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UU Fellowship, San Dieguito

WHAT DO MINISTERS DO AND WHY

This is the first of a two-sermon series about ministry. The second part will be June 10, on the same day the Search Committee makes their report about results from the surveys you completed and the focus groups you attended. You will be interested in knowing that I've already received calls from ministers who might be interested in serving here.

Before talking about ministry, particularly settled ministry, I want to share some ideas about interim ministry. You have been generous and gracious in your acceptance of me. However, I have some malaise when I hear someone say, "We wish we could clone you to become our next minister." Seems to me that's about like wishing you could clone the attorney who helps you write your will or trust documents, so that the same attorney could help you with a case involving a civil suit.

I am talking about specialization. Just as you would not want your internist to be your surgeon, so the interim minister should not become the settled minister. I am engaged in a specialized ministry to help congregations get ready for a settled ministry. In this case, namely my work with you, I've had the particularly problem of being only a short-term "fill in" interim minister. However, I have felt there were some specific areas which I could address.

Much of what interim ministers do depends on the situation. For example, when I went to be Interim Minister at Santa Barbara the congregation was facing a

serious conflict. My primary role there was to try to help people hear one another; to help people realize that there are various perspectives, all of which are honorable. My role there was to help begin the healing process.

After that I served for two years as Consulting Minister at Laguna Beach. That congregation had reached a plateau of contentment. My role there was to help them focus and move with renewed vigor into the future. Later on I served for one year as Interim Minister at Pacific Unitarian Church. As I listened to people there, I became aware that they really needed someone simply to care, to help them realize their strengths. So, Interim ministry is different in different places.

When I came here in January, I felt like the primary thing needed was stability: As I heard the Board and others talk, seemed to me you needed stability in Sunday Services, so I planned six straight Sundays without a break. Seemed to me you needed some organizational help. I've tried with some success along those lines. I also felt that a significant need here was to be aware of people; to listen to their stories—stories not only about this Congregation about their personal lives. That is why I visited in homes, particularly of the older members. ***You should not expect your settled minister to do that kind of visitation in homes. That is a specialized ministry which I believe was required.***

One of my primary roles here has been to help you think about moving forward. I've had only very modest success with this because I am here only a

very short time, with Rev. Tom Owen-Towle coming for a full year. There have been some occasions when I've thought that no matter what, I wouldn't be here long enough to have any significant effect. So, I hope more than anything that you know I care about you.

Well, that's enough about Interim Ministry. Let's move on to ministry, as I respond to the question in the title of this sermon, "What do ministers do and why?"

Several years ago the "New York Times" carried an article about the election of the Episcopal Bishop for New York. I've lost the clipping, but do have my notes. That article began with these three sentences:

"What does it take to be an effective leader? And what can one reasonably expect from the people one would lead? These are perennial questions for religious leaders."

Right on! These are "perennial questions" about religious leadership, whether the Episcopal Bishop of New York or the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Dieguito. One of the realities facing religious leaders is the substantial difference between the authority or power once given to religious leaders and the authority given now. While the Pope may get "good press" even Roman Catholics do not agree with him. The days of the political power of Cardinal Richelieu or Cotton Mather are long gone and good riddance.

For the most part religious leaders today have only the authority granted by the people they lead. However, that can be dangerous. There is an irreverent web

site called “Real live preacher. Com.” Not long ago that site carried what the author called “An Open Letter from a Pastor to his Congregation.” I won’t read it all, but when it comes to the authority granted a minister from the people in the congregation, these words are appropriate:

“Maybe you want a preacher in stripes and suspenders with white gloves and nothing much to say. A person with a perpetual smile, twisting balloon bunnies and handing out theological la-dee-das to the smiling crowds. Is that what you want?”

Obviously the point is that while the minister’s authority comes from the congregation, congregants need to be very cautious less they turn their minister into a spokesman for the status quo, or nothing more than a mascot. My sense, however is that authenticity is far more significant than authority.

Both authenticity and authority are difficult to define. What is considered authentic by one person would be considered authoritarian by another.

Authenticity defies objective analysis as does ministry. In fact this whole subject of authentic ministry defies specificity and clarity. Generally speaking authentic ministry is similar to what a Supreme Court Justice once said about another matter: “I know it when I see it.”

In over 40 years of parish ministry and 8 years as a district executive, I am increasingly aware that ministerial leadership is a highly subjective topic. What appeals to one person is considered anathema by another. I have noticed how different people respond to sermons. For one person the sermon was “The finest” or “just what I needed.” For another the same sermon was mediocre at best.

If “art is in the eye of the beholder,” surely sermons are in the ear of the hearer.

Which brings me to the reality that we Unitarian Universalist want each person to engage in his or her own “search for truth and meaning.” Each of you is responsible for your own religious understandings. If that is true, then what is the role of the clergy?

The short answer is simply that the clergy are called, ordained, installed and supported so that they, the clergy—ministers---can give more direct attention to matters of faith and the congregation. To say it another way: Ministers are expected to provide a major portion of time to consideration of some of the deep questions of life and death, to think about religious matters, to consider how best a congregation can be organized. The minister is expected to do this full time while lay people by the very nature of their lives can only provide part time to the same kinds of considerations.

Perhaps a bad analogy will be helpful. I suppose each one of us, if given the proper training and manuals, could repair our own automobile. However we do not do so; but take our car to a mechanic who has given full time and study to learn about and repair automobiles. By the same token, ministers go to seminary and study and learn in order to provide leadership for the congregation.

