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Rev. Ken Phifer is very much a typical pastor. Yet, at the same time, he follows a different, more liberal spiritual path than most religious leaders.

Such is the life of a minister in the Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Phifer is a fifth-generation minister, and just like his father and other ancestors, he is following a unique family tradition. Each minister followed a different faith community than his father as well as different than all the others. His father was a Presbyterian minister, preceded generationally in order, by Dutch Reform Methodist and Baptist.

After graduating from University of Chicago Divinity School, Phifer found a Unitarian Universalist congregation that attracted him mainly because of a religious education brochure.

According to Phifer, that brochure affirmed that, "The purpose of religious education at a Unitarian Universalist congregation is to help each child feel a sense of his or her own worth. Secondly, to help that child to appreciate the worth of every other child and all living things."

That's exactly what he wanted for his children.

"Not so much of a particular belief, but that tremendous respect for life," Phifer said of the attraction for him

He says that's what the U.U. promised and has delivered to him and his family for the last 35 years. The abbreviation U.U. is frequently used as a self-moniker for the church as well as its members.

Phifer, officially retired after 25 years as senior minister at First Unitarian Universalist Church, Ann Arbor, Mich., still resides in that community. He currently serves as the consulting minister at Maunee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation on Ohio 25 between Bowling Green and Perrysburg.

He started in January, after a planned six-month time frame, both he and the board of the church agreed to continue the relationship on a yearly basis for up to three years.

Phifer was hired by the board, and therefore is not the official minister of the church. That position can only be filled by a vote of the entire membership.

His role is part-time, generally being at the church to lead the services on the first and second Sunday of each month. He teaches classes at the church and also offers advice and counsel as desired, often by e-mail due to the distance between his home and the church.

The local U.U. congregation has not had a minister since 1995, so Phifer provides them with some stability and consistency as they discern various aspects of their church.

Interestingly, one of his previous careers was as a Russian language specialist and spy in Berlin, Germany. He worked for the Army in that capacity from 1961-63.

While in Berlin, he primarily listened and analyzed what he heard from the Russians in regards to troop movements and imminent attacks. Phifer pointed out that the U.U. philosophy thrives on no creeds to adhere to for its membership.

“We are very broad, theologically,” Phifer said.

He stressed the liberal thinking of himself and the church, but he focuses on the liberal definition of being “a generosity of spirit.”

Because of not having a creed, the U.U. has often drawn agnostics and atheists; as well as humanists into its fold.

“Belief is not the critical factor. What we look for is to honor the liberal religious tradition, and we take the word liberal very seriously,” he said.

“If there’s anything that I believe characterizes Unitarian Universalist it is the effort to live up to that phrase, ‘a generosity of spirit.’”

He stresses that U.U.s don’t always agree with each other, but they respect each individual and their beliefs. They often draw a wide spectrum of people who have an even wider spectrum of beliefs.

“I can learn from faith positions with which I’m not personally in agreement,” Phifer said. “They can teach me things I need to know.”

Phifer says he has learned to be “very careful and respectful” and “to take each individual as that individual comes to you.”

Despite the vast diversity, he says the congregation is held together by its sense of social justice; and a commitment to not argue about matters of faith.

He noted that U.U.s take seriously a commitment to make this world a better place. Their views often put them outside the mainstream. They can unite in their differences, because they share the common feeling of a different perspective or view.

“For many of us there is a real enjoyment of discussing and learning with people who we don’t agree with,” Phifer said. “I grow because my congregation is always pushing and challenging me.”