

Frequently Asked Questions about Rev. Shari's Departure

1. **Why are you leaving?** What led me to look was family and four seasons. Each year since I moved to Texas, there has been something medical happening with my parents – a surgery, diagnosis of a new condition, another surgery. They are in their late 70s and doing okay so far, but I don't want to be so far away when they might need me in the future. They live in rural Iowa; right now I'm a plane ride plus half a day's drive away, or two solid days' drive. My brother, who had lived in Texas with his family for over a decade when I moved here, has since moved to Colorado. We would also like our child to be able to see extended family in the Midwest more often.

Those of you who know what a nature-lover I am may not be surprised to hear that I also miss the landscape and the climate of my native bio-region. I have found things to appreciate about Texas, including the glorious wildflowers. But there is not a single season of the year that feels right to me here... the rhythms of the seasons just feel *off*, and the extended summer heat makes it hard for me to do the re-grounding outdoors that is basic to my well-being. There are many northerners who migrate to Texas for the climate and who love leaving winter behind. (My spouse is one of them!) As it turns out, it's not a good long-term fit for me.

2. **But there's a pandemic – how does that affect everything?** I had just returned to Fort Worth from a pre-candidating weekend, spent a few days of a vacation week discerning, and realized the new congregation was a Yes for me – when things got real with COVID-19 and restrictions here in DFW. I returned to a more intense ministry at Westside as we adapted, and meanwhile I reconsidered whether it was the right time to make a change. Ultimately, having learned that a good supply of interim ministers is anticipated this year (for you all), and recognizing that a match this strong might not come along again for some years if I dropped out now, I decided to move forward.

We may all need to make adjustments to the usual transition process because of the pandemic and how life has changed right now. The UUA expects the interim ministry search to stay on the same timetable as usual, with interim ministers starting in August. If shelter-in-place type restrictions are still in place at that time, it would likely mean a new interim minister beginning to do the ministry with Westside virtually – as I would also be doing with my new location... and as I would have continued to do here if I had continued with you.

The pandemic does not affect my ministry with you meanwhile – I am still here for Westside's members and mission, and we'll continue to connect virtually until we can be together in person again. Our caring ministries are in place with support from several teams, many church groups have transitioned to gathering online, and we have adapted worship in a way that could be continued indefinitely as needed, too, including lay-led services and those with guest speakers. Even the June congregational meeting could potentially be handled online, should that prove necessary. The Board is looking into that.

I do think it is important that we have the opportunity for in-person closure. If I am not able to connect in person with Westsiders before I start my new ministry, I have the support of leadership in my new congregation to come back and be with you one more time.

3. **Where are you going?** I will share that as soon as it is appropriate to do so. The new church has shared with their congregation that they have a candidate, but have not yet said who, since I needed to let you all know of my plans first – I wanted you to hear it from me and not through the UU grapevine (we are all

connected!). The candidating church will then share my identity in worship on April 12, and I can subsequently let you in on where I will be going.

4. **Can we talk about your leaving and what happens next?** Yes. Saying goodbye is important. I have witnessed Westside do this well with members who have moved away, as well as with staff who have gone on to new positions or retired. Celebrating what we've accomplished together, and offering well-wishes for the future, is a vital part of the transition. I ask for nothing different for my family. Our daughter Avonelle has been embraced by this congregation, as has my husband William; this change will be big and personal for all of us, and I appreciate your caring in expressing thanks and best wishes.

I'm not sure how much I will want to talk about the nitty-gritty of my search process; ministerial search, including Candidating Week, is a stressful process – even without an audience – and can involve a sense of loss and compromise as well as excitement and discovery. We have the added uncertainty of when and how we'll be able to transition geographically given the pandemic around us. With Westside these next several months, I would like to focus on being present with you, and to enable you to take the next steps in your own transition as a church.

5. **Is this a sure thing? What if your Candidating Week does not go well? When will we know?** That is a nerve-wracking question! An invitation to candidate almost always leads to an overwhelming vote to call and a new ministry. The UUA Transitions Office reports that only one match every two years does not have sufficient support by the end of candidating week to move forward. So I do not expect this to happen. Doing candidating week virtually, during the pandemic, will be different – and it is possible to end up without sufficient support to move forward with confidence. In the unlikely event that this should occur, I would hope to continue serving as Westside's minister for this next church year. Candidating Week is April 26 - May 3.
6. **What happens to us now?** While individual ministers come and go, the office of the ministry in a congregation is enduring. I will leave, as ministers before me have left, and you will, in good time, find a new minister. All will be well.

