

“Religion, Its Ministries, and the Roles of a Minister”
Peninsula Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
September 22, 2013
Rev. Bruce A. Bode

Reading & Lighting of Chalice (in unison)

Amid all the noise in our lives, we take this moment to sit in silence –
to give thanks for another day;
to give thanks for all those in our lives who have brought us warmth and love;
to give thanks for the gift of life.

We know we are on our pilgrimage here but a brief moment in time.

Let us open ourselves, here, now, to the process of becoming more whole –
of living more fully;
of giving and forgiving more freely;
of understanding more completely the meaning of our lives here on this earth.

(Rev. Tim Haley)

Call to Worship

Each day is a new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
For the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love that bind us together, giving
dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Ancient as the home is the temple; ancient as the workbench is the altar.

CONGREGATION: Ancient as the sword is the sacrificial fire; ancient as the soldier is the priest.

MINISTER: Older than written language is spoken prayer; older than painting is the thought of the nameless one.

CONGREGATION: Religion is the first and last – the universal language of the human heart.

MINISTER: Differing words describe the outward appearance of things; diverse symbols represent that which stands beyond and within.

CONGREGATION: Yet every person’s hunger is the same, and heart communicates with heart.

MINISTER: Ever the vision leads on with many gods or with one, with a holy land washed by ocean waters, or a holy land within the heart.

CONGREGATION: In temperament we differ, yet we are dedicated to the one august destiny; creeds divide us, but we share a common quest.

MINISTER: Because we are human, we shall ever build our altars; because each has a holy yearning, we offer everywhere our prayers and anthems.

CONGREGATION: For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities; we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family.

(W. Waldemar W. Argow)

“RELIGION, ITS MINISTRIES, AND THE ROLES OF A MINISTER”

Introduction

This past May, I was invited to give the sermon for the ordination ceremony of Dennis Reynolds, now the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island, and who, in the 2009-2010 church year, was the first of the ministerial interns at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship where I serve.

And though I had been a minister for thirty-five years, this was my first time to give an ordination sermon. Thus, it gave me an opportunity to think through in a somewhat systematic way what it means to be ordained into the role of a Unitarian Universalist minister.

What I'd like to do with you this afternoon is draw from that ordination sermon in the hope that it may be helpful for you, as an emerging congregation, in considering what a religious organization such as yours is about and what are the various roles it plays in our lives.

Of course, at this point, for you, the various functions of the religious organization are all covered – to the extent they are covered – by lay leadership. But, hopefully, this will be helpful for you as you look toward the future when, perhaps, you may have your own professional minister.

So, let me start at the top and begin by saying a word about what I think religion is.

Religion as defined more narrowly

Religion is spoken of in both narrower and broader ways.

More narrowly speaking – which is the more common way – a “religious person” is one who belongs to a given organized religion, holds its beliefs, and observes its practices.

And a “really religious” person – for there are degrees of religiosity in this narrower definition – is one who is *very dedicated* in this regard, practicing his or her religion “religiously,” you might say, which is a clue to the broader definition of religion that I will get to in a minute.

With respect to the narrower understanding of religion, it is possible to be “nonreligious.”

In this regard, you might hear an individual say, “I’m not a religious person” ... meaning, “I’m not a member of any organized religion; I don’t believe a lot of what most organized religions teach; and I don’t observe the practices or rituals of organized religions.”

Again, sometimes you will hear a person say – and perhaps you have said it yourself – “I’m a spiritual person, not a religious person.” Or, yet again, “I’m an ethical person, not a religious person.”

All of this has to do with defining what it means to be religious in its narrower or more restrictive frame.

Religion as defined more broadly

The broader understanding of what it means to be religious is that we are religious beings *as a species*, just as we are social beings as a species.

And our religious nature, like our social nature, doesn’t hinge on whether or not we belong to any particular organized expression of that.

Thus, in this broader understanding, we are religious creatures by virtue of being freed from strict instinct and by having to face certain large questions relating to the meaning, value, and purpose of our existence.

From early childhood we wonder about our place in the vastness of time and space. And, confronted with the knowledge of our own mortality, we “are driven to explore the mysterious ground of our own being.” (Forrest Church, [Bringing God Home](#), p. 195)

“Religion,” writes author and Unitarian Universalist minister, Dr. Forrest Church, now unfortunately deceased, “is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”

And the primary questions that arise from this condition are these:

Who am I?

And how should I live my life?

What should I ultimately value, revere, and serve?

To what or whom should I give my highest allegiance, loyalty, and trust?

