

‘Losing our Wendy’: After 14 years, Harvard’s Unitarian minister moves on

BY LUCINDA BOWEN (3074) · JUNE 18, 2015

This past Sunday marked the last service of the church year for the Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church (HUUC). But when worship services resume in the fall, the church’s most familiar face will be missing. The Rev. Wendy Bell, the fifth-longest-serving minister in the church’s 282-year history, has given her resignation. After 14 years as minister, Bell’s last day of affiliation with HUUC will be July 31.



Rev. Wendy Bell. (Photo by Lisa Aciukewicz)

“It was very hard to make the decision to go, because this is a wonderful town and a wonderful congregation and I felt very lucky to have been here this long,” said Bell in an interview last week. She leaves her full-time ministry to pursue a doctorate of ministry at Andover Newton Theological School, where she will focus on studying the response of liberal churches to climate change.

Caring for the environment has been a lifelong passion for Bell, whose concern for the planet’s future intersects with her faith’s social consciousness. “There is a real need to look deeply at our own conflicting values and figure out what we are going to pursue and what we are going to sacrifice,” she said. “There are people suffering the impacts of climate change right now, and more who will suffer more directly than any of us will. It’s a theological question: Who is worth saving? I’m a Universalist. I think nobody should have to suffer unduly, no class of people should be expected to bear the suffering the rest of us are not expected to bear. [Churches] have a really important role in helping to shape society to accept this new reality.”

Climate: No longer an abstraction

Though Bell has been struggling with how to answer questions about environmental social responsibility since college, when her daughter was born seven years ago, Bell realized that the predictions about the state of the world in 2050 were no longer abstractions to her. “This was

the world my daughter would be inheriting,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s easy to think about how things are not going well, to know in our hearts that we disagree about how things are going. It’s an entirely other thing to position oneself to confront those things which are unfair, unjust, and harmful.”

Bell is now positioning herself to do just that. After attending and preaching about the march for climate change in New York City last fall, she had an epiphany. “There was a moment of [realizing] I don’t have to wait for everyone else to be ready to go; I can just step out and do this.” After spending four years completing her doctoral coursework part time, Bell knew it was finally time to give her studies her full attention.

“I want to get [my doctoral dissertation] done, because otherwise there’s a danger I’ll never do it,” she said. She dreams about the potential impact of her research on churches like HUUC. “I keep thinking about what this project will turn into ... a book, a series of articles, something. I want it to be useful and helpful. Research leading toward transformation.”

While Bell steps off in her new direction, HUUC has appointed an interim minister, J. Mark Worth, to lead the church for the next two years while the congregation searches for its next called minister. During this time, members of the congregation will engage in an intentional process of self-reflection to determine the most salient aspects of their identity and what attributes they are seeking in their next leader. This process is one Bell values and has encouraged during her leadership.

“We are pleased as punch that she has this passion and commitment. ... We celebrate that. But now we are going to lose our Wendy. That’s a bitter pill to swallow.”

—Didi Chadran

Outreach, spiritual deepening

“The leadership and I have been working for a number of years on trying to help the congregation develop a sense of their own unique purpose in the world and how to offer their unique gifts to the world and the community around them,” she said. “Part of that is about outreach, and part of it is about spiritual deepening.” Bell talks with pride about the ministries that have grown out of this reflective process, such as the Glean Team, a group of about 60 volunteers who rescue food from Roche Bros. and local farmers’ markets five days a week and distribute it to Loaves & Fishes, WHEAT, and Transitions.

Bell’s thoughtful approach to self-discovery and putting values into action is part of the legacy she will leave behind at HUUC. “She’s a great teacher, in terms of her thoughtfulness, the research that she does, the way she can challenge everyone in the congregation with her sermons,” said congregation member Darrell Wickman.

“Wendy has challenged us to take ownership of our church, to find our individual strengths, and to share them with each other,” added Cary Browse, who has worked closely with Bell on many initiatives over the years.

Tom Daniells, president of the HUUC board, has appreciated the stability that came with her

years of challenging inspiration and teaching. Both Bell and Daniells believe those years of stability offered the church a settled place from which it could work to address key social issues. “During her tenure we became a welcoming church during a time that same-sex marriage has been a key social issue,” Daniells said. “She has helped us raise our consciousness about social justice, hunger, and global warming as very important issues for our congregation to be involved in.”

Affection and praise

When asked to reflect on how Bell has shaped the HUUC church over the years, congregation members speak with affection and praise. “Wendy’s presence has made the congregation feel a lot more open, welcoming. People are constantly hugging each other now. I don’t remember that kind of warmth being there before,” said Wickman.

Part of that warmth comes from Bell’s sharing deeply of herself from the pulpit, letting the wide range of her interests be known, from her love of single malt Scotch whisky and baking, to her adventures as a hockey goalie and her desire to learn to play the bagpipes. “She’s an Everywoman,” said Didi Chadran.

The intimacy between Bell and her 190-member congregation makes her departure from HUUC a bittersweet change. “If there was a way I could both stay and go, I would. Leaving is hard,” Bell said.

Many in her congregation feel similarly. “We are pleased as punch that she has this passion and this commitment. It is such a worthy direction for her and ambition for her,” said Chadran. “We celebrate that. But now we are going to lose our Wendy. That’s a bitter pill to swallow.”

For Bell, the decision to move on from HUUC comes down to being willing, and brave enough, to take her own advice. “I encourage people to find the thing where they are the most passionate and get involved in it. I think we are all called to do this. We do best to do it from the place where we stand, wherever that place is. It is going to require everyone—scientists, religious people, activists, grandmothers—everyone.”