

Dear First Church Members and Friends,

As I did last year at this time, I will be leaving next week for a month's sabbatical. From January 15 through February 18, Michael and I will once again be in Belfast, Maine.

Sabbaticals are part of almost every minister's contract with a local church. It's widely recognized that providing ministers with a time to periodically step away from the church helps promote healthier ministers, ministries and churches. Many churches contract to provide ministers three or six months of sabbatical every five or seven years. My contract with First Church provides for one month sabbatical each year after four years of full time ministry. More and more churches are finding this way of taking sabbaticals easier to schedule. I took my first sabbatical last year and hope to do so again next year.

Sabbaticals provide a time for prayer, meditation and reflection. Those of you who were present for my first sermon after last year's sabbatical may remember that I used it to share some of my thoughts about worshipping in the Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast during our time away. That experience of being temporarily part of a church linked to two other UU churches helped guide some of the conversation about our future planning and our outreach to other UU churches in our area. I've learned a great deal about lay led and shared ministries from the Belfast church, information that I've tried to share with First Church members from the pulpit and at church meetings.

This year I look forward to continuing my exploration of the Belfast church and its on-going relationship with the UU churches of Ellsworth and Rockland. I've been in touch with the ministerial intern who helped build bridges between the churches to see if some of her experience might be transferable to our planning with local churches here in Central Massachusetts. I also plan to devote some of my time to writing, planning worship, and spiritual deepening.

While I'm away, First Church will be in good and capable hands. We have as strong a Standing Committee as any I've worked with (Win Clark, George Frantz, Sylvia Vander Sluis and Bryan Walters). They are more than capable of handling any situation that might arise in my absence. Our Worship Committee (Gail Bloom, Cathy & Jon Lord, Sylvia Vander Sluis, and Bryan Walters) has planned for guest ministers to lead worship each Sunday. Rebecca Pichon will continue to be in the office to field questions that might arise and direct them towards the appropriate person. And as always, you the First Church members and friends, will continue to be the warm and welcoming church you always are.

May the winter month ahead be a time of quiet reflection for all of us. Peace and deep blessings to you all!

Rev. Bob Johansen