



**First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
*Creating Community, Welcoming All***

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

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Signs of a Conspiring Spirit

By Rev. David Jones

On Sunday, September 25 at 3:00 pm, I will be installed at the First Congregational Church as their “settled” minister. This has been a long time coming. I came to Ashfield three years ago, my first job as a minister. And I was not ordained at the time. I had to complete the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield before I could be ordained, and I couldn’t be installed until I was ordained.

I finished CPE in March 2020 at the very beginning of Covid. Immediately, our church shut down as did most things, and my ordination was postponed. It finally took place via Zoom in September, 2020, with only a few people in the Sanctuary at church. Rev. Mick Comstock gave the homily, and my family in Canada watched online. As our congregation continued to monitor Covid, we delayed the installation until we felt we could safely host this event and invite everyone to come and celebrate my ministry in Ashfield. That time is now.

Rev. Mick Comstock, who’s been a mentor of mine since I arrived, once told me that it takes three to five years to become a church’s minister. Before that time, you are a church’s “new minister,” which is a somewhat different thing. So even though my installation was delayed, I think the timing works well. By now this church community understands more of who I am, what comes to me naturally, and what needs time to grow. I was called to be a partner to a congregation already overflowing with talent and strong leadership. So it’s very meaningful to me, having been through so much together in three years, to receive this affirmation from my partners now.

The United Church of Christ’s (UCC) installation service emphasizes the role of what most Christians call the Holy Spirit in bringing a minister and a church together. The Spirit is leading us all, but this service will claim that the Spirit did something specific by bringing Ashfield’s First Congregational Church and me together. We can see signs of this if we go looking. I grew up in Canada not going to church, studied in Ottawa and Toronto, joined the UCC and was approved for ordination in Florida. Then somehow early in my search, I found a church in New England that spoke about faith in the same way I did, emphasizing justice and community, and thinking about the future of churches as places for community organizing. Then when I first visited this place, the hilltowns were dressed up in a cool springtime mist. It was hauntingly beautiful, and I couldn’t wait to return. These could be among the signs of a conspiring Spirit.

But ultimately we honor the role of the Spirit with humility. With faith in its presence, the trick becomes trying to figure out what she wants from each of us, and therefore from all of us together. Three years has taught me a lot about this place, but I feel very strongly that the Spirit is only beginning its work with

us. The Spirit is patient and it is carrying all of history with it into the present. It is posing new questions in the hilltowns, speaking on behalf of the God Who Is Love, or on behalf of that great Love Who Is God.

Since we are not a perfect community, we have real struggles right here in our midst. Some children go to school hungry and some parents or grandparents go to bed hungry. We must still have somewhere more glorious to get to. It is the Spirit who tells us that this “somewhere” is already here if we can just figure it out. So that’s basically what we, with the Spirit, are up to at First Congregational Church. Our humility ensures that we do not make the mistake of thinking we can solve all the world’s problems, but the Spirit ensures that we never stop believing that we can help solve the problems of the people we serve. Until no one feels they are on their own, we will keep following the Spirit’s lead.

This sacred service is a sign of mutual commitment. It marks the end of a transition time for our church, and the official start of something new. It will remind me of a Sanderson Sunday over three years ago, when I led worship here for the first time as a candidate for the position. The late Bob Bates chatted with my wife and me in the pastor’s office while the congregation deliberated whether or not to call me.

That day Bob spoke of his deep love for Ashfield, and mentioned, with a sparkle in his eye, that there was “no firmer foundation” than the hilltowns on which to raise a family. Three years later, my wife and I are expecting our first child in November. There may not be an immediate, apparent difference in our ministry together simply because of this installation service, but the congregation and I will certainly understand that we are all together now, on a firmer foundation.

I invite you to join me and our church family on Sunday, September 25, at 3:00 pm, to celebrate this new beginning.