
I. The Ten C's of Ministry

In 1853, the Secretary of the American Unitarian Association wrote a series of open letters to Unitarian congregations in the pages of the association's Journal. Ministerial settlement was the subject of one of those letters. While today his language may seem quaint, his observations and advice appear to me strikingly sensible, and in many respects still valid. Among other things, he urged congregations weighing ministerial candidates to consider first and foremost "their religious qualifications, their desire to serve people, their piety." Congregations would be well advised, he said, to seek "the solid rather than shining parts in a minister." Congregations were advised not to be mesmerized by intellect, charisma, or smoothness of manner, but to look first for the specifically religious qualities: piety, love for others, enthusiasm, and conscience.

Having served as a student minister for four years, a full-time parish minister for seventeen years, and ministerial transitions director for the association from 1971 to 1985, I find that my thoughts on our ministry are in substance those of the AUA secretary a century and a quarter ago.

If I were serving on a ministerial search committee or were a member of a congregation about to seek a new minister, what expectations would I bring to that search? What qualities would I like to see in our next minister, and what priorities would I assign to them? There are at least ten specific qualities of "the solid rather than the shining" kind that would have priority for me. It happens, with my fondness for alliteration, that all these qualities begin with the letter "c." Alliteration, like illustration, can be a helpful teaching and preaching device, and so I use it here without apology, but with the admission that it took a little straining to come up with words to maintain the alliterative consistency.

What I would look for, first of all, is CHARACTER. I do not have in mind here either eccentricity or self-righteousness, but moral consistency, stability, and reliability. All of us know persons we can count on, to whom we feel free to go for help, in whom we can confide, from whom we expect both candor and concern. Ministers of character also have what might be called personal authenticity, genuineness or transparency, the absence of phoniness, airs and self-importance. A person of character is, to borrow Betty Ford's apt phrase, "more real than role." Unitarian Universalist ministers never did possess the authority of a priestly role in the same sense as, say, a Lutheran or Anglican cleric. But those of us in the liberal ministry know from experience that a kind of authority accompanies the role of minister in certain situations, such as counseling, rites of passage and preaching. In recent years we have seen an erosion of that authority of role, so that what limited authority ministers do have must and should come from their own authenticity and reliability as men and women of character. The minister, by being a certain kind of person, should be able to speak with authority "and not as the scribes," and also be in a position of being able to preach what he or she practices. No amount of professional skill or intellectual acuity can compensate for the absence or inadequacy of character.

I would, in the second place, look for a minister with a sense of CALLING. The ministry is not apart from or superior to other careers, but, as in all genuine vocations, there should be a compelling urgency to do one's best because what one is doing is important and holy under the aspect of eternity as well as in our own eyes. A sense of calling motivates us to do our work well, to be a worker "who needeth not to be ashamed." It shares with us a vision of reality and of life's possibilities that infuses us with enthusiasm. As Emerson wisely observed, "nothing great is accomplished without enthusiasm." It energizes us for our work, enabling us to work hard and to work well — not in a frenzied, driven sense but in a clearly focused, self-directed way. It humbles us, not only with an awareness of our shortcomings, but with the knowledge that we are accountable to a heritage and a reality that transcend the local congregation, personal ambition and a particular job.

In recent years ministers have sought to professionalize our calling, a needed but perilous venture. As we have sought to be treated in a more business-like manner regarding decent financial compensation, employment benefits, sabbatical leaves, etc. — all in a "letter of agreement," we sometimes encourage a climate where a covenant of trust is replaced by a contract of law. Similarly, some laypersons, propelled prematurely to parish leadership positions and lacking experience with our congregations and movement, import attitudes and practices incompatible with a called ministry. They may in fact view ministers as hirelings accountable to them. Both ministers and congregations need to strike a healthy balance so that the best qualities of professionalism and calling are strengthened. For example, ministers might remember that a sense of calling renders talk about forty-hour work-weeks inappropriate and unprofessional. The minister who invokes the response, "that's not my job," when asked by lay leaders to lend a hand with administrative and institutional tasks, may lack this sense of calling. For us who practice it, the profession of ministry should be something we love, not loathe — something that enriches rather than demeans us, a calling, not a chore. All of us need to remind ourselves that ministers are called, not hired — the difference is significant.

