

## **Sabbatical Report**

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August 4, 2011

The sabbatical (January 1 - June 30, 2011) involved a wide variety of activities. In late January I spent a few days in Boston participating in a seminar for Ministerial Settlement Representatives. (Among my activities outside the congregation, for six years now, I have been serving in this role as guide for district congregations searching for a new minister.) As part of my MSR duties in March, I twice visited the UU congregation in Columbia, MO, and twice visited a Chicago UU congregation in April and May.

In February I attended a UU ministers' Institute for Excellence in Ministry at Asolimar, a conference center near Monterey, CA. There I enjoyed five days of worship, study and fellowship with 375 colleagues, all of which involved worthwhile reflections about the future of the Unitarian Universalist movement.

Additionally I officiated at two memorial services and one wedding for church members, and joined our Board of Trustees at their June retreat. Also I was involved with several meetings and interviews related to the search for our new Director of Religious Education, as well as a few conversations relating to our new sanctuary sound system. However the central focus of the sabbatical consisted of writing of a doctoral thesis draft.

As of May 2008 I have been enrolled in a Doctor of Ministry program at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. The degree program is designed to accommodate the schedule of ministers serving in a parish setting, by offering courses in week-long intensive formats. By the time the sabbatical commenced, I had completed the bulk of the program's required course work, and was ready to turn my attention to the final doctoral project.

In January I began a self-directed study course, which was entitled "Liberal Religion and the Third Reich." The reading materials selected included writings by historians Peter Fritzsche and Doris Bergen, philosophers David Gushee and Hannah Arendt, political scientist Daniel Goldhagen, and theologians Howard Thurman, Paul Rasor and Henry Nelson Wieman.

The final project of the course consisted of drafting an outline of my doctoral thesis, which included ideas from relevant authors and scholars I had read throughout the doctoral program, as well as primary source materials I had gathered in the archives of the Free Religious congregation in Offenbach (the German liberal religious church in which I was baptized and confirmed), and in the personal records of my grandfather, Rev. Max Gehrmann, who served the Offenbach congregation from the 1930s through the 1960s.

My outline was completed in March, and submitted to Meadville faculty for review and comment. It was also sent to several German ministerial colleagues affiliated with the Offenbach congregation. In early April I traveled to Germany in order to gather

additional materials, and to have conversations with my colleagues, to address potential questions and concerns. The Third Reich continues to be a sensitive and charged subject in Germany, touching on questions of guilt, complicity and collaboration with the Nazi regime.

The collegial meetings were very worthwhile. I was relieved to receive strong support and constructive feedback for my project. Also, I was able to locate additional illuminating documents amidst my grandfather's papers, which shed further light on his actions and convictions throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, as well as the shifting political and religious landscape. For the remainder of the sabbatical I worked to develop ideas introduced in the thesis outline, and completed a doctoral thesis draft by June 30.

The goal of the thesis is to shed light on how National Socialism affected the Free Religious Congregation in Offenbach, as well as on the moral complexity of various responses to Nazi power and ideology. This examination seeks to show how liberal religious thought was vulnerable to Nazi ideology, but also points to liberal religious resources for resistance. Historical research shows that no clear line can be drawn to separate good from evil, or perpetrator from victim. Mindful of the reality of moral confusion, the thesis suggests a vision of moral clarity, which can guide us toward the greatest good.

In fall of 2011 I will attend a final writing seminar at Andover Newton Theological School, via the phone/internet, in order to edit and amend the thesis. I intend to submit the completed thesis to Meadville in January and graduate in May 2012.

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As far as my activities are concerned, I think the sabbatical was a full success. I feel profoundly privileged to have had the opportunity to spend this substantial period of time on a subject that is of great professional and personal interest to me. I have been able to grapple with issues of morality, history, and theology much more intensely than is possible amidst the regular ministerial routines of preaching, teaching, committee meetings and pastoral care. I have been afforded a rare opportunity to deeply explore my own religious family history.

I am very grateful to the Sabbatical Task Force and the many members of the congregation who helped maintain our church programs during the sabbatical, and also carried out a successful stewardship campaign, service auction, and made substantial improvements to our sanctuary - all of which provides evidence for the vitality of our congregation's shared ministry.

I look forward to the upcoming months when the sabbatical experiences of minister and congregation, respectively, will hopefully serve to stimulate new growth and new initiatives.