

## Meet

The Rev. James Ishmael Ford  
Candidate for Minister of the  
First Unitarian Church of Providence



*"When we come together  
in a spiritual community,  
we are called  
to remember,  
to re-member,  
to rejoin,  
to return  
to our truest selves."*



## James Ford. . . in his own words

### On his hopes for his next ministry:

I believe our liberal faith brings us two great truths. First, we are on a spiritual quest, a search for life and meaning. And, at the same time, we manifest our spiritual depth in our engagement with the world. I see our mission as Unitarian Universalists as nothing less than healing the broken heart and healing our broken world. I need to serve among people who feel a similar call of quest and engagement.

### On his path to ministry:

In my late twenties, I came across William Ellery Channing's famous sermon "Unitarian Christianity." As I read it, I felt as if I'd come home.

### On one of his strengths:

I believe I am particularly useful in helping to create a healing and inviting environment for a congregation that has experienced some conflict.

### On religious education:

I believe life-span religious education to be as important as our public worship. I believe it is important for the ministers to publicly and frequently demonstrate support for the religious education programming and its leaders.

### On his personal theology:

I frequently say I have a "physiology of faith": a Buddhist brain, a Christian heart, and a Humanist stomach. By this I mean my basic theological orientation is a liberal Zen Buddhism. But my dreams are populated by Moses and Miriam, Jesus and the Marys; my fundamental metaphorical references are derived from the Bible that was so central in my upbringing. And then, very much, all this is washed through my strongly rationalist and humanistic disposition.

### On social justice:

I've found the arcs of my inner life and my outer life moving in tandem, particularly with concerns for various issues of social justice, each informing the other. I have also come to believe this twin path is at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist way. My personal attention these days tends to go to the areas of hunger; racial dialogue; and, most of all, promoting GLBT rights in our larger community, particularly around issues of equal marriage rights. An interesting consequence of this focus has been the growth in the Newton congregation of gay and lesbian families.



## A Short Biography

The Reverend James Ishmael Ford is currently the minister at the First Unitarian Society of Newton (Massachusetts), a church with 385 members. He was ordained in 1991 and served churches in Mequon, Wisconsin, and Chandler, Arizona, before being called to the Newton church in 2000.

James was born on July 17, 1948, in Oakland, California, and was raised in a fundamentalist Baptist household. "At sixteen," he says, "I became a socialist; at the age of seventeen, an atheist." At nineteen, he began the serious practice of Zen and was ordained a monk and later a priest. It wasn't until his late twenties that James discovered Unitarian Universalism and soon after began attending UU services.

For twenty years, James worked as a buyer and manager in used bookstores along the coast of California. After two brief marriages, James met Jan Seymour; they have been married for twenty-five years. James and Jan eventually opened their own bookstore, north of San Francisco, in the town of Guerneville.

After his teenaged son moved in with him and Jan, James transferred his membership to a church in Santa Rosa from a UU fellowship in San Rafael. There, he led a high school youth group and began to consider the ministry. (Sadly, his son later died of a drug overdose.)

James and Jan currently live in the Auburndale section of Newton; James's retired aunt, Julia Bernard, lives with them. Jan works as a research librarian at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts.

James holds a Bachelor's degree in psychology from Sonoma State University (1987) and an M.A. and M.Div. (1991, 1992) from the Pacific School of Religion. James is a Soto Zen Buddhist priest and has published two books about Zen Buddhism, one of them for Unitarian Universalists by Skinner House Press, the UUA publisher. He has also written UUA pamphlets and articles for *UUWorld*. For additional sermons, please see [www.fusn.com](http://www.fusn.com) and click on Sermons. James also keeps a blog at <http://monkeymindonline.blogspot.com>.



## Why the Search Committee chose James Ford

When the Search Committee polled the congregation about what they wanted in a minister, the four most important attributes were:

Be inspiring – able to motivate, uplift, or stimulate others to take action

Have a sense of humor – able to appreciate and express the humorous

Be ethical – professional beyond reproach

Be educated – well informed, possessing many life experiences

*We believe James has all of these qualities. James went through some dark times in his early life, and we believe his experiences have helped to make him a stronger and more focused person. We enjoyed his sense of humor during our weekend together and found him to have a keen mind.*

When we asked participants in our cottage meetings what they wanted in a minister, they said we want someone who

is rooted in his/her beliefs and convictions,

can communicate his/her message in a moving way,

will challenge us and help us to be better people and to live out our principles,

will demonstrate how Unitarian Universalism is relevant and important in our community and in our world today.

*We believe that James has these attributes as well and that he will be able to articulate his thoughts to the congregation.*

When we heard from individual parishioners about what they wanted in a minister, they told us to find someone

with a deep, personal spiritual practice,

who supports small group ministry,

who supports a vibrant lay ministry.

*Writing and meditation are part of James's everyday spiritual life. He supported and strengthened both small group ministry and the lay ministry while at the Newton church.*

*We believe James Ford is the right person to be the next minister of First Unitarian Church of Providence.*

*We urge you to meet and get to know James during the Candidating Week, from Sunday, April 27 to Sunday, May 4. Following the worship service on May 4, the decision on whether to call the Rev. James Ishmael Ford to serve as our next settled minister will be yours.*

—The Ministerial Search Committee  
Stewart Armstrong, Andrew Barrett, Jim Estey,  
Martha Manno (chair), Merritt Meyer,  
Janet Noble, Rita Rossi

