



24 Fountain St NE Grand Rapids, MI 49503

April 23, 2020

Dear Fountain Streeter,

The Senior Minister Search Committee is delighted and proud to nominate the **Reverend Mariela Pérez-Simons** to be Fountain Street Church's eleventh senior minister. This nomination has the enthusiastic endorsement of the Rev. Christopher Roe, Governing Board President Chip Wall and Vice President Amy Preston.

During the long and thorough interview process, the Search Committee has been impressed by Rev. Mariela's intellect, insight and sensitivity. We are moved by her personal story and want to share some of it here, adding her own words.

Rev. Mariela was born in Cuba into a life of extreme poverty. As a child, she sought solace in nature and in the Catholic Church.

I am a religious naturalist— someone who falls on their knees with reverence for things like hurricanes, or sunrises, or perfect cumulus clouds.

... this period of my life shaped my ministry today and my understanding of what "church" is and how it can change the lives of individuals, particularly those who are suffering due to social injustices.

She earned a bachelor's degree from *Instituto Superior Pedagógico* in Havana while studying elementary education. In 1995, she and her family entered the US as asylum seekers. Over the next two decades, she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Writing/Literature from Bennington College and built a successful web design and photography firm. She is married to Dean Pérez-Simons and is the mother of Christopher, age 23, and Lucia (Lulu), age 13.

While volunteering at her UUA church, leading women's circles, working at an eco-spirituality sanctuary and creating a garden at a homeless day center, she felt a strong pull to the ministry.

The call was perfectly clear, the longing was excruciating, but I needed a few more years of inner work to feel worthy of being a minister.

It took the election of 2016 to give her the final push. Meadville Lombard Seminary, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago, offered her a full-ride Presidential Scholarship. The school is one of only two UUA seminaries in the world, has an historical relationship with the University of Chicago and is a member of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools.

Rev. Mariela graduated at the top of her class with a Master of Divinity after her ordination at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Tulsa—the largest UUA church in the world. Her charismatic preaching style has already attracted wide attention. When she became an intern at All Souls, the ministerial team invited her to preach after only two weeks on the job, a first at the

church. Last fall, Dr. Elias Ortega-Aponte, the president of Meadville Lombard Seminary, singled her out as a good fit for Fountain Street. And this year, the national leadership of the Unitarian-Universalist denomination selected her to preach and to lead the closing ceremony at their General Assembly in June.

I see worship as a form of hospitality; I see preaching as a gift of love to the congregation.

Although Rev. Mariela received other offers, she chose Fountain Street.

I like that Fountain Street is an urban church . . . I [also] need a big space . . . [and] a church that is open to possibilities and wants to grow with me: in health, in vitality, in enthusiasm, in diversity and in numbers.

Outside the pulpit, Rev. Mariela radiates warmth, personal charm and enthusiasm.

I'm an extroverted relational being . . . I've never met a stranger in my life. . . Whatever we do—even pulling weeds—when we do it as a team, with music in the background, and with treats afterwards, it feels like a joyful task.

To help Fountain Street grow, she will welcome congregants into leadership roles.

We empower people when we treat them well and match their gift to the task to be done . . . One of the most rewarding experiences is helping people recognize their own gifts, finding a way where they can use them and then watching them thrive.

Rev. Mariela's social justice work shows a special passion for marginalized communities, bilingual rights, refugee reform and diversity in every form.

I approach social action from a strong theological and spiritual place—from a place of abundance. . . I come to this as an asylum seeker, so I am uniquely qualified. But it's not about me; it's about us. I can't do what I'm passionate about if the congregation isn't involved.

Of all the applicants we considered, Rev. Mariela best embodies these and other qualities and skills that more than 300 Fountain Streeters told us they value most—like empathy, collegiality and approachability. She has also demonstrated her ability to lead small group ministry, create community connections, incorporate music of all kinds and involve children and youth in worship.

There is a place for the liberal church in America—churches that provide a place to ask questions. . . I believe our tradition is enriched by our theological diversity. We draw from many sources because there's wisdom in each of them to help give meaning and purpose to our lives and to live our values in the world. . . We can offer a balance between the intellectual and the spiritual. But if we are going to survive, we have to have a vision.

As we have come to know Rev. Mariela, our enthusiasm for her is equaled only by her own enthusiasm for serving Fountain Street. We are moved by her vision of a larger, more diverse Fountain Street and believe she has the wisdom and generosity to make that happen.

We were also impressed by what we heard from people who know her well:

When I was sick, Mariela was the person I wanted by my side. She knows what suffering is . . . She's a rock star and a treasure. (Former congregant)

Mariela is the future. She will have national appeal. (Ministerial colleague)

She's authentic. What you see is what she is. She brings hope, positive energy and light. She does whatever needs to be done and has deep philosophical conversations while doing it. (Ministerial colleague)

Mariela brings out the best in others. I predict she'll head up the UUA someday. (Seminary professor)

One day I will be able to say, "I knew her when." (Colleague of six years)

There is so much more to know about Rev. Mariela, that we have invited her to introduce herself in the enclosed pages. Be sure to follow the links to view her sermon videos and her website.

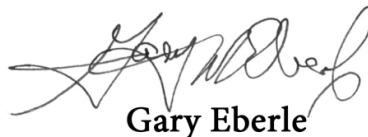
As your Search Committee, we have fulfilled our task of nominating a candidate we believe is worthy of you. Now, it is up to all members-in-good-standing to confirm this candidate by absentee ballot.

The Search Committee wholeheartedly and unanimously recommends the **Rev. Mariela Pérez-Simons** for this ministry. We thank you for your sage advice and personal support during this long and fruitful search. It has been an honor to do this work for the church we love.

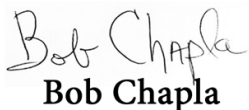
In gratitude,

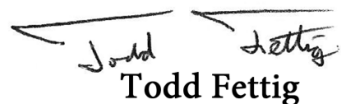
The Senior Minister Search Committee

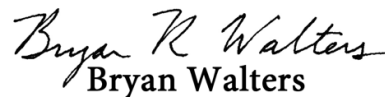

Marty Arnold

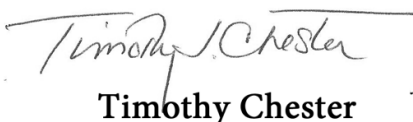

Gary Eberle


Lydia Stubbs

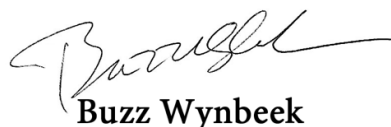

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