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In this fifth year of her call with us, Rev. Karen G. Johnston is taking a three-month sabbatical this winter/spring. She will be gone beginning January 25, with plans to return on April 25. We are proud to support our minister as she takes this extended leave as a time of rest, renewal, research, and a change of rhythm. As a congregation, we, too, understand ourselves on a form of sabbatical, renewing our commitment to strengthening ourselves. As a way to guide our sabbatical journey while Rev. Karen is away, we have chosen Widening Circles as our theme for the year.



To learn more, please click here. [sends to tab with the following text]

**Sabbatical Tab**

**Sabbatical for the Congregation and for Rev. Karen**

Reverend Karen G. Johnston began serving as our minister on August 1, 2016. Following our Letter of Agreement with her, and in sync with [recommended best practice](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1566992230/ref=as_li_qf_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=northmchurch-20&creative=9325&linkCode=as2&creativeASIN=1566992230&linkId=f601106dcdf9f7eefb5a7332c23c23e7), Rev. Karen can take a sabbatical beginning in her fifth year of service to us. The sabbatical is equal to one month for every year of called ministry, so Rev. Karen has earned four months of sabbatical.

In Unitarian Universalist congregations, there has been a tradition of the minister being away for sabbatical leave every seventh year. However, in recent decades, this has evolved toward ministers taking shorter, more frequent sabbaticals. This pattern helps decrease both burnout in long-term ministries and the disruption to congregations from ministers being on extended leave.

Due to the current spike in pandemic cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, Rev. Karen has adapted her sabbatical plans (yet again). Most recently, with the Board’s support, she has decided to split her sabbatical – to take three months this congregational year and to take one month next congregational year. For this year, it means that Rev. Karen will begin her sabbatical on Monday, January 25 and will return on Sunday, April 25, 2021. Rev. Karen will preach on January 24th and again on May 2nd.

**What is a sabbatical?**

Sabbatical is an ancient practice relating to a period of rest, usually after six years. The root word literally means "ceasing." And the longer time of sabbatical rest in a *seventh* year mirrors the practice of a weekly sabbath each *seventh* day.

"A Duke University study in 2007 found that 85 percent of seminary graduates leave ministry within five years, and only one in ten retire as a pastor" ([The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/12/11/i-feel-so-distant-god-popular-dc-area-pastor-confesses-hes-tired-announces-sabbatical)). To help avoid burnout, the practice of sabbatical provides an intentional time of renewal, rejuvenation, and learning to help make longer-term ministry healthier and more sustainable for both the minister and congregation.

**What are the minister's sabbatical plans?**

This extended leave will provide space of rest, renewal, research, and change of rhythm.

Of course, the global pandemic has impacted Rev. Karen’s plans for sabbatical in significant ways. Rev. Karen has long wanted to tour parts of the Civil Rights Trail in Alabama and Mississippi, as well as to visit places in Louisiana relevant to the [Lost Souls history](https://lostsoulsmemorialnj.org/). Her first adaptation to the pandemic included doing this tour in an RV. However, she recently recognized that it no longer feels pandemic-safe to do it even in that manner. So, the Civil Rights Trail will be postponed until the spring of 2022.

This year, her three-month sabbatical will include reading (for both leisure and education); an extended silent meditation self-retreat; conducting a Clearness Committee for a Buddhist colleague; deepening her Befriending Death spiritual practice; taking part in courses/conferences to deepen her anti-racism practice; surrounding herself with beauty.

We trust that Rev. Karen will use this time to position herself to better serve us and our denomination when she returns.

**Sundays Services**

We are fortunate to be a part of the [NJ-based Leadership Leaves](https://www.uua.org/central-east/clusters-affiliate-groups/profchapters/leaderleaves), with member UU congregations helping to fill our pulpit, alongside paid guests and members of the congregation who have volunteered. Our Music Director, Nick Place, will continue to make his musical magic and our Director of Congregational Life, Jessica M. Hess, will have an increased presence in helping our Sunday services operate smoothly and in an engaging, high quality way.

We are anticipating that unless there are some significant change in pandemic-related trends Sunday services will continue to be held virtually through the sabbatical period and for the rest of this congregational year, and possibly longer.

**Pastoral Care**

Our pastoral care team has been strengthened and will be responding to congregant needs through the sabbatical period. You may be wondering what will happen if someone in the congregation dies and there is a need for a memorial service during the sabbatical period. Our Minister on Call will respond pastorally to the family’s needs, helping to discern whether they would like to hold a memorial service right away or to wait until Rev. Karen’s return. If the family would like to do it right away, and Rev. Karen is out of state, the Minister on Call will identify someone who can officiate. If the family would like to wait until Rev. Karen’s return, she would be honored to officiate as soon as such a service can be reasonably scheduled.

**What is Happening at TUS during Sabbatical?**

This whole year our theme is Widening Circles. As Rev. Karen preached in September, sabbatical is not just for the minister. It’s an important time of learning and self-discovery for the congregation. What do we want to make of our sabbatical? What can we share with Rev. Karen when she returns?

This is an unusual year, given our continued focus on virtual activities amid the pandemic. We will continue to offer opportunities for connection and will communicate about them using our weekly eblast that arrive in your email inbox, such as the monthly Buddhist sangha meetings and the monthly meeting of the Sunday Salon on the first Friday of each month; or the weekly drop-in zoom rooms at lunch on Tuesdays and on Wednesday evenings. We will continue to welcome visitors, and the Membership Committee plans to hold another online class for new folks looking to learn more about the congregation and possibly new become members.

We can take this time to reflect on our relationship with our Minister and how we can best take advantage of her professional skills in the years ahead while meeting other needs ourselves. And, of course, this a wonderful time for us to celebrate each member’s work and commitment to our shared congregational life.

**Reaching Someone at TUS during Sabbatical**

Because the sabbatical is designed to be a complete break from ministerial responsibilities, there should be no need to contact Rev. Karen while she is on leave. Rev. Karen’s Facebook profile and Messenger will be turned off. She will not be checking messages or texts on the phone number she has shared with the congregation. If you run into her locally, it’s fine to say hello but please refrain from sharing anything related to TUS while she is on sabbatical.

Our Administrator, Donna Rice, will continue to work Monday – Thursday, 9am- 3pm. Unless there is another shelter-in-place order, or a snow day, you can find her in the office by phone. Please do not visit her in person without arranging with her ahead of time.

If a non-pastoral occasion arises, or if you are a representative of the media, please first get in touch with Board President, Rich Phelan. If a pastoral emergency arises, please contact Phyllis Shaw, Chair of the Pastoral Care Team. These people can be reached through the Contact Us link on the web site, though it may take several days (longer, if it’s over the weekend) for your message to get to them.