

UUMAN your annual stewardship drive has begun. A weary joke about the minister's stewardship sermon calls it "The Sermon on the Amount". You are being invited to gather in your caring circles to learn what UUMAN's 2016-2017 financial future looks like, and to add your two-cents, hopefully more, in the form of a pledge for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

As a *settled* minister for thirteen years, my approach to the *sermon on the amount* was to take another approach. The standard sermon felt like singing for my own supper. Professional ministry is the biggest ticket in the budget. I can't make that line item into anything else. However as an *interim* minister, I'm charged with singing for my successor's supper, which isn't hard at all. I believe in professional religious leadership, not only that of the resident spiritual leader, but also the religious education director, music director, office administrator—the entire congregational payroll. I believe in compensating staff generously for the work they do. I depend on them. So do you, and in my opinion you've got some of the best.

My colleague the late Gordon McKeeman's meditation is a staple of ordinations, installations and sermons like this one. *Ministry is a quality of relationship between and among human beings that beckons forth hidden possibilities.* That sums it up. I could stop right now, but I have around twenty minutes, so I'll keep going. Like all institutions, religious community has a terminology. *Shared ministry*, or *sharing the ministry*, is shorthand for what Rev. McKeeman put into lyrical language. Shared ministry encompasses minister, staff, lay leaders, children, youth, and absolutely everyone else in a congregation—even visitors, although we don't ask you to pledge.

Stewardship is broad terminology for *everything* a congregation does to sustain its existence. *Financial* stewardship, the object of pledge campaigns, is an element of the whole. Buddhism might call it a finger pointing at the moon, not to be mistaken for the moon itself. Financial stewardship is an obvious aspect of shared ministry, but it's far from the last word, let alone the *only* word. A congregation's budget is a *human* document in the same sense that *ministry* is the human *embrace* of UUMAN's abiding relationship with the holy.

If all goes as well as it has to date, in a matter of months, you will be calling UUMAN's next *settled* minister. What a minister does between Sunday services is invisible much of the time. This morning I mean to shine my little light on the bang for your buck that you get where a minister is concerned—not so much because of the services we provide, as because of the *spirit* underscoring ministerial vocation—a vocation that you, the congregation, are called to

share. No minister ministers alone. Ministers come and go. *Shared ministry* gives visible shape, continuity and therefore meaning to the *invisible* holy.

There's a dream package every congregation wants from a minister. In no particular order...

Stimulating preacher, inspiring teacher; well-educated; widely read; conversant with a number of religious and spiritual traditions; inclusive of the needs and entities that contribute to diverse Unitarian Universalist community; observant of pastoral care—visiting and counseling, but also rites of passage, i.e. ceremonies of marriage, memorials, child dedications; civic involvement—social justice work, interfaith relations, and denominational concerns (media skills increasingly desired); good with children, adults and elders (religious education experience a bonus there); sociable but not a meddler; growth-oriented, will attract new members, especially young families; charismatic leader—inspires and motivates the congregation; administrative aptitude, pertaining especially to the Board, Committees and Staff; collaborative, not authoritarian; a peacemaker, not an antagonist. Models self-care. Gets plenty of rest. Vegan optional.

Have I left anything out?

Oh yeah, *musical skills*. Divinity students at my seminary were frequently invited to preach in nearby congregations at the reduced, not-yet-ordained rate. One congregation with musical ambitions wanted to know if I could play the cello like their last guest minister did. What I said aloud was, No. What I said inside, and wisely kept there was, No, *but once in college I played a prostitute in Brecht's Threepenny Opera*.

Shared ministry has a history by that name. In the mid-90s, progressive Christians introduced and spread the idea that a congregation's *ministry* is in the hands of the entire congregation, not only the professional minister. Shared ministry was seen as a reciprocal, sacrament. All were invited to contribute their gifts and talents in service to God. The people who created the shared ministry brand had the advantage of Christian story to anchor their books and workshops. They hadn't reckoned on Unitarian Universalists. We had to do some translating. A good question for pondering here is *What story anchors us*?

On one hand, the shared ministry concept made sound UU sense, given our democratic principles. On the other hand, our besetting sin has long been a penchant for micro-management. Negotiations over who was sharing what could get touchy. There were turf wars. More than one minister learned the hard way. More than one congregation did too. What took several years to realize is that shared ministry must be a balancing of give and take between control and surrender—a spiritual discipline we needed to learn.

