

2nd RESPONSE
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I would like to respond to Charles' paper through a story which for me suggests the present and future task of ministry. "The German poet Heinrich Heine stood with a friend before the cathedral of Amiens in France.

"Tell me, Heinrich," said his friend, "why can't people build piles like this any more?"

Replied Heine: "My dear friend, in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than opinions to build a Gothic cathedral.

My thinking of late has been in the direction of "convictional theology." It strikes me that the liberal church is too much dominated by opinions - intellectual guesses about the way things are and ought to be. We are rather short on convictions - values about which we feel strongly, are prepared to act, and indeed do act upon them. It is convictions rather than opinions that made possible the cathedral of Amiens.

I quite agree with Charles that the greatest challenge of the liberal ministry will be probably what it has always been, "bringing spiritual depth and theological meaning to the lives of those we serve."

Let me briefly apply a convictional theology to three points in Charles' paper.

He speaks of the minister's authority to lead as being derived from three sources: specialized training, commitment to the liberal church and calling to a particular congregation. I would add one more source of authority: a spiritual calling to a life vocation that transcends any particular training, movement or church. Be the calling to the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community or simply "to improve the odds of something human happening," there is a spiritual dimension here that goes beyond opinion to conviction.

I have in mind an older minister who gave his spiritual odyssey not long ago at the annual gathering of the clan in Cazenovia. He entered the ministry when it vitually required a vow of poverty. He was a radical in the best sense of the word - addressing root causes of theological, political and economic prob-

lems. He had a "vision that transcend(ed) the immediate situation," was guided by a "commanding reality" in his ministerial vocation. When I consider the professionalization of ministry with our "union", our salary charts and our perques, I sense something of that sense of calling may be missing - that we are more profession than vocation. It is the difference between opinion and conviction.

Charles also spoke of the liberal minister as a "minister to ministers," as a catalytic agent to encourage a lay ministry. I think we have neglected what our orthodox colleagues call "a theology of the laity." Despite our avowed participatory democracy in ecclesiology, I think too many of us have cultivated, consciously or unconsciously, a "cult of personality." It is as if only God speaks to ministers and then only by appointment. Or as Thoreau said of his parishioners: "I know the character of all, and the thoughts of such as had them."

I recently had a chat with an active long time member who is nearing retirement. He expressed interest in making some major new commitment to the church at that time. What could I suggest? I was at the same time delighted and mystified. I savored the harnessing of this highly talented individual but beyond the normal committee and group functions I could not think creatively about a person whose lay vocation might be the liberal church.

Perhaps we might place on our common agenda a theology of the laity. What is the theological grounding for lay leadership in the church? What roles are there for lay people who have substantial time and energy to commit? How do we recognize this vocational commitment? Can we take seriously our "ministry to ministers?"

A third comment has to do with Charles' celebration of the minister as "generalist." Sometimes we are apologetic for being in a society which adulates specialists. I look out at a Sunday congregation and see a sea of experts. Would I preach on philosophy? There sits a veteran philosopher. Would I preach on El Salvador? Over there is another professor who specializes in third world development. Would I speak of the family? There are more family experts than I can count on a single Sunday.

I recall preaching in the Canton church once upon two decades ago as a college sophomore just returning from a European summer for the Universalist Service Committee. I confided my fear at preaching to a congregation full of St. Lawrence University professors to Ruth MacLean who assured me that beneath those crusty professorial exteriors beat human hearts with human problems and concerns like my own.

It was a liberating experience! I was no longer terrified, embarrassed by what I had to say - they had not been there - I had. It was confirmation of a lesson learned on the gridiron when the coach would encourage us as we faced a small college powerhouse by reminding us: "They all pull on their socks the same way."

The minister is a generalist - one who seeks to make some sense out of the highly specialized confusion of the modern world. The minister is one among other generalists - like the poets - who tries to see life whole when the rest of the world is trying to break it up into neat little segments to feed the latest computer. The minister is a generalist who tries to ferret out the moral and spiritual implications of what is happening.

Here again, the minister needs to draw on a deeper well of spiritual refreshment than provided by the conventional wisdom of a particular culture. We need to rely not merely on opinions of the time but on ultimate convictions that transcend time. The late Dean William Inge once spoke about his own "refusal to cooperate with the spirit of the age," adding that "he who marries the spirit of the age will soon be a widower."

In sum, a convictional theology will be required if we are to "bring... spiritual depth and theological meaning to the lives of those we serve." If it seems an overwhelming task, remember these wise words: "Saints are simply sinners revised and edited."