

10 June, 2007
UU Fellowship San Dieguito

THE EYE OF THE TARGET

As most of you know the Search Committee has held “focus groups” and conducted surveys in an attempt to discover the kind of minister and ministry you would like for this Congregation. Today, I want to share some thoughts with you from the minister’s perspective. Here is a “short hand” way of saying what I hope to say . The Focus Groups and surveys have asked, “What kind of minister does the Congregation want?” This sermon will be “What kind of congregation does a minister want?” I realize that is an over-simplification, but you get the point.

What follows is based on my experiences, which I do not claim to be universal experiences of all ministers. I was ordained in 1960, but began doing ministry before graduating college or seminary. I have about 50 years of ministerial experience either as a senior minister, associate minister, campus minister or district executive.

What I will do now is share a few stories, based on Congregations I have known, which illustrate some of the positive and some of the negative experiences I and possibly other ministers have faced.

Early in my career, a congregation insisted they would provide housing—not a financial housing allowance, but housing. They drove us by a lovely home which seemed just right. Later on they learned that house was not available, so moved us into a small house which had been converted from a barn. The house

had two floors, but the stairwell was too small to take furniture upstairs, so we could not use the upper floors.

In that same Congregation I learned that a minister could share some basic information without fear. Here's what happened. That congregation had two Sunday Services plus a Wednesday evening Bible Study. Well, I was young and it was all I could do to prepare two services per Sunday. So I decided for the Wednesday Bible Study I would simply use notes from a seminary course on the prophecy called Isaiah in the Jewish Scriptures.

One Wednesday I got to a passage about a young woman who was pregnant who would bear a son. That passage was later mis-translated and used as a kind of proof that Jesus was born of a virgin, not 'young woman.' So I shared with that group my understanding of how words can be mistranslated and misinterpreted. That evening one of the members brought his elderly aunt to the study. He said on the way home the elderly aunt said, "You know, that young preacher is telling us what we should have had the good sense to know long ago."

I learned there the importance of visiting in homes, a lesson which has stayed with me for these 50 years. I have learned so much from conversations with people in their homes. More than that, they have an opportunity to experience me as someone other than a "preacher in the pulpit on Sundays."

One of the things I have learned is that Congregations can help to make or to form ministers. When I was a young minister serving as an Associate in a historic

Congregation I made the mistake of “popping off” in a letter. I wrote a too quick response in a too quick way, without knowing the person to whom I was writing.

That person used parts of my poorly-written letter, parts taken out of context, to accuse me in public of being a “pinko” if not a “Communist.” I made front page news among some of the extreme right-wing papers throughout the South.

The Senior Minister and other members of that Congregation helped me learn my mistake, helped me learn how I could do better, most of all were supportive, even while pointing out my mistake. They helped to shape me.

Often congregations have ministers who are inexperienced, who make mistakes, as I did. Congregations can help to shape the inexperienced minister into a fine minister.

In another Congregation I learned the value of not being manipulated by someone who had an “ax to grind.” I was serving as a student associate minister in a congregation. There were people in the Congregation who did not like the Minister. One day, in the men’s room, one of those people stopped me and said, “If you will join with us, we can get Rev. So-and-So fired, and you could become our minister. WE like you.” I was shocked, backed away and said, I want nothing to do with this, I am not going to be part of anything like that.”

I went out in the hall and was stopped by someone else, asking about the religious education program. About that time I saw a man come out of the

bathroom. He was one of the Minister's closest friends. He had been in one of the stalls in the bathroom and heard that conversation. I realized how easily I could have been manipulated and could have lost my job, and possibly my ministerial standing.

Among some negative experiences I have had are related to the tools needed for ministry. One congregation wanted me to become their minister. The Committee was very complimentary, assuring me that anything I needed would be provided. I specifically asked for a good typewriter and got the response, "no problem."

When I arrived and moved into the office there was no typewriter. I asked the Administrator and she took me to a room where things for the upcoming rummage sale were stored. There were several old typewriters, and I was told the Committee had invited to select whichever one I wanted. All were used, donated, and not much good! Ministers cannot work without proper tools. Enough said!

I should say that one of the most positive things which happened to me in that same Congregation was the way they cared for me. I have a tendency, as you may have noticed, to work hard—sometimes to work too hard. The Committee on Ministry in that Congregation taught me about self care. They insisted that I take at least one and one-half days per week away from the office and official duties. During my time in that same congregation I injured my back, resulting in months

of therapy and finally surgery. Then, I had the bad luck of having a clot from the surgery get into my lungs causing an embolus, which required an even longer period of bed rest. The Congregation arranged for me to have three months off to recuperate.

I have had some negative experiences with congregations. One Congregation wanted me to become their minister. I asked not to be considered because I didn't think I wanted to be their minister. They insisted and encouraged me with salary and commendations to come. I was there only a few months and I realized that they really did not want a Minister, they wanted a mascot. We never actually had conflict, I just learned through their passive behavior that I was expected more to be a kind of "showpiece" for the community than a minister.