I would, in the third place, hope for a minister who is a person of CULTURE. I don't want sermons written in textbook jargon or conversation heavy with grim, pretentious intellectualizing. But it is reasonable, I think, to hope a minister will be cultured in the sense of being reasonably learned, informed and interesting as a person. A minister ought to cultivate a catholicity of tastes and avoid becoming either a boor or a snob. A cultured minister is acquainted with the arts and sciences, with religion, politics, sports and television. How else can there be contact and communication with people where they are? How else can one learn from people with varied and differing tastes? (I was speaking in this vein to a group of our ministers several years ago, and indicated that a cultured person would, for instance, be able to identify both Beverly Sills and John Havlicek. One obviously cultured minister interjected, "that's easy. Beverly Sills is a forward for the Boston Celtics.")

A fourth quality to look for in a minister is that of CARING. He or she should be genuinely interested in, and concerned for, other persons — neither excessively self-preoccupied nor interested in others only to the extent that they meet his or her needs. This is especially crucial in personal counseling where there always lurks the temptation

to play god, to dispense divine wisdom, or to create an unhealthy dependency. Caring is healthy and liberating when its is rooted in a vision of others as our brothers and sisters, flesh of our flesh, kin for whom we feel kindness and empathy. An extension of the caring ministry is concern for the larger community, especially for the voiceless, the dispossessed, those who do not have, or do not believe they have, any power to change their situation of suffering or oppression. Simply put, care needs prophetic as well as pastoral expression, impelling us to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. How deeply does he or she *care* about the struggle for peace, justice and bread in the world? Is there only rhetoric about caring, or is there evidence of trying to learn more about, and do something constructive to solve, the social problems that afflict our local communities, the nation, the world? The solid minister reconciles the pastoral and prophetic, since both spring from a spirit of caring and a resolve that what we claim for ourselves we wish for others.

A fifth quality I seek in a minister is the capacity to be CREATIVE. Most of us may not be creatively gifted, however much we harbor fantasies about writing the great novel, painting a memorable work of art, or being the chef of a gourmet restaurant. We can hope, however, to cultivate a first-hand relationship to reality, to be original in the sense of listening to our own response to life and being courageous enough to share it. We can be open to new and disturbing ideas and ways of doing things — not venerating either the new or the old, but being willing to hear out the person with a new idea, or to try something to see if it works, or to deliberately shape something new with the stamp of our character on it. A healthy capacity to innovate is every bit as important as the capacity to conserve and transmit “the tried and true,” the continuity of the human pilgrimage.

Again, a minister needs to see his or her role as CATALYTIC, helping to make things happen, galvanizing people into action, sometimes providing just the impetus to bring to pass what had previously been but latent. As one who has always had an aversion to chemistry, I am wary of pushing the metaphor of catalytic agent very far. Yet I have this conviction that the effective minister is a lever or agent, neither a do-it-all figure of paternalism nor a passive technician. The catalytic minister works to develop a ministry of the laity, laypersons who participate in worship, teaching, counseling and witness, and who work with the called professional leader to build a caring and redemptive community.

A seventh quality worth seeking in ministry is a leadership style that is CONSULTATIVE and COOPERATIVE. It is a given of our movement that leadership be democratic, not authoritarian. Nonetheless, democratic leadership is still leadership; it is the willingness to be out front and up front in risking initiatives, in suggesting tactics and goals. Democratic leadership is not an abdication of either initiative or advocacy. I don’t want a minister to tell me what to do, but I do want him or her to tell me what he or she believes ought to be done. I would like to see a leadership style that is neither diffident nor arrogant, just as I would like to see congregations that are neither anticlerical nor clergocentric. The consultative and cooperative minister represents the middle way of Aristotle: listens as well as speaks, learns as well as teaches, shares the challenges and burdens of leadership rather than monopolizing or relinquishing them.

