

It's Not All About Me

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As most of you are probably aware, I will be taking a Sabbatical Leave beginning a month from now on November 1, and lasting through next March. As is common in Unitarian Universalist congregations, my Letter of Agreement with you entitles me to one month of Sabbatical Leave for each year served as your minister. I have now completed five years with you, and so I will be spending five months doing something different – enjoying a real change of pace that I hope and expect to recharge my batteries and equip me with the physical, emotional, and spiritual energy I'll need for my next five years of serving you.

Because this is your first experience as a congregation with ministerial sabbatical, and because it has fairly significant implications for congregational life, I will be spending two Sunday services – today and next week – talking about the sabbatical period and what it means for me and for you.

Many of you have asked me about my plans for while I'm away, and I have responded with varying degrees of detail. I would like to share with all of you in a bit more detail what my plans are. But not today. That will come next week. Today I want to focus more on you because, as the sermon title says, it's not all about me.

My being gone for five months, through the heart of the church year, presents a great challenge and a great opportunity for you as a congregation. This will be a wonderful chance for all of you to practice what we preach about shared ministry. I am your professional minister, but even in my absence, ministry here will continue. One way to look at this sabbatical period is as a test of how well I've done at "giving the ministry away," and assuring that it's not all about me.

I first talked with you about this concept of shared ministry five-and-a-half years ago, even before you called me as your minister – about an hour or two before to be exact. It was the final Sunday of my Candidating Week here, and I wanted to articulate my sense of what ministry is about, and the importance of understanding ministry as a shared enterprise. I'll be repeating this morning some of what I said then. The fact that I feel comfortable reaffirming that vision of ministry now reflects the fact that it has been borne out in my experience with you over these five years.

The word 'minister' comes from the Latin *ministrare*, which means 'to serve.' As a professional minister, my job is to serve a congregation that calls me for that purpose. But that is not the end of the story on ministry. As members of a religious community, you all serve one another and the community in many ways, and so you are part of the ministry as well. In her book, *Churchworks: A Well-Body Book for Congregations*, Anne Odin Heller refers to called ministers as "first among equals."

She says that the co-equals, along with the called minister, are 1) members of the congregation, particularly those who serve the well-being of their fellow members' bodies and spirits; 2) the Board, who are elected and empowered by the community to work and govern on its behalf; and 3) the rest of the paid staff, who perform the essential tasks for which they are engaged.

A healthy ministry – that is, the healthy life of the Fellowship – depends on all these equals doing their parts, in cooperation and coordination with one another. It's an intricate dance, requiring good communication and diligent attention from all involved. You need to talk

to one another, and you need to listen to one another, so you can share your combined gifts and energies in such a way as to best serve this gathered community.

This wasn't always the prevailing view of ministry. Traditionally, ministry has been considered the job of *the* minister. And one traditional way of delineating the role of minister is with the four P's: Priest, Prophet, Pastor, Preacher.

The traditional role of the priest was to serve as intermediary between God and the people. Only the priest had access to the Holy Scriptures. Only the priest could perform rituals and lead worship. Only he (and it was always a he) could hear confessions and grant absolution. Only he had direct access to what was holy. This changed with the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers. The idea is that all may have access to the ultimate resources of the religious life, and that all have the responsibility of shaping their faith in response to those resources.

For Martin Luther this meant primarily access to the scriptures in understandable language. Our Unitarian ancestors took the notion even further. The Transcendentalists replaced the authority of the Bible with the authority of personal experience – direct access to the Divine through nature and intuition. Others introduced and emphasized the use of reason through scientific approaches as a way of better understanding existence.

This brings us to a present in which we acknowledge that no one – neither clergy, nor scientist, nor scholar – has a monopoly on truth and understanding. We must each gather our wisdom wherever we find it; from personal experience, from “experts”, from the stories of those who have gone before, and of those who walk beside us.

Our reading this morning spoke of “giving away the ministry.” Well, today's Unitarian Universalist minister can readily give away – or at least share – virtually all of the so-called priestly duties. Our job is not so much dispensing wisdom, or granting access to the Divine, as it is walking together with our companions in a common quest for wisdom, seeking together ways of experiencing the Holy. What professional ministers have going for them is that they are able to devote a large amount of time and energy to religious pursuits, and they are often aware of how and where to find a variety of helpful resources.

But one thing has particularly struck me these past five years. I've led a number of Adult Religious Education Classes such as “Building Your Own Theology” and “Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography.” And I've continually been impressed with the richness that participants bring from their own lives, their own experience, their own reflection. I'm sure I have learned as much from those classes as anyone. Revelation is not sealed, and it sometimes comes from unexpected places. We need to be open to such gifts, wherever they come from.

What about minister as prophet? The traditional role of the prophet is to speak for God, to give human voice to God's will. Certainly the prophets of the Hebrew Bible purported to be passing along Divine messages directly from on high. The idea of minister as prophet, then, once again assumes some special clergy pipeline to God. On the other hand, we can take a more liberal, humanistic view of prophecy. Rather than a direct messenger from God, a prophet is one who can point to and interpret the signs of the times; who can point out where things are going awry, and what may be required to get back on course.

