



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS  
WELCOMES SPECIAL GUEST MINISTER

REVEREND JEN CROW

# Hand in Hand

Sunday, November 16, 2025

In-person worship at 9:30 and 11 am

Online worship at 9:30 & 11 am and 7 pm CT

What an absolute joy it is to get to be here with all of you today and to get to celebrate with you and with Beth on 10 years of ministry for her and 10 years of ministry for her here with you. What a tremendous gift. Beth and I go back all of those 10 years when I had the privilege of serving as her mentor in her first few years of ministry, we shared and still share the joys and challenges of serving large urban, vibrant congregations with more than one minister. And we shared and still share in the work and the joy of creating community and belonging of creating spaces for learning and faith development in our churches. And it turned out we shared something more too. We shared a connection to this congregation, even though this is the first time I have ever been here.

You see, if you go back to the year 2002, I served as the first Hallman Ministerial Intern at Unity Church Unitarian in St. Paul Minnesota, named after your Minister Emerita, the Reverend Dr. Laurel Hallman. Now, I was benefiting from her ministry over 20 years ago, even though I had never met her, but she had been called to ministry, felt the call to ministry at that congregation in St. Paul, and they had honored her with an endowed ministerial internship fund. Now I remember clearly my first time talking with Laurel. It was a few weeks into my internship there, and I was in awe of her. She was still the senior minister here, and we had a good conversation about, you could probably guess this, the importance of spiritual practice in ministry and in your spiritual life. And she also said to me, folks are starting to get confused because there's been something named after me and now I'll add, there's a building named after her too, but she's like, "I am alive. I am not dead yet."

And when I talked to her a couple of weeks ago, she wanted me to convey to you not just her gratitude and her love and her blessings on your work, but also to let you know she's still very much alive. So, now, as many of you probably know, Reverend Dr. Hallman was one of the first female ministers in

Dallas and one of the first women in senior ministry in our larger Unitarian Universalist congregations who didn't arrive to that position married to a male senior co-minister. When Laurel retired from here in 2009, she had served this congregation for over 20 years. And this is what she said when I talked to her a few weeks ago. She said, "It's not the same church now as when I arrived or when I left. And that is as it should be. Church is not meant to stay the same, but the DNA is there." And she is right.

The DNA that led this congregation to call one of the first women to ministry in Dallas is the same congregation that ordained Beth into ministry here with you in 2015. The same congregation that with Beth and all of your efforts has built programs and ministries that support not just this congregation, but that reach out across the country to help ground newcomers and long time church members in the heart of this faith, teaching us how to live out our faith alive in the world. Now, much has changed in the time that Beth has been with you here. 10 years ago you and we were celebrating marriage equality with huge rainbow cakes and so much joy. Now the rainbow walkway that existed just a mile from here is pulled up. The times change, the politics and the risks change, but the purpose of the church, it does not change.

The Reverend Mark Morrison Reid, parish minister and collector and keeper of Black history within Unitarian Universalism wrote a piece years ago that many of our congregations returned to again and again. It's reading number 580 in the back of your hymnal if you ever want to find it when you need it. And in it, he says this, "The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community, the religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

I feel this in church. I feel it here in this church, in the congregation I serve in Minnesota, everywhere I travel that together. When we gather in religious community, our vision widens and our strength is renewed, that it is in places just like this, where we come to know the particularities of each other's lives and we can feel here, a connectedness that inspires us, a connectedness that inspires us to act for justice, that reminds us we are not in fact alone. That every part of us is welcome here in this world and in this place. That we are in fact a part of the largest company in all the world. The company of those who have known love and the company of those who have known sorrow. In the midst of a society that so often encourages us into isolation and greed into self-centeredness and superiority together here we are trying to find and make another way.

