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Best Practices for Guest Preachers in Unitarian Universalist Pulpits

Compiled by Rev. Erika Hewitt, UUA WorshipWeb
Curator, with input from Unitarian Universalist
ministers on social media



Intentions & Purpose

These Best Practices were assembled to provide clarity about the mutual expectations that Unitarian Universalist clergy and congregations bring to guest preaching experiences. In the past, these respective responsibilities have not always been outlined clearly, leading to assumptions that create confusion or even conflict. The practices outlined in this document reflect the collective experience of UU clergy in different ministerial settings, and the wisdom encapsulated by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA) Code of Professional Practice.

Responsibilities of the host congregation

Worship planning — not just leading the service — is an act of hospitality. Set that tone through collaboration: you're the essence of hospitality to, and for, guest ministers (and other guest speakers). You're also the ambassador for the entire congregation.

- Stipulate in advance what the preaching honorarium is and, for example, whether mileage is included. Be aware that some guest preachers believe that creating a slideshow or multimedia worship should entail a higher fee. Others may be reluctant to accept less than the current minimums (\$250 for one service, \$300 for two), which reflect the value that we as a people of faith place on fairly compensating those who serve us.
- The host congregation should communicate clearly which worship elements the preacher is expected to do (even if some of those are negotiable).
- Make sure the sample order of service is up to date, indicating which elements the preacher usually chooses and/or leads. It's helpful to clarify which elements aren't open to variation, and which elements the guest preacher can be creative with.
- Clarify how long the children and youth remain in the service, how they come in, how (if) they leave, and where they are for the Time for All Ages.



- Clearly communicate the “rubrics” of worship that are not evident in the order of service. Those items may include: Who announces hymns? Does your congregation practice both the lighting and extinguishing of the chalice? If so, how is that done? Does the preacher go to the back of the sanctuary for the benediction? Is there a receiving line?
- Brief the guest preacher on how long the elements of the service usually run, and how many minutes the sermon should be.
- Practice clarity around who chooses the hymns.
- If the guest preacher is requested to engage in a sermon discussion, let them know ahead of time. Be prepared to accept a guest preacher’s choice not to engage in this practice.
- It’s preferable for the host congregation to provide a single contact person who will serve as liaison to the religious education professional, music / choir director / accompanist, and office administrator.
- Have mercy: plan ahead and clearly communicate deadlines. If the host congregation needs sermon information and/or a speaker bio, ask the guest preacher for it well in advance.
- Ask the guest preacher about their accessibility needs. If they require accommodation, provide clear information about which parts of the campus are, and aren’t, physically accessible, including the pulpit.
- Determine whether the guest preacher needs an elevating stand behind the pulpit—and provide a safe one. Few things will diminish a speaker’s authority more quickly than peering over the pulpit.
- Communicate to the guest preacher whether it’s the congregation’s culture for the preacher to robe, or to wear only a stole, or neither.
Note: this decision is ultimately up to the guest preacher.
- Ask your guest preacher for their pronouns, how they’d like to be addressed, and how to pronounce their name. When you communicate those preferences to the congregation, also be sure to spell your guest’s name correctly (for example, in the newsletter or on your congregation’s website).

- Be aware that the title “Reverend” applies to ministers who have been ordained. Some ministers are in candidate status, or otherwise have not earned the “Rev.” title. When in doubt, ask.
- If the congregation records (audio or video) sermons to post online, ask guest preachers for permission ahead of time.
- If the congregation typically uses slides in worship, provide information about who assembles the slides, and how the guest preacher is expected to communicate with them.
- Communicate the congregation’s inclement weather procedure: Who makes the decision about cancelling church? Will the guest preacher be paid even if worship is cancelled? If the preacher needs to cancel, will they send their sermon to be read by a lay leader?
- Assuming the guest preacher has never visited the host congregation, provide instructions about where to park (for example, is there a minister’s parking space?).
- Arrange for the guest preacher’s honorarium check to be presented *on the day of the service*.

All of the guidelines above communicate respect for, and collaboration with, your guest minister. As a matrix for hospitality, most of them also apply to lay speakers, interfaith guests, and other religious professionals.

Responsibilities of the guest preacher

- If home hospitality, long-distance mileage, or any other compensation beyond the honorarium are expected, those expectations and requests should be made clear before accepting the preaching date.
- If you plan to bring young children with you, communicate that to the worship associate and the religious educator in advance.
- Respect the worship practices of the host congregation, and read the guide you are sent.

- If you wish to use a specific kind of music, technology, or other equipment, request it well ahead of time. Be willing to arrive early in order to test or troubleshoot that equipment.
- Complete requests for the order of service or suggestions in a timely manner.
- Arrive at least 30 minutes early on the morning of the service.

Day-of hospitality at the host congregation

- Someone from the congregation, preferably the worship associate, should greet the guest preacher.
- If the guest preacher has brought their partner and/or children, greet them and help them feel at home.
- Provide a quiet place for the guest preacher to put their robe, belongings, etc. before the service, and a secure location for their valuables.
- Provide the guest preacher’s check before the service begins.
- Provide clear information about the restrooms.
- If the guest preacher is invited to lunch following the service, understand that they may not be able to accept the invitation.
- Do not assume a guest preacher is a “hugger.”
- Provide a glass of water in the pulpit or nearby.
- Explain and test the sound system with your speaker.
- It’s a welcome gesture to write a thank you note to your guest preacher, perhaps at the next Worship Committee meeting.

UUMA Collegial Covenant and Dynamics

The UU Ministers Association’s [Standards of Professional Practice](#) state that “collegial relationships are expected to be professionally sensitive,

respectful, and supportive.” For guest preachers who are bound by these standards, professional relationships can be strengthened in any of the following ways:

- Upon accepting a guest preaching invitation, ask the colleague whose pulpit you’re filling, “What can I do to support your ministry?”
- If you invite a colleague to preach in a congregational setting or moment that entails controversy, give them a heads-up.
- If you are the guest preacher, ask whether there’s anything you should know about current congregational life, whether particular topics would be helpful, or whether there’s anything the congregation needs to hear.
- If a congregant attempts to criticize or triangulate you regarding another colleague’s ministry, do not engage them.
- When you, the guest minister, take the pulpit, offer unbidden a few nice words about the incumbent. Talk about your colleague, your relationship to them, and praise their ministry.

Remember: Worship isn’t about conveying information or having enough candles. Worship Associates, clergy, and other worship leaders are preparing a table for beloved people with deep longings, invisible hurts, and a need to be buoyed by the community’s hope. Together, you’re creating a space that will hold them — and Spirit, who often drops in for a visit.