

The Many Meanings of Ministry II

Among the now uncountable number of conversations I've had with members and friends of the congregations I've served, are ones with those men and women who are considering the Unitarian Universalist ministry as a career.

More often than not these conversations have been with women or men who are seeing the ministry as a second career. They generally tend to be in their early-to-mid forties and have decided they do not want to spend the next 20+ years of their life doing the same thing they been doing for the previous 20+ years. Of course it all runs much deeper than their just looking a new job. Their call to ministry most often grows out of their involvement and engagement with a UU congregation, along with the direction their spiritual journey has taken them, to the point that the professional ministry feels like the next rightful step for them.

Of the many conversations of this nature that I've had, there is one that especially stands out in my mind. It was with a gentleman at the Nashua UU Church who largely fit the profile I've just described. He was a software engineer who had worked for a couple of the high-tech companies in our part of the world here.

In the course of our discussion I offered the observation that his career up to that point could well work to his advantage were he to serve a UU congregation; particularly one in our Boston area where some of their membership often comes from the corporate world. I went on to suggest that he might even have an advantage over a minister like me, for whom the ministry has been a life-long thing. Except for a few short-term and very part-time teaching gigs here and there, and writing a few books, ministry is all I've ever done career-wise.

So I said something like this to my congregant and aspiring UU minister: "You would have a sense of the career world that some of your congregants would be coming from in a way that I don't. I've never been in the corporate world and I know very little of corporate culture." His response was to sit and stare at me for some five to ten seconds, which seemed like an eternity, before saying, "Well, let me tell you Steve, you haven't missed much!"

Perhaps he was right, but I still wonder sometimes: Has a life-long career in the ministry given me a skewed view of the world and its people? With my 70th

birthday now well in the rear-view mirror, the question is purely academic at this point; but it still floats through my mind at times.

I will say that the thing I've come to treasure most about the ministry is that it has given me an entree into person's lives that various other careers do not generally permit. It has allowed me to see some of my fellow human beings—both individually and together—at their very best; and occasionally at times at far less than their best. It's all part of the mix. As hokey and schlocky as I find the song *My Way*, I can nonetheless connect with a few of the lines Paul Anka wrote for Frank Sinatra: "Regrets, I've had a few, but then again too few to mention." So I won't mention any here today.

This is the second installment of the two sermons I'm doing this year on "The Meanings of Ministry." I gave the first one back in the fall when you were in a much earlier phase of your search process for a settled minister. Your cottage meetings were well underway at that point, giving you the opportunity to offer your Search Committee feedback and ideas as to the kind of minister you felt would serve you best in the years ahead. Now, some four to five months later, and after countless hours put in by your Search Team, you'll be learning of the outcome of their efforts very soon.

In that sermon last fall, to pick up a few pieces of it, I stressed that ministry, in our free-church tradition, is not something a minister "does to" a congregation. Ministry is what happens in the inter-action, in the inter-play, between the minister and the congregation she or he serves; with each fulfilling their respective roles. This is the thread I want to pick up this morning.

What I first want to offer, for the next little bit of time, are what have come to be my four pillars of ministry. They apply, I feel, to both ministers and congregations alike as they pursue a shared mission and live out a shared covenant. I first came across them in the early years of my ministry with the Nashua UU congregation. I hit a rather serious rough patch in getting myself launched there. It happens; no minister or congregation are ever completely immune to the occasional rough patch. So I took part of a summer—back in the early 1990s—to step back a do and little self-inventory as to what I felt I needed to do to get myself in a better place with the congregation I was serving. There were some congregational currents

over which I had little or no control, but I could still focus on the things I *could* do to put our shared ministry in a better place.

One Sunday during that pivotal summer I attended a Sunday service at one of Boston's UU Churches—Kings Chapel. I'd originally intended it as a way of filling up some time before a Red Sox game at Fenway Park I had a ticket for in the afternoon. I do not especially resonate with the theology or style of worship at Kings Chapel, but there is something about its ornate setting that draws me to it on occasion.

As it is, I've completely forgotten everything about the Sox game—but I still remember the sermon I heard that morning. It was one of those gifts you sometimes get right when you need it. The speaker's topic was about four basic rules or maxims for living a meaningful life. As I listened to what he had to say, it occurred to me that they are also four basic guideposts, or four bases to be touched if you will, for having a good ministry. They are printed in your Order of Service for today: Show Up; Tell the Truth; Do What You Do With Intensity; and Don't Get Attached To Outcomes.

