

**1998 Josephine Gould Discourse
The Rev. Elizabeth M. Strong
Wine/Wineskins:Ministers/Ministries**

The Ministerial Fellowship Committee and the Department of Ministry are considering combining the current three tracks of parish, religious education and community based ministries, into one track of ministry with a core curriculum followed by minimal training and emphasis in these areas as specializations. This paper is a response to this consideration by the Fellowship Committee and the Department of Ministry in this paper. I will, however, focus more on the Ministry of Religious Education.

I want the Unitarian Universalist ministry to be as powerful, dynamic and effective as it possibly can be in our congregations and in our denomination. I believe that worship, religious education and social action are ministries, and that they are too vital for Unitarian Universalism's well being and future to be lumped into minor categories of emphasis in one generalized ministry. Each one must be a ministry in its own right, and we need ministers with specific, concentrated and expert level skills to fulfill these ministries. I believe this can only be accomplished by the training and empowering of specialized ministers to fulfill these areas of ministries within our congregations. I do not want our congregations or our ministers to face situations whereby congregations expect an excellence in everything from their ministers that those ministers are unable to deliver; as demonstrated in this telling but amusing story.

"Now it came to pass that while the Elder in Israel tarried at Babylon a message came from a distant city, saying 'Come thou and counsel with us and help us search out a priest, for he that did serve us hath gone mad!' And the Elder in Israel arose, and journeyed to the distant city.

And when the men of affairs were assembled he spake unto them, saying, 'What manner of man seek ye to be your priest?'

And they answered and said unto him, 'We seek a young man, yet with the wisdom of gray hairs; one that speaketh his mind freely, yet giveth offense to no one; one that draweth the multitude, yet will not be displeased when we ourselves are absent on the Sabbath Day.

'We desire one that hath a happy mood yet is of sober mind; that seeketh out dark sayings and prophecies, yet speaketh not over our heads; that filleth the church and buildeth it up, yet defileth not the sanctuary with the Ethiopian and the foreigner.

'We seeketh one that putteth first the instruction of the young, yet requireth not that we become teachers; that causeth the treasury to prosper, yet asketh not that we give more of our substance. Verily, we seek a prophet that will be unto us a leader, but will not seek to change us, for we like not to be disturbed.'

And the Elder in Israel answered and said unto them, 'When I have found such a prophet will I send him unto you, yet will ye have to wait long, for the mother of such a one hath not yet been born''

I interpret this story to mean not that the minister failed because he was asked to do too much, although that was part of it, but more that he lacked the skills to do expert ministry in everything demanded of him. He had not been given the opportunity to develop a specialization that was congruent with his passion for ministry. And the congregation had not empowered him to develop the specific strengths he brought to the ministry.

Much is asked of ministers, too much in many cases. We are asked to be preacher, teacher, counselor, prophet and administrator. We are expected to hold all the skills necessary to fulfill each of these ministries with the intellectual depth of James Luther Adams, the educational expertise of Angus MacLean, the emotional empathy of Clara Barton and the crusading zeal of Susan B. Anthony or Lotta Hitchmanova. In essence, one minister is asked to fulfill multiple ministries. We have begun to recognize these complex ministries for what they are, and that the skills and attributes required for successful achievement in ministry do not all reside in one individual.

Responsibilities and forms of ministry have constantly changed throughout history. Current configurations in our Unitarian Universalist ministry have evolved from a deeper understanding of the church that has emerged from our work to rewrite our Principles in 1984 and 85, and the work done by the Commission on Appraisal in 1992 as it studied excellence in our ministry. And from this has come the recognition that there are many varied and complex ministries within our congregations, and that it is no longer possible for one form of ministry, or one minister or professional, to adequately fulfill them all. Each minister has specific strengths that wise congregations encourage their minister to emphasize.

In recognition of this, the nature of the Unitarian Universalist ministry has been changing rapidly during the last twenty five years. New ministry tracks have been created and the three specialized ministries of parish minister, minister of religious education and community based minister have emerged. Within the parish ministry there are associate, assistant, interim and extension categories. Students for the ministry are now being educated in specialty tracks in our

theological schools and called to serve our congregations and communities in one of these specialized ministries. The programs of education for these ministries, at Meadville/Lombard in particular, are continuing to change as the demand for ministers with concentrated skills in these ministries grows. New specialized ministers are being poured out into new ministries in our congregations, like new wine into new wineskins.

While I believe the Ministerial Fellowship Committee is committed to excellence in our Unitarian Universalist ministry, I don't agree that eliminating the three tracks will achieve their goal. If you take away the distinctions currently embodied in the three ministries you only serve to blur the areas of specialized responsibility now carefully defined by the tracks. It will not diminish the inequities between the three categories of minister because the ministry of religious education and community based ministry are still too new to be equally understood and valued by our congregations.

The Ministry of Religious Education and Community Based Ministry are distinct and unique ministries in our Association. As I understand it, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee believes that ministry is ministry is ministry and then you specialize following a general study for the liberal ministry. I disagree that this is the best method for educating our ministers for the demanding tasks of ministry. It is about models of ministry and about expertise in ministry.

