

"THE FUTURE OF THE MINISTRY"

THE JOSEPHINE GOULD DISCOURSE

SLUUD Spring Conference
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I am deeply honored to have been chosen by my colleagues to give the first Josephine Gould Discourse, especially since it honors the memory of a woman who was very dear to me and to whom I owe much. She welcomed me warmly when I came to Syracuse thirteen years ago to become minister of the First Universalist Church, and she was a constant support to my ministry there until she moved away two years ago. Even after that, I felt her support through letters, cards and phone calls up until her death last fall.

During the years we spent together in the church in Syracuse, Jo was always ready with some new idea, or a new book, or to step in and help wherever help was needed. She had a deep and abiding commitment to the liberal church and an interest in every facet of its life. Two things about Jo stand out in my mind - the careful planning that went in to all that she did and her deep appreciation of beauty. Nothing was ever done thoughtlessly or carelessly by Jo, and everything she did reflected her sense of beauty, whether it was arranging a bulletin board or a chancel decoration. I hope and believe that some of this rubbed off on me.

Her contributions to our denomination and our district were immense, of course - especially with respect to religious education and the Service Committee, and her influence touched the lives of countless children and adults, including many of us who are here this morning. It is most appropriate that this Discourse has been planned in Jo's memory by the UUMA-LREDA chapter of which she was a member, and I hope this will become an annual event at our Spring Conference.

My topic this morning, chosen to fit into the overall theme of this conference, is "The Future of the Ministry." Jo herself was never an ordained minister, though she certainly ministered to many people in many ways, but I think she'd wholeheartedly approve of my topic, for she saw the professional ministry as a

most important vocation, and had the category "Minister of Religious Education" been established a generation earlier, she doubtlessly would have been ordained.

One necessarily approaches talking about the future - the future of anything - with some degree of caution. We often hear the phrase "In the foreseeable future" - "In the foreseeable future this or that will happen" - but the future is not foreseeable. We can only make educated guesses about it, or, more often, uneducated guesses.

But let me hazard a few guesses about the future of the ministry, and, for those of us who are ministers, about "Your Future/Our Future: The Next Twenty Years."* Then in the year 2003 we can look back and see just how educated those guesses were.

But let's start on what should be firmer ground - with a view of what the ministry is now - and then go on from there.

A Unitarian Universalist minister, ideally at least, should serve as a leader - the leader of a religious community, a church. The minister's authority to lead is derived from three sources: specialized training for the ministry; commitment to the liberal church and its leadership, publicly avowed at the time of ordination; and through being called and installed by a particular church as its minister.

This authority to lead a particular church is derived from the assent of that church's membership, and can be exercised only as long as that assent continues. The minister's opportunity to lead stems largely from his or her ability to devote full time as a professional to the work of the church. The minister's commitment to the church is not necessarily greater than that of a layperson, but the opportunity for service is.

The minister does not lead from outside the church community, but from within it. He or she is one of the individuals integrated into the network of interrelationships which constitute the church - a member of the religious community, albeit a very special member. Upon the minister more than upon any other member of the community rests the responsibility for giving the community

* The Conference Theme

direction and keeping it vital.

The minister's professional commitment is to lead the church, and unless this is coupled with a clear doctrine of the church based on a sound personal theology, he or she will flounder in the attempt. The minister must attempt to lead without imposing or monopolizing leadership, lest the whole concept of the church as a religious community be destroyed. Instead, the minister must encourage as much lay leadership and participation as possible, attempting to catalyze the process of group interaction within the church and providing for the expression of the thoughts and desires of the laity as well. The minister should promote the idea that in a church the members are called on to support and sustain each other in a mutual ministry. Thus the minister serves as "a minister to ministers."

Most Unitarian Universalist ministers are expected to fill many roles - pastor, preacher, priest, teacher, organizer, coordinator, administrator. As pastor, in counselling and supporting the people of the church in times of need; as preacher, in delivering sermons aimed at and arising out of the needs of the people; as priest, in leading worship services - not only the regular Sunday services, but weddings, funerals, memorial services, and the dedication of children as well; as teacher, in giving leadership to the religious education program of the church, also integrating the teaching role with the preaching and pastoral functions; as organizer and coordinator, in giving any necessary leadership to a coherent committee structure for the church; as administrator, in seeing to it that the church staff functions well and that the necessary clerical, financial, and publicity aspects of the church's work are adequately handled.

In addition to these roles performed within the church, the minister is also called on to represent the church to the larger community and to serve in various denominational, inter-denominational and civic capacities. There are, of course, some large Unitarian Universalist churches with big enough staffs to relieve the minister of many of these responsibilities, but at the present time most of our ministers consider themselves lucky if they have a good part-time

~~secretary and a relief part-time justice working with them. Yes, Virginia,~~

there is a generalist" - and Virginia only needs to go down to the local UU Church to see one!