I was so taken with the words that I went home and got on my computer—circa 1992—and made me this desk-top sign with those very words. Here it is. I still keep it in front of me some 25 years after I printed it. The fact that it was made with a dot matrix printer attests to that 25 year span.

Buddhism has its Four Noble Truths; these are my Four Noble Guidelines. So, let's take a trip around these bases—as they apply to both ministers and congregants when it comes to their pursuing a shared mission and covenant. I figure a baseball metaphor is appropriate now since Opening Day at Fenway is a week from Tuesday.

The first base: Show Up. Woody Allen once said that 90% of life is just showing up. The number is pretty much the same for ministry. Over the years when once of my congregants will see me performing a routine task like stacking up chairs after a church event, they'll ask: "Is this in your job description?" Well, maybe. A good piece of my job description is to show up, to maintain a presence.

By this I do not mean—as I assume you know—that a minister is to perform every single task or attend to every single thing that needs attending to in the life of a congregation. That is a sure-fire recipe for ministerial burnout; and it disempowers the congregation as well. Actually there are no hard and fast formulas for when a minister shows up, which is why ministry is much more of an art than it is a science.

Showing up means—as just noted—maintaining a presence, making your availability known, being where you need to be when you need to be there.

To flip the coin now, In order to be an engaged member of a congregation where shared ministry is taken seriously—as I've come to see is the case here—then the charge to “show up” is one for the laity as well. Again, it's not just about showing up for the congregational responsibilities you've agreed to take on—crucial as that it is—but also to be a caring and loving presence for you fellow congregants. A healthy congregation is one in which the minister and the member and friends of the congregation develop those ways in which they can present for one another—when and where such a presence is needed.

It has been a joy for me to witness, in just my short time with you, how you have shown up—have you have been available to one another—especially in those times when your love and care has been most needed. This is a gift I feel you have to offer your incoming, settled minister. In my conversations with your prospective candidates I have stressed how well you love and take care of one another.

The Second: Tell the truth. This can be a tricky one for UU ministers. In a more orthodox setting the role of the minister is to proclaim the truth as based on the teachings and practices of a particular faith tradition. It doesn't quite work that way in a liberal religious setting like this one. For a UU minister, “tell the truth” means to speak your own truth and do so in a way that will encourage and challenge those who hear you to seek their own truths as well, whether or not it corresponds with your own.

Telling the truth, for a minister, also applies to his or her role in helping to guide the life of a congregation. It means encouraging the positive aspects seen in congregational life, as well as speaking to any kinds of behaviors or attitudes that

may be detrimental or destructive to a congregation's life. A minister in our faith tradition, then, is called to speak his or her truth on matters of religion and spirituality, as well as any "institutional truths" she or he may feel need to be addressed.

Here again, this charge is for clergy and laity alike. A UU community offers a setting for members and friends to share the truths they have found while respecting and learning from the faith journeys of others. This is the beauty of not insisting upon doctrinal conformity. We call each member and friend to their particular responsibility in determining their spiritual path while also taking inspiration from others. We share, we tell, the truths we have found as a way of ministering to one another.

And what I said about a minister speaking "institutional truths" applies to lay people as well. Another thing I've passed along to prospective ministers is that you are a congregation with a strong democratic spirit—a very widely felt sense of participation in your institutional life. You, many of you, have your strong institutional ideas as to the means by which you'll be together and govern yourselves; about the programs and policies you'll pursue. And, in this aspect of your congregational life, you do speak the truth in love; and this is essential. Differences of opinion are fine when they are offered in the spirit of better determining how we shall be and how we shall act in seeking the greater fulfillment of our mission and covenant.

Next One: Do what you do with intensity. This one is pretty simple. Simple to state anyway, but challenging to do. It really means showing that you care; that you have a certain passion for what you are doing. I have come to see this as a basic rule of leadership in a free religious congregation, for the minister and laity alike: Do what you do with intensity. Passionate commitment, as I've learned, is infectious. If one, or just a few, people can catch fire with an idea it can often spread.

A corollary to this third tenet, I've learned, is that sometimes the best leadership a minister can offer is that when someone comes along with a good and productive idea, and has some good energy around it, then get out of the way. The minister will very likely have to channel that energy at times; that's yet

another role of the minister—to help guide and direct and focus the intensity of some of his or her congregants without stepping on it.