Alasdair MacIntyre, the Scottish-American philosopher in his book *After Virtue*, was describing what was the historical task of religious communities in an earlier era when they too were facing societal uncertainty and collapse. And he said the role of the religious communities then was this, "What they set themselves to achieve," he said, "Was the construction of new forms of community within which a moral life could be sustained. In the midst of societal collapse and uncertainty what they set themselves to achieve was the construction of new forms of community within which a moral life

could be sustained." Sounds a lot like what we're up to here. Church has always been a place of aspiration and practice. A place where we can see each other's faces and hear one another's voices, learn each other's stories.

Church has always been a place where we can practice beloved community, beloved community, which means a community, a place that is free of racism and poverty and violence that is grounded in experiences of unconditional love that cannot help but transform us as individuals and collectively. Beloved community that can lead us into a world and a life of mutual thriving for each and all of us, communities in which a moral life can be sustained. The question before us today and every day is not what church is for, but how church might meet this moment that we are in. What does it mean today to know our interdependence as fundamental to our very being? What does it mean for our vision to widen and our strength to be renewed, to construct new forms of community in which a moral life can be sustained? Now, in this moment, I've been finding that I need everything I've told you so far, and I need something even more in these days.

I have been finding myself in need of hope, in need of a gritty and tenacious kind of hope, hope that defies reason or logic, hope that we have to hold together. I need the kind of hope that Cornel West has described as the tragic hope that so many Black communities know. A hope he says that knows fully what history has been, what the failures have been, but also what the successes have been, and thus what remains possible still. I need the kind of hope, the feminist ethic of risk that theologian Sharon Welch describes as the decision to care and to act. Although there are no guarantees of success. I need a kind of hope that helps me believe that the seeds of justice and love that were planted yesterday, that we plant today, that will be planted tomorrow, can still bloom if only we can weep and wonder and keep on gently and fiercely nudging them toward life.

We are inheritors of church, inheritors of this church, inheritors of the church writ large with all of its fumbles and focus and harm and healing over the centuries and millennia. Unitarian Universalism that has been striving and failing and falling short and trying again to reach its aspirations of living into its core values. We are inheritors of these gifts and challenges here today to pick up what we have been given to hold and enrich it and evolve it for a while and then pass it on again to the generations still to come. I can hear the ancestors, their voices speaking in the language that we are using today. I hear our ancestors when we say in places like this and communities like this. When we all share what we have, we can all have what we need. This is in fact a statement of faith. When we all share what we have, we can all have what we need.

This is a foundation on which a new form of community in which a moral life can be sustained, can live. When we say each and every being whole and holy and worthy, welcome and wanted, all with room to grow, this is the foundation on which we are building communities in which a moral life can be sustained. When we say here that we want to live into the kind of universalism that Dr. Mark Hicks describes as a love so powerful, it will not let us go, will not let us down, and will not let us off the hook. We are building on the kind of foundation that will allow us to build communities in which a moral life can be sustained. When we say to one another in times of tenderness, in times of despair, in times when we are in need of strength, you are not alone.

We are holding it together. We are building on the voices of our ancestors. We are building communities in which a moral life can in fact be sustained. So, what are we to be in the moment like this? What can church do in the face of what has become so much fear and uncertainty in this moment? We can see each other's faces, we can hear each other's voices. We can learn each other's stories. We can be in each other's presence. We can become each other's business and our sense of who we are, who we are, must be ever expanding. This moment we're in, I have become less interested in arguing over what we can call it. So, you can call it fascism, you can call it autocracy, you can call it the erosion of basic human rights here in America. Whatever name you want to give it.

The situation we are in is built on lies. It's built on lies that are so much easier to believe when we aren't in community with one another. Lies about who we are and who's responsible for the problems we are facing together, lies about what power is and who has it, lies about human nature and our neighbors. And when we come here, we come into a place where we can see each other's faces and hear each other's voices and know each other's stories. And when we do that, it is so much harder to believe those lies. Instead, we become grounded in what is true in interdependence, in the kaleidoscopic beauty of the reality and the particularities of each of our lives. In this time and place, in this moment in American history, this now, we are living in, communities of faith, churches, people of faith have a very important role to play.

