

Ministry Changes as Churches Grow

*Rev. Stefan Jonasson
UUA Director for Large Congregations*

For many years before I was ordained to the Unitarian Universalist ministry, I was frequently mistaken for being a minister. While deep inside I was flattered by this – and now recognize that in fact it contributed to my eventual sense of calling – I would sometimes express frustration about my mistaken identity. Once, when I ventured to say something about it, one of the leading members of the church where I grew up dismissed my protest by saying, “If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then chances are it’s a duck!” Amused by his quip, other members of the church picked up on it and, before long, I waddled off to theological school. What this insightful member was really saying was this: he knew what ministry looked like, so he could recognize a minister when he saw one!

Most of us are pretty confident that we know what ministry looks like, so we’re pretty sure that we can spot the duck when it waddles by. But really it’s not that simple. Just as there are different breeds of duck, there are different styles of ministry. And some approaches to ministry are better suited than others to congregations of a particular size. Yet many Unitarian Universalists persist in believing that all ducks are created equal – that all ducks pretty much waddle and quack the same way.

In family-sized congregations (the Family Church where attendance averages fewer than 50 participants), ministers serve as chaplains to the congregation. They usually focus most of their energy on leading worship and providing direct pastoral care for members and friends, including home and hospital visits. Beyond this, they may serve as private advisors to those in the very real, but unofficial, roles of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the congregation. Once they have established their influence by working alongside these important lay leaders, they may even befriend them. Both ministers and laypeople seem inclined to view the family-sized church as an entry-level ministry or a step on the pathway to larger churches, so ministerial tenure is relatively short in churches of this size.

The pastoral-sized church (the Pastoral Church where attendance averages between 50 and 150) actually takes its name from the fact that ministers find themselves at the center of the congregation’s relational system. This size of church needs a minister with particularly strong interpersonal skills, who can coordinate and manage the work of the church with sufficient personal charm so that no one is very conscious that it’s even happening! Warmly extroverted ministers, who appreciate being at the center of most everything that happens, from worship to adult programs, will generally thrive in this church.

When a congregation grows beyond an average attendance of 150, the role of the minister shifts once again as church operations become more complex and diversity of programming begins to supplement personal relationships between the minister and church members. In such program-sized churches (the Program Church where attendance averages between 150 and 350), the minister's attention moves increasingly in the direction of pastoral administration, where program development and planning take priority over those activities customarily associated with pastoral ministry. Church members' spiritual needs are thus increasingly responded to by lay ministers and in small group programs for mutual help and learning.

In the largest congregations, the so-called corporate-sized churches (or Corporate Church) where Sunday attendance averages 350 or more, the nature of ministry changes dramatically. The first characteristic of ministry in a large church is the degree of specialization that is required. The ordained ministers of large churches need to be assisted by an adequate staff with specialized skills to manage the complex business and diverse ministries that are a hallmark of congregations this size. But even the ministers themselves must specialize, shifting away from the "general practice" that characterizes ministry in smaller congregations and focusing their attention on distinct aspects of ministry.

The senior minister (or co-ministers or ministerial team, as the case may be) needs to be recognized as the chief of staff. Many large churches grant their senior ministers even greater authority and responsibility! But at a bare minimum, the senior minister (or team) must be able to direct the ongoing work of the staff, even if this is done by delegating daily supervision to another – perhaps an associate minister or the administrator. This general oversight of the church's work is one form of specialization that attaches itself to the role of the senior minister. Another one of the senior minister's specialties will inevitably involve leading worship and preaching, since the richness and quality of its worship is one of the clearly distinguishing features of large congregations. When it comes to pastoral care, the senior minister's activity will, of necessity, be limited to care for the staff and the lay leaders of the church.

Four out of five large UU churches have at least two ministers and nearly one-third have three! Whether they are associates, or assistants, or ministers of religious education, their work will also be specialized. So, in a large church, the duck may still waddle and quack, but we need to remember that the size of the pond and its role in the flock will influence how the duck behaves!