There used to be a monthly journal for ministers called *First Day's Record*. On the first day of each month, a nominated group of ministers would submit an essay about whatever was on their minds concerning their calling. These were compiled and sent to subscribers. FDR was a labor of love, not a revenue source. I subscribed, and later was nominated to write. Not long after, the publication folded, but that was because the editor retired, not because of anything I said.

I describe the distinction between the laity and the Reverend this way: *Yes, we're all in the same boat, but one of us is paid to hang her feet over the side—and sometimes, there are sharks.* Sure, the minister is where the buck stops, but the congregation is where the buck starts. Sharing ministry is not just about divvying the workload, or helping out the minister. Shared ministry is a heightened mutual consciousness. To illustrate, I will call upon excerpts from my favorite submission to First Days' Record, "Letters to the Minister" by Rev. David Rankin, followed by a single entry from the UU e-list for lay leaders.

ON THEOLOGY... Dear Rev. Rankin: I heard your sermon on the Virgin Mary. It was shocking and disgusting. If Mary was not a virgin, then Jesus was not the Son of God and the Savior of all mankind.

Dear Sir: I think you are on to something.

Maybe no one ever said that to Rev. Rankin in real life. Then again, maybe someone did. A newcomer once asked me in all seriousness whether Unitarian Universalist ministers are celibate. Catholicism was her only reference point. When you've stopped laughing, think for a moment. Being religious liberals does not make Unitarian Universalists exceptional. However it complicates explaining our faith to seekers whose experience of religion to date may have conventional roots.

The Unitarian Universalist heritage is chock full of forebears you'd have over for dinner if only they hadn't died a few centuries ago. Start anywhere you like along the spectrum of voices that have made us the people we are today. But do start. Shared ministry is shared passion for this faith. *Be evangelists.* Just please *don't* perpetuate glib misunderstandings like *No one here is a Christian*, or my personal teeth-gritter, *UUs can believe anything they want.*

COME SUNDAYS...

Dear Rev. Rankin: I object to prayer, the mention of God, and the traditional hymns we sing on Sunday morning... We have outgrown these relics from the past. Let's get modern in our approach to religion.

Dear Sir: The best of the modern includes the best from the past... Like the program for a great symphony orchestra, we look for the truth and beauty that abides in every work.

Newcomers to Unitarian Universalism often are surprised and delighted by the extent of lay participation in our services, for instance the worship associate's reflection. *You mean somebody from the congregation might deliver a sermon? How unusual!* For us it's not. It's liturgy.

My minister's philosophy of worship is based on that good old-fashioned church word. *Liturgy translates to the work of the people.* Ministers, worship associates and musicians pour themselves into creating smooth-flowing experiences of the holy. We are our own worst critics. Slip-ups are inevitable, as I think you would agree. Sunday services at UUMAN are not performances subject to clapping or critique. To the people who labor over them, they are... in a timely word, Valentines. Shared ministry understands Sunday services are gateways to the fullness of Unitarian Universalism at UUMAN.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Dear Rev. Rankin: The world is coming apart... I would like to hear sermons on serious themes... The problems we face are immense.

Dear Madam: Within the last six weeks I have spoken on death, the Holocaust, and nuclear war. If you have a more serious subject, I hope you will keep it to yourself...

The problems we face *are* immense. Add to the list, systemic racism, Islamophobia, environmental degradation, transphobia, oppression in any form and all else of deepest social concern. We pulpit people sometimes feel like oppressors *ourselves* raising these subjects repeatedly. However, Unitarian Universalism is an activist faith, especially for younger generations who neither know, nor *want* their religion any other way. Shared ministry is willingness to step outside the congregational comfort zone... to take to the streets, to the media, the state capitol, wherever the public square calls us to speak Unitarian Universalism out loud.

Shared ministry is a mutual covenant to live the meaning of transformational human community.

Art Ungar and I were UUs in California. I could hear his satiric humor operating behind the scenes of his response to a question on the lay leaders' list. Sad to say, not everyone got the joke.

Does anyone out there have specific language written into their minister's contract which allows for evaluation based on measurable criteria?

Mr Ungar replied, *Well, I believe the professional minister is the spiritual leader of the congregation. Thus the evaluation should be based on whether the congregation has grown spiritually. In establishing criteria, you might consider questions such as:*

How many minutes per day have the congregation members meditated—median and mean?

How many members have experienced the oneness of all beings in the past year?

Shared ministry takes the holy seriously—but not too seriously.

May the love and the ministry we share bring us ever closer to relationships that beckon forth possibilities inherent in ourselves and in the love we embrace... the love that will not let us go. May it be so.