And: how am I part of the whole, and how is the whole part of me?

These, I would say, are the essential religious questions that have to do with the basic orientation of our life, our overall world- and life-view, our entire faith structure.

Thus, religion can best be defined, as Philosopher of Religion Dr. Frederick Ferre does, saying that “Religion is one’s way of *valuing* most comprehensively and intensively.”

Along the same line, retired Unitarian Universalist minister, Dr. Richard Gilbert, author of the Unitarian Universalist adult religious education curriculum, Building Your Own Theology, says that religion has to do with “that core of ultimate meanings, values, and convictions to which we commit our lives.” (Building Your Own Theology, Volume 1: Introduction, p. xiii)

So, in this understanding of religion, we are all equally “religious beings” – all of us compelled to determine how we will live, what we value, and what we will serve. We cannot escape this task, even if we would.

And whatever it is that we choose, whatever it is that draws our highest loyalty and devotion, whatever it is that commands our greatest allegiance and deepest reverence, that is our religion, our *real* religion, whether or not it is connected to a given organized religion.

Thus, in this broader understanding of religion, we are not made religious by belonging to some religious organization or another; rather, we are already religious, and religions and religious organizations come into being to help us deal with our religious nature.

The dimensions of organized religion

Now, for the sake of being systematic, I’m going to quickly mention what the typical aspects or dimensions of organized religions are. And these apply across the board, whether the organized religion is literal or liberal, credal or non-credal.

Scholar of world religions Ninian Smart lists seven basic dimensions of religion. And let me simply tick them off for you:

- 1) First, there is the ritual or practical dimension of religion – as in this worship service.
- 2) Secondly, there is the mythological or narrative dimension – the stories we tell that make sense of our lives.
- 3) Thirdly, there is the doctrinal or philosophical dimension – an attempt to give intellectual clarity and system to our religious faith.
- 4) Fourthly, there is the ethical or legal dimension – having to do with the code of ethics and the norms of behavior in a religion.
- 5) Fifthly, there is the social or organizational dimension of religion – the way a religion is organized and how it manifests itself with respect to its particular society.

- 6) Sixthly, there is the material or artistic dimension – which has to do with the physical buildings of a religion, and its icons, altars, chalices, etc.
- 7) And, finally, there is the experiential or emotional dimension – which has to do with one’s inner experience and emotional response in relation to one’s religion.

The roles or duties of a minister

Now, having given you both a broad definition of religion as well as these basic dimensions of religion, let’s turn to the various functions or ministries of organized religion.

And I will get at these functions or ministries through the role of a minister, who is typically the person ordained to see to it that these functions or ministries are being met or served. (Again, here, of course, in this congregation, as I said, these ministries are being met primarily by lay members of the congregation.)

So what are the typical areas of ministry, or the duties and responsibilities that a minister is expected to fulfill and oversee?

Let me tell you a little story about how I came to my present understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a minister.

For twenty-two years I was an associate minister at a large, independent, unaffiliated, liberal congregation – the Fountain Street Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. This was before I decided to seek credentialing in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Part of the credentialing process involved undergoing a two-three day battery of psychological tests, one of which was an exercise titled, “Understanding The Career Within.”

This was an exercise in which the typical functions, roles, duties, or ministries of a minister were identified and summarized – six in number – and then the person undergoing the exercise was given thirty units to divide among the six roles that seemed most ideal for that individual. You could put all thirty units into one area of ministry if that was how you felt (though it might make you a rather one-sided minister), but the idea was to determine what functions or roles in the ministry you were most drawn to and called to.

As I said, when I took this exercise, I had been a minister for over twenty years, though I had never seen this particular breakdown of the various ministerial roles. But immediately I knew each of them ... and I knew they were all part of a minister’s work.

So here are the typical roles or ministries of a minister within a religious organization. And the question, as I say, is which of these ministries the individual preparing for the overall ministry is most drawn to. I will read them just as I encountered them. As I read

these, you might reflect on to the extent to which ministries or functions are being fulfilled here.

1) Scholar. In your identity as scholar you see yourself as one who seeks to master an understanding of complex material in realms such as theology, philosophy, ethics, comparative religions, etc., and to impart that understanding to others. You read extensively, research, analyze, and synthesize material. You value intellectual stimulation and insights and are interested in learning and wisdom.

(This relates most to the preaching and teaching roles of the ministry, the leading of worship services and the conducting of adult religious education classes.)

2) Healer. As healer you see yourself as one who works with people individually, in couples, families, or small groups in order to address personal issues, pain, and brokenness. You offer empathy, care, understanding, and sometimes direction in helping people. You identify with the realms of psychology, pastoral counseling, and spiritual direction and emotional well-being.

