

“Who are UUCD’s Ministers? All of Us!”

**The Rev. Sue Spencer
UU Congregation of Danbury
Appreciation Sunday
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Today we come together to celebrate the ministry of this congregation. Please note that I don’t say the *ministers*, I say the *ministry*. We celebrate our ministry to one another, and our ministry to the wider community.

We could ask, of course, “Who *are* the ministers of this congregation?” And the easy response would be, “well, it’s Peggy, our Community Minister, and Sue, our Interim.” But a truer answer comes from the church I attended last Sunday in the Poconos, where my sister is a member – the United Methodist Church of Canadensis.

At my sister’s church, I couldn’t help but notice the back of the Order of Service, where the staff was listed. On the first line, it listed the Ministers: “All of us.” Below that, on the second line was the name of the person usually called The Minister – the ordained person on staff, George Alt. He was listed as “the pastor.”

Now, I don’t expect UUCD to adopt that particular wording any time soon. UU’s tend to resist any suggestion that we might be “sheep” – the clear implication of the word “pastor,” which means “shepherd.” Nevertheless, I think that the UMC in Canadensis has the relationship exactly right. The ministry of the congregation is primary. That of the ordained people, whatever you call them, is secondary.

I remember a young adult in my Vancouver congregation who was fond of calling me “The Boss.” But of course, The Boss is exactly what a minister is not! In fact, the word “minister” means exactly the opposite – it means “servant.” In Latin, it’s related to a whole group of words meaning something lesser, something subordinate: minister, minus, minimum, minor, minuscule. In Greek, the word for minister is *diakonos*, from which comes our word “deacon.” But the original meaning of *diakonos* is “a person who waits tables.” Not The Boss, in other words, but a servant.

In our free church tradition – the one Unitarians and Universalists inherited from the Reformation – *every* member of a congregation is called to serve. Every member of the community is a minister, and has a ministry! This is often recognized in Unitarian Universalist ordination services, through the central act of “laying on of hands.” This is an ancient ritual symbolizing the act of conferring of power, by one person to another.

In hierarchical churches, a bishop performs the laying on of hands; in others, the assembled clergy. But at many UU ordinations, it’s done by the entire congregation, joined as one body, linking hands and hearts. This makes sense in our tradition, for it says where the ordained person’s power really comes from. Not from on high, but from the people assembled, with the Spirit moving among them.

Paul the Apostle saw the Congregation as a body, with all parts dependent on the others. The Congregation gets its power to minister from the gifts of the members. “To one is given the

utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge, to another the working of miracles, to another the gift of prophecy,” Paul says.

To which we might add, “To one is given the gift of skillful administration, and to another that of community organizing. To another is given the skill of managing money, to another the power of a listening heart, to another the talent of organizing auctions, boutiques, and manifold pot-luck suppers. To still others are given the gifts of music, and teaching, and of creating beautiful works of art, and of welcoming guests, and talking to them at at coffee hour.”

Each of us brings gifts to the congregation – our gifts of time, treasure, talent, and passion. With these gifts, we minister. If you aren’t sure what your gifts are, or which of your gifts could be employed in UUCD’s ministry, I invite you to complete the congregation’s “Interests and Talents Survey,” available both on-line and in hard copy.

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What is the ordained minister’s role in this? It’s fitting that a jazz quintet is providing the music for this service, because when I think of the role of the clergy, I think of jazz. Once I watched the leader of a jazz ensemble, noting how he empowered each member of the group to shine. And I thought to myself, *That’s what ordained ministry’s about!*

The clergy’s role is to help people shine: to help everyone awaken to their own vocations, to challenge them toward spiritual growth, to encourage their care for one another, and to help them realize their power to work for justice.

Now, over the last few centuries, there’s been a movement in a different direction, toward the professionalization of the ordained ministry. If this means that clergy are expected to strive towards excellence in their work, that’s a good thing. But it can also have a downside.

With professionalization comes the unfortunate tendency to believe that “ministry” is only what ordained people do. The clergy are seen as the dispensers of ministerial services (in the words of the Rev. Roy Phillips, the “professional spiritual care providers”), and congregation members as passive recipients.

This view has several unfortunate results. It transforms many laypeople into consumers – in this case, consumers of ministerial services. On Sunday morning, those with a “consumer mentality” don’t ask, “Who might be blessed by my presence at service this morning?” They ask instead, “Will I get anything out of this service?” And when canvass time rolls around, they don’t ask, “What have *I* done this year to further the congregation’s ministry and mission – and what will I do next year?” They ask, rather, “What has the congregation, or the clergy, done for me lately?” If this isn’t a prescription for congregational passivity and clergy burnout, I don’t know what is! At worst, such an attitude turns congregations into private clubs, unworthy of their tax-exempt status.

I remember receiving an angry phone call once, from a parishioner in one of the congregations I’ve served. “The church services,” he said, “are *not meeting my needs.*” We talked about his feelings, and I learned something from the conversation. But here’s the difficulty: Any time the minister changes the Sunday services to “meet someone’s needs”, there’s a very good chance they’ll stop meeting the needs of someone else. And need I point out that, if the minister tries too hard to meet

everyone's needs – for example, by not offending them - then no one's *real* needs are ever likely to be met?

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Roy Phillips, in his book *Transforming Liberal Congregations for the New Millennium* (St. Paul, MN: Unity Church – Unitarian, 1996) suggests that congregations make a major shift in their thinking: “from Membership to Ministry.” By this, he means that we must stop thinking of the congregation as “members” ministered to by clergy, and start thinking of ministry as something the entire congregation does.

This involves letting go of viewing the ordained person as THE minister. Instead, the work of the ordained person and other staff is to help others discover and realize their own ministries: within the congregation, “out there” in the wider community, or as part of a congregation that is “out there in the community.”

Within this framework, it's important that clergy also make a shift in their thinking. They need to stop asking, “how can I meet peoples' needs?” And they need to start asking questions like these, in conjunction with others:

- How can we empower others to discover and live their own vocations?
- How can we create worship that expresses the best of our life together, and our highest aspirations?
- How can we, together, create ministries that speak to the hopes, hurts, and hungers of our world?”

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If ever the world needed vibrant liberal congregations, it is now!

In our fragmented, post-modern age, people long for a spiritual home where the generations can meet, and people they can know themselves and others as whole persons.

In a world where war, violence, and bigotry are rampant, people seek models of reconciliation – communities that respect and welcome difference.

In a world where so many human beings are crushed by poverty, oppression, and violence, people cry out for congregations that bear prophetic witness to human dignity.

Who are the ministers of UUCD? The answer is, “all of us.” Whatever part you play in making this congregation a strong, vibrant, healthy place, please know: It is for the healing and transformation of the world.

