

1st RESPONSE

Roberta Mitchell

Brother Howe, Brother Gilbert, dearest colleagues, denominational friends and guests, I am honored to be a respondent at the first annual Josephine Gould discourse on The Future of the Ministry.

Charles, in your description of the necessary skills for ministry, you emphasized the importance of vision. You have demonstrated today that you certainly have that skill. I am very impressed with the clarity, the sensitivity and the logic of your description of the ministry of the future. Fitting the style of a minister, it is a description not so much of what will be, but of what can be. As you aptly put it, what the future holds depends so much on us.

I agree with you whole-heartedly, Charles, that the liberal ministry has a future. It will continue to be an important resource for meeting the needs of our denomination. In recent years our Unitarian Universalist Association has done a great deal of future planning and a highly qualified ministry is an important strategy for meeting our goals. An extremely significant step was taken this year in implementing this directive: Let me call to your attention a recent article in the UU World. The lead story of the February 15th issue (the one with Joseph Priestley on the cover) describes the \$11 million endowment created by the NSUUS Plandome, a program for the education of UU ministers, educators and the laity. This grant will have a long-lasting positive impact on our future ministry. I do not think we should underestimate the value of this far-thinking action. I suspect that this endowment will encourage the development of the type of ministry you describe in your address, Charles: that is, a ministry of shared responsibility, a ministry bringing spiritual depth and theological meaning to the lives we serve and a ministry with an appreciation for our traditions, both Unitarian and Universalist, as well as a ministry with a capacity for creative insight.

But as strong as our professional ministry will continue to be, I see significant changes on the horizon as a result of lay leadership and specialization.

The responsibility for ministry in the future will, in my opinion, become increasingly shared by the professional ministry and the laity. You eluded to

this trend, Charles in your discourse. You spoke of the need for sharing power with lay people, that even now ministers are encouraging lay leadership, lay participation and the lay members' capacity to minister to one another.

I would go even further to suggest that the actual power of the church body will shift to the membership and away from the minister. I see this as a healthy and democratic trend. It is healthy for the minister because the weight of responsibility for the effectiveness of the society is taken off his or her shoulders. It is healthy for the congregation because they will be led to develop their potential for creating a religious community. This doesn't mean that the minister will be idle. In shifting the burden for actual leadership to the laity, the minister will be able to recapture an ancient part of the ministerial role: that of the prophetic oracle. Or as you described it Charles, the visionary role. The minister will be free to guide the congregation on its path, while the actual decision of which way to go will be determined by the laity.

Instead of captains we'll be navigators. Instead of exploration leaders, we'll be Indian scouts. I think such a behavior will lessen that "overwhelmed" feeling ministers have about their job, that you described so accurately, Charles. After all, no one blamed Cassandra for the fall of Troy. Under Congregational Polity, we should already have such a division of power. In Unitarian Universalist society by-laws of course the membership has the decision-making power, but much responsibility has fallen on the minister, nevertheless. It is simply a matter of developing the lay members potential for leadership. This was, is and will continue to be a function of the professional ministry: to do that training. But with the advent of lay leadership schools across the continent, the potential for lay training is enormously magnified. Under the terms of the new North Shore Unitarian Universalist Society endowment, lay members will also have educational opportunities to develop their theological understanding. I think we will see the development of lay theologians in our movement not unlike Dr. Peter Fleck who inspired this trend.

An increasingly sophisticated membership is important to our denomination's

future. It will also allow us to minister more effectively. As professional leaders we will still be guided by the traditional roles you spoke of Charles: pastor, preacher, priest, teacher, organizer, coordinator, administrator. I suspect, however, that these roles will be increasingly shared with the laity as well. In essence, our sacred office will be de-centralized, if not dismantled. We will no longer have a special turf where angels and laity fear to tread.

Both lay members and professional ministers have the potential of keeping trust, honoring tradition, creating new rituals, enlightening and warning. To be a catalyst of that in others, should be an important part of our role.

In future years Charles, I think this strengthening of the laity will help us meet the challenge you mentioned of justifying our existence, as a religious movement, rather than as a secular haven for come-outers.

In the next twenty years I see our ministry not only effected by the development of the laity, but also affected by the development of specialization. You spoke Charles of the minister as generalist. An apt description of our current role. You also described how overwhelming the job can be, how demanding it is on other life priorities such as family, self and the larger community, and how difficult it is to keep up with the current thinking in all the different facets of our ministry. I suspect that this pattern is crumbling by the sheer weight of the enormous pressures put on the generalist minister. I have already suggested that the laity will, in the future, become involved with the minister's traditional functions.

I also see the development of specialized ministries. We already have a few. I am serving as an extension minister, which means I am responsible for helping a small society grow to the point where they can afford and utilize professional staff services.

We also have colleagues who serve as interim ministers, which means that they serve for a short period of time after a long-term ministry to help a congregation prepare for the next minister's tenure. Rev. David Pohl, the UUA's

Director of Ministerial Settlement stated recently that the Department of Ministry hopes to develop career interim ministers who will become experts at helping congregations go through this transition period.

We are all familiar with the specialized work of Ministers of Religious Education. These men and women have developed a special expertise in the area of religious education, which should, as Charles mentions, be a part of the generalist minister's repertoire. But as Charles and I know, finding time to develop our abilities as religious educators is hampered by the many other demands of the job. In the future, I think we will continue to find ministers receiving a generalist training and taking traditional parish jobs. But over the next twenty years, I think we will also see more ministers refining particular skills through advanced education and on-the-job training who will go on to be specialists in a particular area.

While the professional ministry will undergo transformations in the future, the role will continue to be a vital part of our denominational life. Our movement needs skilled trainers, skilled communicators, and skilled counselors. But, most importantly, we need men and women who have vision and who are called to this great vocation. The professional ministry continues to be a community of people who seek to serve our faith by living, by doing, by growing under a special commitment to share that vision. I am thankful for the example of educators like Josephine Gould and ministers like Charles Howe who have demonstrated how very special our ministry continues to be.