

2008 Annual Award for Distinguished Service
to the Cause of Unitarian Universalism
presented by
the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
to The Rev. Forrest Church

Forrest Church had no interest in the parish ministry; he was finishing his doctorate at Harvard and had set his sights on being a religious scholar. But the search committee from the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York had other ideas. And they got it right. My, did they get it right!

The reluctant young man's first candidating sermon was a bomb. He had very little pulpit experience. He had been ordained but hadn't even begun to explore fellowship. He was not yet thirty. But during candidating week, he heard a call to the pulpit for the first time, loud and clear, and his second sermon won him the job.

The All Souls that Forrest joined thirty years ago, in the fall of 1978, was a midsized church. It was not uncommon for fewer than a hundred persons to attend Sunday worship. The professional staff consisted of Forrest and part-time directors of religious education and of music.

Right from the start of Forrest's ministry, the growth was volcanic. For years now, it's not been uncommon for more than a thousand people to attend Sunday worship at All Souls, and there are more ministers on the staff now than there were total staff members when Forrest arrived. In Forrest's hands, a sleepy congregation with a distinguished history became not only a very large church but also our nation's most visible exponent of liberal religion. And Forrest became the most widely heard Unitarian Universalist voice of his generation, in books, newspaper columns, on television, on radio, and in lectures from coast to coast and abroad.

Now, All Souls is in New York, the media capital of the world, and that helps. But All Souls had been in New York for a long time without drawing much attention - it was Forrest who drew the public's eye. This was partly because he was the young son of a well-known United States senator, Frank Church of Idaho, who frequently showed up for services. But the bubbling vitality of Forrest's growing congregation amplified this attention.

And then there was his preaching. From his clumsy start, he quickly mastered the craft. He found that he had a knack for reducing complex theological ideas to a crisp sentence or two, and that has made him perhaps the most quoted Unitarian Universalist preacher of his generation: Who among us has not heard his definition of religion as “humankind's response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die”? Or, “God is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.” Or, “The opposite of love is not hate but fear.” His words flow with precise ease, his style distinct, at once formal yet laced with irrepressible wit. He drew laughs even in the sermon in which he told his congregation about his terminal illness.

His most recent book, *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*, written in only two weeks after he received his diagnosis, was just published by Beacon Press. Of the other thirteen books he's written, perhaps most familiar to Unitarian Universalists is *A Chosen Faith*, with coauthor the Rev. John A. Buehrens. Forrest has also edited ten books, including the Beacon Press edition of *The Jefferson Bible*, which has sold more than 100,000 copies.

Television discovered Forrest early on: he's been interviewed by Bill Moyers on PBS, on the Today Show and CBS Sunday Morning; he was Dan Rather's companion in broadcasting the memorial service for the victims of the 9/11 attacks. He has written op-ed columns for many major newspapers and has been a regular columnist for *The Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Post*. Within our faith, his almost annual addresses at General Assemblies routinely draw hundreds of listeners. He has been chair of the UUA Grants Panel, a member of the President's Council, a trustee of Starr King School for the Ministry, chair of the Harvard Divinity School Alumni Council. The list goes on and on.

Clearly his success in the parish did not crowd out his early ambition to be a scholar. It's fair to say that he has been a contemporary version of 19th-century ministers such as Channing and Parker, who preached vital sermons to vital congregations while advancing liberal theology. Forrest's address, “Our Universalist Mission: Proclaiming a Theology for the 21st Century,” presented at the 2001 General Assembly in Cleveland, was such an advance that Gary Dorrien of Union Theological Seminary dwelled on it in his definitive work, *The Making of American Liberal Theology, 1950-2005*.

When Forrest stepped down as senior minister of All Souls a year and a half ago, he was given the title Minister of Public Theology. The title only crystallized the obvious. Forrest Church is a great parish minister, public minister, and public theologian. All of this has been made possible by his great spirit, which has propelled his ministry in all its myriad and wonderful forms. It is with joyful gratitude, Forrest, that we present to you the 2008 Award for Distinguished Service to the Cause of Unitarian Universalism.