What do ministers do and why? Ministers attempt, on the basis of study and experience and expertise to provide leadership which enables and encourages members of congregations to do their own faith work. *The Unitarian Universalist*

Pocket Guide uses several analogies to describe the work of the minister. One suggests that the minister is to be a “storyteller,” to relate tales of the past, present and future to the people in order to provide clarity about life.

Another analogy used by the “Pocket Guide” is that the professional church leader is a “midwife” to help give birth to the life already abiding in the congregation. Another analogy is that the minister is a “juggler” working to help bring order out of chaos. I like this description, also from the “Pocket Guide.”

“...in private moments with parishioners and in public forums with the congregations, (ministers) are asked to hold in tension a multitude of truths. With hands and heart (ministers) try to bring balance to the sometimes conflicting needs in faith communities.” (Beth Graham, “Our Ministry,m” in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket guide*, p.26.)

In addition to these three analogies—“storyteller,” “midwife,” and “juggler,”--mentioned in the *Pocket Guide*, I suggest another two. One is minister as “gardener.” As a “gardener” the minister is attempting to help the congregation be the kind of place where people may grow or develop their personal and corporate religious consciousness.

Another analogy came to my mind a couple of years ago when I heard an interview on public radio. The interviewer was talking with a playwright whose Broadway play had been successful. However the playwright expressed concern that perhaps the success of the play had more to do with a famous actress—Carol Burnett—than with his writing. He wanted his play to be successful on its own merits, not because of a celebrity actress.

Seems to me successful plays require both good writing and good acting. Even the best play without good acting will probably appear only mediocre; and even the best dramatists, with a poor vehicle will probably have limited success. Without stretching the analogy to the point of allegory, I suggest that ministers are in some sense playwright; laity are the actors and actresses.

The philosopher/theologian Soren Kierkegaard once used a similar analogy. In writing about worship, Kierkegaard drew a clear distinction between worship and theatre. He said too often people confuse the two, thinking of clergy as the actors, God as the prompter, and the congregation as the audience.

Kierkegaard said this is a poor understanding of the Sunday Service and of ministry. Rather he suggested the clergy are the prompters, the congregation the actors, and God is the audience, watching to see how well we act out what we say we believe.

My understanding is that ministers, based on education and experience, attempt to provide insights as well as questions; comfort as well as challenge, organizational skill as well as pastoral care, all aimed at helping people act well in the drama of life.

Whenever ministers are understood only as actors, providing entertainment for congregants, there is a very real and present danger. It is the danger of manipulation. Here's what I mean. A few years ago the Library of Congress published for a short time a magazine, *Civilization*. The magazine included a

regular column about theater. In the February/March, 1998 issue the columnist talks about Alfred Hitchcock's work. Here is what Hitchcock said to a colleague while they were filming 'North by Northwest.' Listen to Hitchcock:

"The audience is like a giant organ and you and I are playing. At one moment we play *this* note on them and get *this* reaction, and then we play *that* chord and they react *that* way." (Terry Teachout, "The Genius of Pure Effect," *Civilization*, February/March, 1998, pp. 43-44)

That is manipulation! It is deliberately attempting to control the feelings and thoughts of other people. All one has to do is watch some of the television evangelists to see this kind of manipulation. This is always what happens when ministers are expected to be actors or entertainers.

What do ministers do and why? Sometimes as playwrights the minister needs to be a friend; but remember a true friend is someone who will not only provide comfort but will also tell you what you least want to hear.

What do ministers do and why? Ministers comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Ministers attempt to help people live through all the irrationalities of life, most frequently NOT by giving answers but by the simple, but very important act of presence.

What do ministers do and why? Ministers encourage and challenge congregations to take risks, to exist in a state of "holy discontent" in order to share the good word of liberal religious understanding.

What do ministers do and why? One more analogy: In a very real way ministers and laity are in a dance:

The dance of life in the face of death;
The dance of hope in the face of despair;
The dance of challenge in the face of contentment;
The dance of exuberance in the face of caution.

All these and much, much more. Sometimes ministers and congregants step on each other toes. Sometimes we miss the rhythm of the music. Sometimes we grow weary in well doing. And yet we dance because if we stop dancing our muscles will grow flabby and our witness will flag and this Congregation will become little more than a historical museum.

The Search Committee is working to find an excellent minister for this Congregation. Your new minister may be a “storyteller,” a “midwife,” a “juggler,” a “gardener,” a “playwright,” a mixture of some or all of these, or maybe even something not mentioned.

My concluding word is a plea. I beg you to be aware of invidious comparisons. Beware of comparing your new minister to other ministers you have known. Beware of comparing your new minister to me or to Rev. Owen-Towle. Different ministers have different gifts. Comparison is a blind alley.

If you find yourself thinking or saying, “Well, Anne Hines did so and so, but our new minister...” Or if you find yourself thinking, “Kathy Hurd always did...but what about our new minister...” Or if you find yourself thinking, “Jim Grant did....” be careful. If you find yourself making those kinds of comparisons you will be looking backward rather than forward. Worse still, you will not encourage your new minister to be authentic.

This Congregation has a bright future, ripe with possibilities. I have enjoyed being with you for this short time. I'll soon be gone, then Rev. Owen-Towle will be with you a year, then you will have a new minister. You and your new minister can actualize the grand potential of this Congregation. Please do not jeopardize your future by looking backward.