Certainly that is a part of the job of a minister. But still, to concede that role to a single religious leader is to attribute to him or her powers and abilities beyond those available to the common person. Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams introduced the concept of the prophethood of all believers. He writes:

We have long held to the idea of the *priesthood* of all believers. . . We also need a firm belief in the *prophethood* of all believers. The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to a few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.

I commend our Social Action Committee for their work of trying to focus and channel the prophetic impulses of members and friends in the most productive directions available. With all the wide variety of social justice interests and involvements of our membership, that's a challenging task. I encourage you to look to them for leadership and guidance.

As for the ministerial role of Pastor, seminary training includes course work in pastoral care and counseling. We learn the skills of listening, of assessing, of giving comfort, guidance, and encouragement. And I think it's a good idea to have a professional with those skills available to the community. But there's really nothing magical about basic pastoral care. Nearly anyone with a modicum of compassion, empathy, and communication skills can be taught the tools needed to be present and helpful in difficult times.

Certainly all members of the community should care for one another whenever the opportunity or need arises. But I think it's especially important and valuable to have an organized system for meeting the needs of the Fellowship, like that provided by our Caring Committee. What a comfort, even in the good times, to know that if and when troubles do arise, there are loving, compassionate friends ready to respond. In my mind, the more who are willing to share in the pastoral aspect of ministry, the better. The Caring Committee will continue to serve you capably during my absence. And if emergencies arise beyond the scope of their abilities, Dolly Litz in the Fellowship Office will be prepared to provide referrals to additional pastoral resources.

Probably the most visible part of a minister's role is that of preacher and worship leader. It's an awesome responsibility to try and present a worthy message week after week. We sometimes wonder what kind of impact we're really having.

Several years ago a reader of the *British Weekly* wrote a letter to the editor as follows: "Dear Sir! I notice that ministers seem to set a great deal of importance on their sermons and spend a great deal of time in preparing them. I have been attending services quite regularly for the past thirty years and during that time, if I estimate correctly, I have listened to no less than three thousand sermons. But, to my consternation, I discover I cannot remember a single one of them. I wonder if a minister's time might be more profitably spent on something else?"

The letter kicked up quite a storm of angry responses for some weeks. The pros and cons of sermons were tossed back and forth until, finally, one letter ended the debate. This letter said: "My Dear Sir: I have been married for thirty years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals – mostly of my wife's cooking. Suddenly I have discovered that I cannot remember the

menu of a single meal. And yet, I received nourishment from every one of them. I have the distinct impression that without them I would have starved to death long ago.”

And so, we preachers hope that we can offer some degree of nourishment – intellectual, emotional, or spiritual – through our weekly efforts. But, in keeping with the analogy, no matter how nourishing, the same meal over and over is sure to become tiresome. And so, the custom of sharing the pulpit is a way of keeping things fresh. Our Sunday Services Committee does an excellent job of providing a rich variety of well-balanced worship experiences throughout the year, especially all through the summer.

The committee has graciously taken on the huge task of arranging for a combination of guest speakers and lay-led services to cover every Sunday for the five months that I’ll be away. I hope any and all of you will be as gracious if you are approached with the opportunity of helping out in some small way, whether it be by the Sunday Services Committee, the Caring Committee, the Hospitality Teams, the Membership Committee, or any other of the many sharers of the ministry. If everyone pitches in, this Fellowship will surely continue to thrive.

I want to finish up this morning by mentioning a particular way in which you can not only contribute to the ministry of the Fellowship, but directly experience its benefits for yourself as well. I’m talking about our Small Group Ministry program. Small groups establish and nurture themselves in their own beloved community. They provide an opportunity for group members to build strong relationships with each other and with the larger organization of which they are a part.

Small groups encourage people to talk, learn, work and play together over time. Members may tell their life stories, offer support, and engage in work to serve the larger community. Groups offer expanding opportunities for growth, caring and connection within the congregation. Each person is treated equitably. Each has a voice and is heard. And each person is respected for her or his own intrinsic humanity.

You may already be a part of one or more small groups that play that kind of role in your life. It might be the choir, or a book discussion group, or a women’s group, or whatever. But if you don’t have any such groups, or if you do but could use another one, let me tell you about a few ways to find out more about our Small Group Ministry program. First, there are purple brochures that you can pick up after the service, along with registration forms. Second, there will be an informational potluck dinner here at the Fellowship on Friday, October 28, at 6:00 p.m. Or, you can talk to me or Small Group Ministry Coordinator Bev Henshaw.

The real message I want to leave with you this morning is the assurance that ministry will indeed continue here while I’m away, and I will joyfully resume my place in that intricate dance when the time comes for me to return. I’d like to close with the following words from Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield that capture the spirit that I hope will characterize your ministry together:

The things that matter most in our lives are not fantastic or grand. They are the moments when we touch one another, when we are there in the most attentive or caring way. This simple and profound intimacy is the love that we all long for. These moments of touching and being touched can become a foundation for a path with heart, and they take place in the most immediate and direct way. Mother Theresa put it like this: “In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.”

May there be great love in all that you do.