One reality about this issue is that ministers, as I said two weeks ago, should not only comfort the afflicted but afflict the comfortable. Sometimes congregations want to be comforted but not challenged. I realize there is a very fine line between challenging and confronting. My experience has been that ministers do better to try to tell the truth, tell the truth straight but without rancor.

One of the key topics which can make people feel less than comfortable is money. I have had the privilege of working in some upper-middle class, in one or two instances even affluent congregations. I have learned, certainly in the UU Congregations I have served, that people do not want the minister to talk about money. However, the reality is that no congregation can offer programs or

services which congregants do not provide. Sometimes the minister is called upon to remind and encourage and challenge congregants in financial commitment. My sense is that is true here. This Congregation does not get the financial support which I believe you are capable of giving.

This whole matter of challenging people is related to something else I have learned in every congregation I have served. Namely, for the most part, people expect the minister to be a person of integrity who will take a stand. People expect the minister not to conform to the lowest common denominator, but neither to be angrily confrontive.

When I was associate minister in two congregations in the South during the days of the civil rights struggles, I learned that people would not always agree with my stand about civil and human rights, but they also did not condemn me. I know of ministers who lost their jobs because of their open encouragement of civil rights. That never happened to me.

To be sure I got “called on the carpet” once or twice. In one instance I went before a state legislative committee to ask that the state parks be kept open which meant open on an integrated basis. My name and testimony was included the next morning in an article in the local paper. I was called and asked to drop by the office of one of the leading and most influential members of the Congregation. He explained that not everyone agreed with me, and hinted at retribution, which never came.

People did not always like what I stood for, but with one or two exceptions I was never threatened for speaking my mind with integrity. My experience is that most people, at least in the congregations I have served, expect the Minister to exercise integrity even if they don't like what the minister says.

I'll share one other negative experience which has been true particularly in the Unitarian Universalist congregations I have served. For reasons which I do not understand people seem to be hesitant to share their names. There is only one minister, but there are many congregants. The minister wants to be personal and greet you personally. When your new minister comes; no don't wait that long, when Rev. Tom Owen-Towle comes in August, be sure to tell him your name; do so several times.

I want to conclude with just a couple of ideas about the Readings which I have chosen for today. These relate to my experience as a minister, and the kinds of congregations which I believe most ministers would like to serve.

The first reading is Lincoln's story after having been confronted by some rather pious ministers. My sense is most ministers hope the congregation will expect the minister to have and exercise a sense of humor. Moreover the minister will hope the congregation has a sense of humor. There used to be a popular saying among some churches, "The family that prays together, stays together." So far as congregations go, I suggest the "congregation which laughs together stays together."

The second and third readings from T.S. Eliot and Henri Nouwen are reminders to congregants that one of the important ways a minister can minister is by being present with people through life's irrationalities. Among other things that means that congregants need to keep the minister informed. I don't know how many times, particularly in Unitarian Universalist congregations, I have learned too late that someone has been in the hospital, or had a death in the family. One of the ways a minister can serve you is by sharing your times of hardship.

The final reading from drama critic, Richard Eber is simply a reminder to congregants that most ministers expect to be seen as a person, not a role. I realize, of course that one of the occupational hazards of ministry is failure to allow one's self to be real, to be a real person, to be a real person who feels and hurts and laughs just like everyone else. Said another way: Attorneys and financial planners and other professions have clients. A minister has a community and wants to be accepted as part of the community. To be sure with some specific tasks, which I talked about two weeks ago. I thank you for welcoming me into your community during this short time we've had together.

Too briefly, and in summary, here are some things a minister looks for in a Congregation.

- ++ A minister expects the congregation to provide the tools necessary for the work.
- ++ A minister expects the congregation to want to hear the truth, to be challenged in an appropriate way.

- ++ A minister wants to be a minister, not a mascot.
- ++ A minister hopes congregants will not only allow but encourage the minister to care for them during the crises of life.
- ++ A minister expects a congregation which provides sufficient financial support for what the congregants say they want.
- ++ A minister wants the congregation to expect to be challenged, without rancor; to be encouraged to aspire to reach the congregation's potential.
- ++ A minister hopes congregants will share their names, often.

Readings for the Service, June 10, 2007

One day, after being visited by a group of pious clergy, President Lincoln told the story of a little boy who sculpted a beautiful church, replete with pews and pulpit, all made from mud. When asked, "Where's the preacher?" the little boy replied, "I ran out of mud!"

"T.S. Eliot's sentence about poets applies to ministers: "The essential advantage for (a minister) is not, to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory."

"The great illusion of leadership is to think that (humans) can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there. Our lives are filled with examples which tell us that leadership asks for understanding and that understanding requires sharing. ..."
(Henri J.M. Nouwen)

These words about being a drama critic apply to ministers: "Well, for one thing it is a perch and not an identity. Of all the jokes about madmen who thought they were Napoleon, the most grave and incurable instance was that of Napoleon himself. To confuse oneself with the job would be to stifle the only useful thing one can possibly bring to it: an individual and spontaneous point of view. If you think you are an institution you will write like one." (Richard Eber)