Not only do we create spaces of care and connection, but we are also one of the few spaces not governed by laws, not beholden to the erratic and often unjust impulses of the state. These are places and spaces where we can intentionally step out of the collapsing society around us and into spaces where we are actively striving to build communities in which a moral life can be sustained.

That's right. We need congregations just like this. We need church right now. We need spaces where we can remember our power too. So, let me tell you a story about that kind of power we do hold. It was a few months ago, back at the end of summer, beginning of fall out in Rochester, New York when the first Unitarian church there had what we often do, what all of us do wherever we are, a church picnic.

Folks had gathered to share food and be in community, but also to learn while they were there, they were hearing from the local Rapid Response Network, a community-based group that supports immigrant communities by providing training and information on how to respond to immigration enforcement actions like ICE raids or detentions. The network there uses trained volunteers to document incidents, connect families with legal resources, and ensure community members are not left alone during difficult situations. My guess is you probably have something like this here. We do in Minneapolis too, these Rapid Response Networks. My friend Sherry, who is the lead minister at the church there in Rochester, wondered what we ministers always wonder when we plan something, is anybody going to show up? Is anybody going to sign up to learn more? Is anybody going to want to be a part of this network? Will our people really show up when our neighbors need them?

And many people did show up for that church picnic, for that training, for that Rapid Response Network learning. And four days later, the test came for the community. In a residential

neighborhood, not far from the church, there were a crew of folks working on an apartment building. When agents showed up from ICE from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, they showed up in unmarked vehicles wearing masks that covered their faces. One of the men who was working on the apartment building was snatched up off the street. He had been living here in the US legally for 25 years. The other two folks who were working on that apartment building were up on the roof at the time, and when they saw their friend and co-worker kidnapped off the street, they pulled the ladder up on the roof. Someone in the neighborhood called the Rochester Rapid Response Team and activated that group.

Within 30 minutes there were about 70 people there, including three Unitarian Universalist ministers and a dozen or more congregants along with other activists from the community. With the ICE agents still circling the building, the number of folks on the ground began to grow, and soon there were more than 200 people there. They were shouting up to their neighbors in Spanish, "Stay strong, our brothers, we know it's hard up there. We will be down here for you." The men on the roof started to weep and then a ladder went up just long enough for an attorney to join them. Soon this became a public spectacle and ICE agreed to leave. The men came down from the roof and were quickly whisked away by the activists and the Rapid Response Team. We have to remember what power we have. Now, you could say that it's only two people that weren't detained that day, but we all know that two people means two families.

Two people, two families not going through the hell of detention and separation. All because a handful and then dozens, and then hundreds of people showed up for their neighbors. Many of them inspired and trained and brought into relationship at a church picnic just four days earlier. Now, I really, really wanted to call this sermon how church picnics can end fascism because a church picnic is a powerful thing it turns out. And like I said before, you can call it whatever you want, this moment we're in. You can call it fascism, you can call it autocracy. You can call it the erosion of basic human rights, whatever name you give it. What is happening today in America is built on lies that are easier to believe when we aren't in community with each other, when we don't see each other's faces, when we don't hear each other's voices, when we don't know each other's stories, when the horror we hear about is news and not neighbors.

But here we remember that we are all family, all connected, each of us whole and holy welcome and wanted all with room to grow in all of our beautiful and kaleidoscopic and necessary difference. The times may change, the politics may change, the risks may change, but the purpose of the church, it does not change. The purpose of the church to ground us in our deep interconnection and interdependence, to widen our vision, to strengthen our resolve, to help us remember our power, to remember we are in this life together, that we are lucky enough to be alive in this moment, receiving gifts from the generations of the past, holding onto them for a while, enriching, nourishing, evolving those gifts and passing them on to the generations to come. We are here to remember how to make love come alive in the world, in our relationships, to believe in hope and possibility, and to create the world that we long for. Let's make sure this is our work together. May it be so. Amen.