(This relates most to the pastoral care and spiritual counseling areas of ministry.)

3) Prophet. As prophet you pay special attention to and speak out against injustices. You act out of a care for people in groups, particularly oppressed groups. You relate your religious understanding and tradition to the need for changing the order of society, and you work to change minds and institutions in order to rectify social wrongs. You value justice, conscience, challenge to the *status quo*, and being a courageous advocate for the oppressed.

(This relates most to the social justice area of ministry and being a witness for justice in the public square.)

4) Designer/Facilitator. As designer and facilitator of learning events you use your creativity to plan and lead activities in which people discover and learn by doing. You lead people in discovering for themselves new understandings and possibilities. You identify with much of the realm of religious education. You value the experiential learning process and connecting people with each other in ways that stimulate personal growth and development of community.

(This relates most to the area of religious education.)

5) Manager/Director. As manager and director you see yourself as the person at the helm overseeing the operation and mission of the organization. You orchestrate all of the operations, offering motivation, training, and direction for individuals to play their part in the overall mission. You value crisp, effective, and efficient administration and decision-making processes that have integrity, accountability, and results. You find value in being a person who can get things done and who can handle the ultimate responsibility of the organization.

(This relates most to the administrative area.)

6) Parson/Priest. As parson and priest you see yourself as making your significant impact through your presence. You live in community with the people and identify with the people. You are there with them at both common and uncommon occasions in their lives, and your presence brings meaning and comfort to gatherings. Sometimes through the conducting of rituals and rites, you represent a divine presence and activity.

(This relates most to the area of ritual and ceremony.)

(Note: The above is based on an exercise titled, “Understanding The Career Within,” authored by John R. Matthews, S.T.M., an Associate Executive Director of Midwest Ministry Development Service, and is used with the permission of the Midwest Ministry Development Service.)

A recently-published handbook on ministerial roles

So these are the typical ministries of a religious organization that a minister is called upon to oversee and fulfill, and all of them are important to the well-being of healthy and meaningful religious organizations.

And just this past summer at our annual Unitarian Universalist ministerial professional gathering that precedes the General Assembly – this year held in Louisville, Kentucky – a handbook published this year by our Association was made available to us. The handbook is titled, Fulfilling the Call: A Model for UU Ministry in the 21st Century.

This Handbook is intended to provide a tool to seminaries, to congregations, to Committees on Ministry, and to ministers in understanding and being able to evaluate the scope of the ministry.

This Handbook enumerates the six areas or “duties” of ministry that I just detailed, often in very similar language, but it adds three more, which I will only mention, namely: “Personal Renewal and Professional Development,” “Serving the Unitarian Universalist Faith,” and “Leading the Faith into the Future.”

In addition, this Handbook provides a four-level performance gauge that relates to the fulfillment of these nine ministerial duties:

- Level One: Basic Competence
- Level Two: Approaching Proficiency
- Level Three: Proficiency
- Level Four: Expert/Exceptional

The impossibility of fulfilling all the roles expertly

It is impossible for any individual to be an expert in all of these areas of ministry, and any individual who tried would soon be exhausted – this before being carted off.

For example, when I was a minister at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, I was part of a staff of fifteen full-time persons that included four ministers. There, each of us was able to concentrate on a couple of these areas of ministry.

That was challenging enough. But now that I am the sole minister of a congregation, the challenge of seeing that all of these roles of ministry are being fulfilled is even greater.

I think one of the most important things in being a minister is to recognize one's limitations in fulfilling all of these tasks.

The value of this Handbook for congregations

Nevertheless, it seems to me that this Handbook can be used by a congregation not only to evaluate ministers but also to evaluate themselves in the fulfillment of the various ministries of their religious organization. Used properly, it could be a valuable tool in defining and deepening the scope of a given religious organization.

Conclusion

What I have brought to you today is a large part of what I delivered at the ordination ceremony of Dennis Reynolds this past May. I hope it may be helpful to you as you think about and engage the various tasks of ministry in your emerging congregation so you can be a vibrant and healthy religious organization, fulfilling your promise as an institution that seeks to meet our needs as religious beings.

Benediction

As we leave this community of the spirit,
May we remember the difficult lesson
That each day offers more things than we can do.

May we do what needs to be done,
Postpone what does not,
And be at peace with what we can be and do.

Therefore, may we learn to separate
That which matters most
And that which matters least of all. (Richard S. Gilbert)