I still fondly recall something said by one of my UU ministerial colleagues some year ago at a ministers' gathering. This was back when small group ministry, or covenant groups, were just getting going in many of our congregations. This colleague said he was skeptical at first as to how well small group ministry would work, but then when he realized how much enthusiasm for it there was in his congregation, he said: "My leadership skills are such that I know when to get in front of a moving parade." Sometimes you'll be the moving parade, and the role of the minister in such a situation is to guide and direct the enthusiasm that is driving it.

Then there's the fourth one: Don't get attached to outcomes. This can be easily misunderstood, but in some ways it is the most important of the four; and it applies in the many areas and arenas in which we live our lives well beyond our congregational involvement. This tenet does not mean you don't care about the outcome of anything you undertake. "Don't get attached to outcomes" has to do with being aware of what you control and what you don't.

To put it another way, in any endeavor you undertake, or on any issue you confront—especially one you may have strong feelings about, if you can tell yourself: I showed up, I told the truth as I saw and knew it, and gave it my best shot—did what I did with intensity, that is; then you are positioned to let the outcome be what it is. If you showed up, told the truth, did what you did with conviction and passion, then you have accomplished the things you can control; and the outcome is the outcome.

As I say, this dynamic applies to many of areas in which we live our lives. When it comes to congregational life—again, for ministers and laypeople alike—it means that a particular outcome will not always be what everyone completely desires. But it also means that we, all of you, remain in this thing together and that you'll continue to show up, tell the truth, and do what you do with intensity because you care deeply about your congregation.

These are some of the guideposts that have helped me along in my journey of ministry. They have served me well; and, when carried forth, have also worked

well within the congregations I have served. And I offer them to you as you will soon move into another chapter in your congregational life with a newly called minister.

I have one more piece of ground to cover before we're finished for today. I said earlier that except for a few teaching gigs, my whole career has been in the ministry. I'll say a bit about that teaching gig here because of what it taught me about the nature of ministry. For a few years, off and on, I taught a course over at U—Mass., Lowell, both in their Continuing Studies program and a couple of times to undergraduates, on (surprise, surprise!) the Beat Generation writers.

It was a fun time, for the most part. I enjoyed the interactions with the students in my classes, for the most part. And that experience gave me a perspective on the difference in the relationship between an instructor and students, and that of a minister and a congregation.

My relationship with my students was, essentially, a contractual one within a defined time frame. I would offer them a certain amount of information and material—both in the classroom and with reading assignments. They were expected to process that information and material and demonstrate to me how well they were receiving it and where they were going with it—by way of our classroom interactions, how well they did on quizzes and exams, the papers they wrote, and the like. In the end I gave them a grade, which allowed them to move one step closer to the degree they were pursuing.

It wasn't nearly as sterile as I just made it sound, I should add. We had some good times in the classroom, and I took a lot of satisfaction in seeing how they responded to this particular aspect of the greater American literary landscape. I tried to create a classroom atmosphere wherein we were a "community of scholars" learning from one another. But in the end the relationship was, as I just described it, a contractual one within a certain time frame.

Ministry, on the other hand, in our free-church tradition, is covenantal and open ended. Yes, your newly called minister will sign a contract having to do with compensation, work time, study leave, and such things as that. But that contract is put in place in order that a covenant may then emerge and develop between him or her and you.

A covenant, within the context of ministry, is a promise the minister and the congregation make to one another for as long as they each and all wish to maintain it. Without getting chapter and verse about it here, I'll say it is a covenant in which the minister and the congregation pledge to one another to bring together their resources, their time, skills, energy, knowledge, love, compassion, and care in order that real ministry can happen. It is more than a contractual agreement, that is to say. It is a pledge to walk together towards the ongoing fulfillment of a commonly shared mission and vision.

Such is the nature of the covenant you will be called into with your settled minister, once the contract is in place. It is a covenant that will call upon all of you to show up, to tell the truth, to do what you do with intensity, and to not be so taken with any one particular outcome that you lose sight of the bigger picture or greater prize.

This is a covenant I have every good reason to believe you are prepared to enter into as "equal persons in the search for beauty, truth, and right." The words are contained in our closing hymn. Let's sing it together.

Stephen Edington
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