowed under our bylaws, we met via Zoom. The state has now withdrawn that permission.

We follow Robert's Rules of Order, which allows for majority rule while ensuring that all voices are heard. Robert's Rules explicitly state that a meeting must occur with all people in the same room, and that doing otherwise requires enabling clauses in the bylaws. The committee has created a proposal for changes to the First Parish bylaws to allow hybrid online meetings and voting. The changes are as generic as possible, leaving details to the Parish Committee. This makes it easy to change with experience, and lets us to adapt to technological changes. For example, instead of "Zoom" we say "internet meeting services."

Our bylaws can only be changed by a vote at a congregational meeting, so our proposal will be on the agenda for the meeting on February 7, 2027, when we will also vote on the initial draft of our Congregational Covenant. The February meeting is scheduled before our Congregational Meeting in May so that that important gathering can be hybrid, to ensure maximum participation when we vote to call our new settled minister. Ministerial candidates consider high participation in that vote to be very important.

To learn more and ask questions, please come to an information session on November 22 at 11:45 am in the Parlor, or online on December 2 at 8 pm. Details are available through this code.

The Bylaw Committee:
Tish Miller, John Shriver,
Cathy Slesnick, Anne Quaadgras

# Staff and Contact Information

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

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## The Spire

Diane Shriver, Editor

Next issue: Sunday, December 6
Submissions due by Sunday, November 28
*Items may be edited for space and clarity.*

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