Over the last several years, I have worked with our wonderful lay leaders and staff to move toward your vision of growing in membership and in service to the wider community, while expanding the opportunities for connection and spiritual growth among members. The church building is now an open, welcoming place for new people and for Westside's programs. Its staff can have their primary offices there (after COVID-19 subsides) and form a more cohesive team. Soon the gardens will also be transformed. The metamorphosis of the facility is wonderful to behold!

At the same time, Westside has built and strengthened relationships with other organizations, and is becoming more known in the community for its liberal religious values and social action. While membership numbers have not yet lifted out of the pastoral-to-program plateau, we have created accessible ways for new people to learn about the church, make connections, become part of this community, and move into leadership roles. You also have a committed, competent staff that you can rely on; be good to them and they will serve you well. The dream for a professional music director is alive in the congregation, and I believe it is only a matter of time until you are able to make that hire. In short, you are well positioned to continue growing into your vision.

Practically speaking, the Board will hire an interim minister who will help the congregation through the search for a new settled minister. Westside has a positive reputation in the larger UU community right now. I believe your future is bright.

7. **Will you return? What about rites of passage?** I will not return to Westside for a period of at least three years. After that time, I may return for special occasions if invited by your new minister and if that would seem positive to the congregation as a whole. Perhaps most painfully, I will not be able to officiate at weddings, memorial services or other rites of passage after my ministry with you ends, as those duties would rightly belong with subsequent ministers. Please know that I will honor such life moments myself privately.
8. **Can we be friends? Can we stay in contact?** The UU Minister's Association Code of Ethics dictates that I will no longer have contact with Westside and its members during the above mentioned three-year period. I ask that you respect this policy – and my own need to set up a new life – by not reaching out to me after my ministry with Westside formally ends.

If I remain in Fort Worth for a while, with a new ministry beginning virtually due to pandemic restrictions, we may cross paths in the community. Feel free to say hello and make small talk; just know that it is not appropriate to “talk shop” about Westside and what is happening there.

On Facebook, I will hide Westsiders' posts from my feed so that I do not see them, or otherwise alter my settings so that I am not following your posts. For Westsiders who have chosen to friend me, I have you in a special friends group, and may sometimes include you in posts I make that are public in nature, but not personal posts. These no-contact practices on social media mirror the no-contact practice with other kinds of communication for the three years after my ministry to Westside concludes.

These boundaries are not about my affection for you – it is about giving you and your new minister(s) space to forge your own healthy relationship.

9. **What about your family?** I am a fairly private person and have had strong boundaries around our home and personal information. However, I have always made an exception for our daughter; I did not want her to be penalized, in her ability to have friendships in the church, because her mom happens to be the minister. If we remain in Fort Worth for some time after my ministry to Westside concludes (due to travel restrictions and the real estate market), I anticipate looking to strike a similar balance for Avonelle. She might still have play dates (real or virtual) with her friends from Westside. It is less clear to me whether it would be appropriate for her to continue to participate in the children's RE program. I will look for guidance from the interim minister and colleagues if this question proves applicable.
10. **When is your last day with us?** This is negotiated by the departing minister and governing board. Typically with a geographic move, I would end my current ministry on June 30, and start the new one on August 1. However, it may not be feasible for us to move until life (and the housing market) return a bit more to “normal.” Should the pandemic delay my geographic transition, and lead Westside to want more continuity in ministry – avoiding or reducing any gap before the interim minister arrives – I could continue to serve Westside through much of July. I anticipate the Board and I will be discussing that option, and evaluating what will work best as conditions continue to evolve.
11. **What will you be doing between now and then?** I will continue to lead worship, do pastoral care, work with the staff and ministry teams of the church, and fulfill my core responsibilities as your minister. I also will spend a considerable amount of time and energy in these coming months trying to say goodbye in a loving, healthy way. This means closing any loopholes that might exist, making sure any institutional knowledge that I have is shared with appropriate people, and, most importantly, talking to you.