

## **Often Frustrated but Never Bored! 36 Years in Pastoral Ministry!**

Remarks by Marshall Dunn, upon receiving Alumnus of the Year, 2025  
July 15, 2025, General Assembly in Memphis, Tennessee  
Disciples Divinity House

Thank you, Alumni/ae Council for this honor (Laura Jean, Lee, and Yvonne, 3 of my favorite people).

I'm sure the most exciting period of my career was when I moved to Indianapolis to work with our GMP, Sharon Watkins, living apart from my wife of then 40 years and doing a job that largely required what I had thought was my least honed skill, administration. They DID give me a title to always remember: I was the Temporary Associate General Minister and Vice President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada! Try putting THAT on a business card!

It turned out to be a great joy and honor to work with Sharon who was and is an amazing person, but it still pales next to my 36 years serving three congregations as their senior minister. Two of those congregations came right after DDH and the Divinity School, where I pastored two churches on the South Side of Chicago, in West Pullman and Blue Island. After sharing me for two years, they voted to unite, sell one building, and become one congregation with co board chairs, two worship chairs, two property chairs, etc. They voted to merge, 144-0 and 72-1, and I've often said my greatest leadership and people skills may have peaked when I was 27 years old!

After five years there, I got a call one night from Bill Cowl, a DDH alum and eventual Associate Dean, saying "Marshall, I put your name in for a church in the Capital Area!" I asked, "Don't you think you should have asked me first?" He answered, "No!"

That fateful phone call eventually led to my becoming the senior minister of University Christian Church for 31 years. Those 36 total years, in three very different congregations, were the most rewarding years of my career, and I'm going to try to help you understand why.

Being the pastor of a congregation calls a person to be a general practitioner in an age of specialization, and that fit me to a T. I loved being a minister.

First I will celebrate my passion for working with high school youth in over fifty years of CYF camp counseling and 25 years of directing Young Adult Conference for 18-30-year-olds. I knew I was really good at it from my initial evening as the youth minister at a UCC church my first year in the DMin program. I led a session on the Spanish theologian Miguel Unamuno and the tragic sense of life. Yes, all the young people met that very night to

strategize about how they could get me fired! Well, I learned a lot pretty quickly, we bonded, and I spent three very happy years there.

Toward the end of my fourteen quarters at the Divinity School, Dean Blakemore called me into his office. Without so much as a hello he asked, “Is Barbara pregnant?”

I managed to respond, “Not that I know of” and he then told me he had chosen me to go to Bossey, Switzerland. I’ll always be very grateful to Dean Blakemore for that amazing, life changing experience, studying with clergy and other seminarians from 27 countries and 17 denominations!

During my time at the Divinity School, I was exposed to extraordinary things like “The Plunge” where my DMin classmates and I lived on the streets of Chicago for four days with \$8.00 in our pockets to start. Amazingly none of us got hurt, but a few got robbed!

My field placement with the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations was very exciting, especially when Martin Luther King chose that summer to work in Chicago to prove that racism was not a Southern phenomenon! (That wasn’t hard.) Some of you have heard my integrating-a-beach story!

I never imagined going East as a Disciple but in 1974, still 30 years old, I was called as the senior minister of University Christian Church, near the University of Maryland and on the edge of Washington, DC.

Congregational ministry is SO complex, so challenging, and so varied. I used to say I was often frustrated but I was never bored. How could you be, when your first funeral saw you trying to break up a fist fight between the deceased woman's grandson and son, only to get caught with a right hook to the jaw and dropping to the floor like a ton of bricks! When your first board meeting heard the financial secretary say I could buy stationery with my name on it— but only for three months’ supply at a time!

How could you be bored with sermons to write every week and hundreds of weddings, funerals, and baptisms, most in the church’s baptistry but more than 40 in the Atlantic Ocean where our Maryland congregation had an annual retreat. One unforgettable moment came when a huge wave sent me and the young man tumbling over and over in the surf. He came up sputtering, “My minister let go of me!

It was challenging but rewarding to live and work on the edge of Washington, DC and preach after President Nixon’s resignation, 9/11, and many other lesser but powerful moments in our nation’s history. It was exhilarating being with so many of our members protesting apartheid at the South African Embassy and watching with our children as my courageous wife was arrested on the front steps of that embassy.

It was wonderful being part of our church's active ministry to homeless persons and sponsoring a childcare center for little children whose teenage moms were students at the high school next door to us.

But congregational clergy are also asked to share some of life's most tragic moments.

It was heart-breaking being present with young parents removing life support from their previously healthy eight-year-old son, then immediately driving to lead our church's Family Christmas Eve service, surrounded on the rug by happy, excited children.

It was so hard being with a 26-year-old father of two who was full of cancer and his poor young wife couldn't bear to see him so ill and only rarely came to the hospital. One day near the end he asked me to please get in bed with him. I swallowed hard but did exactly as he wished and faced my own mortality like never before.

It was horrible being with two families who had just lost a child to SIDS, and be with grieving parents after tragic miscarriages, then amazingly be invited to join one of those couples in the obstetrician's office to witness the sonogram of the healthy baby girl they would have months later. I'll never forget how we all felt when the doctor pointed to a very tiny little pea on the screen and said, "That's her uterus!"

It was exciting being part of mentoring nine seminarians, ordaining Laura Jean Torgerson and five other members of the congregation and working closely with so many extremely talented and deeply spiritual colleagues as Associate Ministers through those 31 years. One of those, Joanne Bell Haynes is well known to most of you in our DDH family. Amazingly I also had great relationships with all our very talented Ministers of Music!

I loved our congregation's commitment to ministries of compassion and justice, advocating with state and national legislators, sponsoring two large refugee families from Laos and Bosnia, and commissioning many of our members to go on mission trips to Appalachia, New Orleans, Jamaica, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Nicaragua.

When over twenty of them returned from Kentucky, Ramona, one of our wonderful leaders, told me, "Marshall, we're really family now.... We're not even polite to each other anymore!" Meanwhile the church continued to grow in its racial and cultural diversity, with more than 80 people taking anti-racism training! We declared that being an anti-racist church was a core value.

I treasured being a rabbi as well. I began and taught an adult Sunday School class during my entire ministry at University.

Yes, pastoral ministry has been a remarkable journey, and I am very grateful: certainly to DDH and the Divinity School for an excellent education, emotional and financial support. I

thank God for the many wonderful lay leaders who have taught me about faith and courage, colleagues who have been amazing, and most of all my wife Barbara and our children, Kristen and Eric. They have been my rocks, my refuge, my counselors and friends. Your love and support have meant the world to me.

I am so grateful for a career that needed two services on Sunday, very long hours, but living less than a mile from the church always had me home for dinner with my family and saw me never miss one of their games, plays, or special programs at school. And that wonderful flex time also allowed me to play a LOT of tennis!

Finally, I want to thank MY mentor and role model, my Disciple minister father, John Dunn. His courage around confronting racism inspired me, his wise counsel about how to do congregational ministry was invaluable, and his example of being a husband and father surely made me a better human. Thank you, Dad. You are my polar star!

And thank YOU all, again! Amen!