It seems to me quite obvious that the average minister needs as much lay leadership and participation as possible - not only in order to make the idea of the church as a religious community a reality, but also in order that the necessary work of the church can get done! Without lay leadership and participation, the average minister will simply be overwhelmed!

At both of the Unitarian Universalist churches I have served over the past seventeen years, in Syracuse and in Austin, Texas, I've been fortunate to have had excellent Board Chairpersons or Presidents to work with - to interact with as true co-leaders of the congregation - women and men who were at least as committed to the church as I am, and willing to back up that commitment with hard work. Without them, and without a Jo Gould or two, I'd have been overwhelmed!

But even when there is good, strong lay leadership and participation, a minister can easily be overwhelmed, and hence it is important that he or she establish some priorities, and then have the self-discipline and common sense to stick with them. Self, family, church, denomination, the larger community - all make their claims on a minister's time and energy, and each minister needs to establish priorities with regard to how these claims will be met.

I think that at present this is our greatest shortcoming as a profession - we tend to allow our time and energy to be gobbled up by the churches we serve, apparently quite willingly, and as a result our selves (which deserve renewal) and our families (which deserve our time and love) end up being shortchanged. Ultimately, the churches we serve end up being shortchanged, too, for tired ministers from neglected families usually find it hard to be effective ministers.

And so here we are - men and women who need priorities, and a wide variety of skills, and all the help we can get - and, lest we perish, a vision. Twenty years ago, when I was in the process of applying to seminaries, I received a pamphlet from John Brigham of the U.U.A. Department of Ministry, which spoke to

this matter of vision and which, despite its very masculine language, still speaks to it:

"The liberal minister must have a vision. He lives with suffering, tragedy, indifference, frivolity. If he possesses no vision that transcends the immediate situation, he is lost, no matter how many of the other qualities are possessed. He is a blind man attempting to lead the blind. The vision he perceives must be other than abstract and more than intellectual. It must be a commanding reality in his life. He must have a sense of ultimate commitment, be it to 'God' or 'truth', or something else. He must be gripped by it. It has no power to make him other than man, but it does lift him closer to the fullest dimension of what man can be."

So here we are, having or needing priorities, skills, help, vision. Here we are, a small part of a small group of UU professionals, in a small denomination - many of us feeling overworked (which may be our fault) and underpaid (which may be the fault of last year's canvass committee!!). Most of us serve small churches - In fact, of the 57 churches and fellowships in the St. Lawrence District, only seven have memberships of over 300. Most of us serve churches of less than 200 members, many of us on a part-time basis. Most of us are forced to be generalists whatever our skills; and most of us, I suspect, have salary packages of less than \$20,000. Anyone who'd like a nice, cushy job at a high salary should apply somewhere else!

"Your Future/Our Future: The Next Twenty Years" - the future of the liberal ministry - what is it? But before we look ahead at the next twenty years of the unforeseeable future and make some guesses, educated or otherwise, let's look back at the last twenty years and see what's happened. Then maybe we'll have something to extrapolate from.

Twenty years ago when I began making serious inquiries about a career in the Unitarian Universalist parish ministry, I was a member of the Universalist Church of Canton, New York and Max Coots was my minister. The Unitarian Universalist merger had just taken place, Dana Greeley, with all his boundless, boyish optimism, was our president, the denomination was growing, and it looked as if Unitarian Universalism was going "onward and upward forever" - or at least for a good, long while.

But then during the last half of the sixties came the war in Vietnam and

the Black Power movement, both of which seriously divided our denomination; and the sexual revolution and the drug scene, which did in our L.R.Y. (my hair turned prematurely white during those years); and the "Death of God" movement which threatened to make all religious institutions obsolete.

It was the hey-day, too, of the Beatles, and the Hippies, and the S.D.S., and the anti-institutionalism that went with them, and there was the "women's lib" movement, as it was called then, which made masculine, gender-exclusive language suspect.

In the seventies, things calmed down somewhat. Our churches and fellowships began to retreat from social action and the controversy that went with it, and to get into the human potential movement instead - sensitivity groups, encounter groups, T groups, transactional analysis, transcendental meditation, and the like - but the denominational decline that began in the late sixties continued - our adult membership slowly but steadily declined, and our church school enrollments dropped off precipitously.