There is an eighth quality I would look for in a minister, summed up by the word COLLEGIAL, a word that points to the need to relate personally and professionally to colleagues — both in one's own denomination and in the interfaith community. There are “loners” who succeed in ministry, but I think they diminish their own richness and short-change their colleagues by an essentially private practice of ministry. I cannot begin to say how much I have learned from my colleagues, and how much I have been strengthened by them. All in all, it has been one of the highlights of my life to know and be known by my colleagues — in the north Middlesex, Meadville, and Iroquois chapters while I was a parish minister, and in all chapters across the continent since coming to 25 beacon street. We need one another for support, for learning, for fellowship, and for straight talk.

A ninth hope I have — it should be an assumption, I suppose — is that the minister will be professionally COMPETENT. Like other professionals, a minister ought to possess the theoretical knowledge and practical skills of the craft. Congregations have a right to expect that their minister will have mastered, for example, the art of communicating; a minister should project, not mumble; and shape a coherent message, not ramble! He or she should have something to say, and be able to say it well and with power. Teaching, counseling, witnessing, managing parish business, and empowering lay people constitute the balance of what Lyle Schaller calls “the kit-bag of parish skills.” Competence, by itself, is morally neutral. It simply the ability to do one's work well. But in combination with the other qualities of a good minister, it represents the capacity to *deliver*, to be the agent of our faith's heritage and vision so that the greatest number of men and women and children know it and see it and can be empowered by it, too.

Finally, I believe a minister should have a sense of the COMIC, if for no other reason that to take what I have said with a large grain of salt. A minister, no less than other people, and perhaps more than most, needs a healthy sense of humor, and an awareness of his or her own limits. Life is rent with absurdity, incongruity and foolishness. It is also witness to our tragic and amusing tendency to take ourselves and our work too seriously, resulting in either an unbecoming self-importance or an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. We need to be able to laugh, or at least smile, both at our own and others' foolishness. Humor has been defined as the absence of logic; since we, our work and our expectations are often illogical, we need a sense of the comic to keep realistic and sane — especially in a calling that can too easily become solemn, utopian and all-consuming. Beyond that, it helps us to cheer the hearts of all whose joy in living has grown jaded.

My model minister, in summary, is a person of character and culture; he or she has a sense of calling to the ministry, seeks to be caring, creative, catalytic, consultative, collegial, competent, and, to survive under the heavy weight of all these expectations, comic. How such a minister comes into being is beyond the scope of these remarks, and frankly beyond my own understanding. Perhaps it is a gift of the grace of god. But these are what I believe to be “the solid rather than shining parts of a minister.” Our ministerial search committees are giving increasing priority to them rather than to a special skill, a charming manner or an assumed ability to “deliver” the institutional success symbols of increased membership and budget. While we may be tempted to regard the “ten c's” as perfectionistic or pollyanna-ish, the truth is, I believe, something different. A good many

ministers do embody these qualities in their personal and professional lives, disproving the argument that such a model of ministry is a fantasy. What congregations and ministers need is the wisdom to give such qualities priority, and to do what can be done to encourage their development and to deepen their screening, interviewing, auditing and deliberative procedures. With a truer, surer knowledge of potential candidates they will be in a good position to affirm and recognize those who manifest “the ten c’s of ministry.”

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 Director of Ministry, 1981-93

... And one more “c”

A dozen years after David Pohl composed his “ten c’s of ministry,” I offer, with regret, one more “c” for the 1990’s. Today CONDUCT merits special mention. Ministers meet people at their most vulnerable. A few ministers have abused their office, violating confidences, influencing counselees for personal gain, or harming people psychologically or sexually. True ministers wear the power of their office lightly, but remember that their power is given as an opportunity to strengthen others, not to control or exploit them. When UUA ministerial fellowship committee identifies a serious offender it ensures that his or her name will not appear on search committees’ recommended lists. Still, careful search committees ask potential candidate to speak about their understanding of professional ethics, about specific boundaries they set for themselves in ministry, and about the things they do each day to keep themselves physically and mentally and morally alert. A minister who sustains a satisfying personal life and practices self-care will also be able to respect the rights and boundaries of others.

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