But there were positive signs as well. It became apparent that the old humanist-theist controversy was obsolete - that traditional theism was intellectually indefensible and traditional humanism (the religious humanism of the '20s) was emotionally unfulfilling, and hence a new, earnest theological quest was begun. More and more students of higher and higher quality, many of them women, were entering seminary to prepare for our ministry. The ministerial musical chairs game, in which ministers were moving from church to church every three to five years, slowed to a halt, bringing greater stability and better pastoral care to our churches. With the appointment and then election of Gene Pickett to the U.U.A. presidency, a concerted effort has been made to reverse our statistical decline.

So here we are, in the spring of 1983, wondering what lies ahead for our denomination, and particularly for its ministry. I believe that the concept of ministry that I outlined earlier will continue to be valid through the next twenty years - that of the minister as the leader of a religious community,

leading it from within, a builder of community and of mutual ministry, a minister to ministers.

I expect the liberal minister, if anything, to become more of a generalist rather than less of one during the next twenty years, for I see the trend from large to small churches continuing - this partly because I believe that most Unitarian Universalists will increasingly prefer the intimacy and involvement of a small church, and partly because I do not expect much growth in numbers in our denomination during the next two decades. I applaud our current efforts to achieve growth, and I hope it will occur, but I suspect that it will be modest, at best, and come more through the establishment of small, new churches and fellowships than through the growth of large ones.

I suspect that the present theological uncertainty in the Western world will stand in the way of any significant growth by religious institutions, other than perhaps the fundamentalists, who will be countering this uncertainty with claims of certainty. But in general, as the relevance of theology becomes increasingly questioned, so, too, will the relevance of the church as an institution, whatever its label. At least that's my guess. Even under the best of circumstances, I suspect that our denomination will never be very large. Most people who want a religious institution want more certainty than our churches can provide, and most people who want freedom of belief don't want anything to do with a religious institution. Hence our Unitarian Universalist approach to religion will appeal in the future, as it does now, to only those relatively few people who want both freedom of belief and an institution to go with it. Please do not see this as a pessimistic forecast - it is not offered as such.

My guess is that the number of men and women wanting to enter our ministry will continue to rise; so, too, will the proportion of women, and those choosing the ministry as a second career; so, too, will the quality of our ministers.

The net result, as I see it, is that more and more of our small churches and fellowships will be served by committed, well-qualified ministers who see the liberal church and its ministry as being so important that they are quite willing

to be "overworked and underpaid," and will be glad if they have a competent part-time secretary and a reliable part-time custodian to work with.

Here are some other guesses as to what will be happening in our ministry during the next twenty years:

That our ministers will become more and more democratic and less and less authoritarian in their style of leadership, sharing power more freely and easily with laypeople; they will increasingly speak of the churches they serve as "our church" rather than "my church";

That sabbatical leaves will become less and less common, being largely supplanted by short study leaves, leaves to serve as a minister-on-loan, and the like;

That the sense of collegiality and interdependence among our ministers will increase;

That, at long last, since in almost all cases there will be but one religious professional on a church staff, our new ministers will be far better prepared in the field of religious education (perhaps this is more of a hope than a prediction).

That our ministers will have an increasing appreciation for both the Unitarian and Universalist parts of our merged traditions, and that the "liberal sectarianism" which places one tradition above the other will largely disappear (perhaps this, too, is more of a hope than a prediction!).

In addition to guesses about the future of the ministry, there are some obvious challenges that face the ministry during the next twenty years:

The challenge of better ordering our priorities so that we really do give enough of our time and caring to our families and to our selves - so that we don't give short shrift to our mates, our children, our parents; so that we don't suffer from burn-out, or do our work while tired and worn out;

The challenge of being the ministerial half of a two-career marriage - one that more and more of us are going to have to face in the next twenty years - two-career marriages in which both partners see themselves as equals in every way;

The challenge of keeping up, or even half-way keeping up, with the knowledge

explosion and changes which will probably be continuing at an ever-increasing rate - hard enough for the specialist to do; far harder for the generalist;

And what I consider to be the greatest challenge of all- the challenge of bringing spiritual depth and theological meaning to the lives of those we serve, many of whom are reacting so strongly to traditional religion that, on the surface, at least, they seem willing to settle for a talk by the local ACLU executive on Sunday morning or a slide presentation on China. To bring spiritual depth and theological meaning to the lives of those we serve - that will be our greatest challenge, and how well we meet it will determine to what degree we justify our existence as a religious movement rather than a secular haven for "come outers."

"The Future of the Ministry" - does the ministry, the liberal ministry have a future? It most certainly does, because it attempts to meet basic human needs - needs which will persist as long as there is a human race - as long as there are people who love and hate, hope and despair, rejoice and mourn, ponder and praise, live and die.

The liberal ministry indeed has a future. The quality of that future depends largely on us.