The Gospel of Mark, Chapter 2 verse 22 teaches us ..."no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

New ministries need new models. This is not the time to pour our ministers back into an old form of ministry. The wines that are the ministry of religious education and community based ministry have not yet aged into the fullness of their potential. Both are heady new creations for Unitarian Universalism. This is not the time to abandon the process of empowering them in our congregations.

The ministry of religious education was created at the 1978 and 1979 General Assemblies through a two year process to amend the By-laws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Community based ministry was created in the same manner at the 1990 and 1991 General Assemblies. Their impact and value are still emerging, within the UUA, the CUC, the Department of Ministry, the congregations, and with the ministers themselves.

There are sources in our history and theology that ground these three forms of ministry and provide a substantive argument for maintaining them.

Conrad Wright, in his book, Congregational Polity, notes that (i)n our Unitarian history the Cambridge Platform of the 1640's informed the nature of the ministry in our congregations. "According to the Puritan scheme of logical classification, the officers exercising authority in the church are termed elders, of which there are two kinds: the ordained ministers and the lay ruling elders. The ministers in turn are divided into two kinds: the pastors and the teachers. The pastors are to 'attend to exhortation: & therein to Administer a word of Wisdom'; the teachers, 'to attend to Doctrine & therein to Administer a word of Knowledg.' Either pastor or teacher might administer the two sacraments of baptism and communion. Actually, the distinction between pastor and teacher was hard to maintain in practice and did not outlast the seventeenth century."

The tradition of social action as part of the religious endeavor is also grounded in an historical precedent for community based ministry.

The report of the 1936 Commission of Appraisal, Unitarians Face A New Age, stated.

"No part of the Unitarian tradition is clearer than that which affirms the necessary relation between religion and social action, ..."
(45) "The 'social application of religion' is itself a misleading phrase, because religion that has no social application isn't a religion at all.
(46)"

The 1936 Commission stated "that Unitarianism of today is saturated with the conviction that religion must move out into society in terms of action, and that Unitarianism of tomorrow will probably feel this conviction even more strongly." (49)

The movement known as the Social Gospel of the late 19th century sounded the imperative to take religions out into the communities where they were located and put into action the faith professed within the walls of the church. Unitarian Universalists in the 1980's and 90's have felt the need to respond to the importance of life span religious education and social action within our congregations and the communities where they are located. We have begun to value our unique voice of a liberal faith in an ever increasingly conservative religious environment. It is, in part, out of this understanding that the three tracks of ministry have been formed. The demands of this age are being felt on our ministry and we are responding.

In the 1981 report of the Religious Education Futures Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association it was recognized that, "concerns were growing about religious education in churches and fellowships. Changing societal norms, new research in human development and social sciences, the increased emphasis on adult learning and the impact of a growing technology compel us to evaluate and modify our philosophy, materials, and methods in religious education in order to nurture

denominational and individual growth." ... The report of the Futures Committee recognized that, "The development of leadership in religious education is ... a major concern. Both St. Lawrence Theological School and Crane Theological School of the Universalists gave serious attention to religious education through professional programs and required courses for students preparing for the parish ministry. Since the closing of St. Lawrence in 1965 and Crane in 1968, and the termination of a Masters of Religious Education degree program at Meadville/Lombard in 1971, there has been no adequate graduate level preparation in religious education for our professional leaders.."

It is in my mind the harshest loss from Universalism's heritage that we as a denomination have sustained, and from which we are just now recovering.

We have flirted with multiple ministry training and practice over the decades. We have vacillated between the demand for a learned, academic preaching focused ministry and a practical parish ministry that is inclusive of teaching, counseling, administration and social action. Our theological schools have focused on the first of these. We must acknowledge that in today's world one minister cannot be everything to everyone; with excellence. I do not believe we can pour our newly created ministries back into an old 'one ministry fits all' form. The ministry of religious education has responded to the report of the Futures Committee and developed ever more complex and meaningful aspects to the enterprise of educating our children, youth and adults. Community ministry is seeking an evermore involved commitment to the surrounding world in which our congregations are located to bring about significant social change.

Colleague, Dan Hotchkiss states the problems well, although he was not speaking to the issue of multiple specialized ministries when he wrote this. "Ministry is just about impossible... and Unitarian Universalist ministry is even harder! How can any one person inform the educated, entertain the jaded, inspire the cynical, organize the rebellious, and recruit the exhausted? The ideal minister combines the talents of Bill Cosby, Meryl Streep, Mother Theresa, Harry Houdini and Bill Gates. It can't be done! We come to church hoping that the minister will help us to overcome loneliness, heal pain, build confidence, reform society, and simplify our lives. It is no surprise that ministers occasionally fail; it is amazing that they so frequently succeed.

"Ministry is never easy. Religious institutions, the ministry among them, face unprecedented challenges. We ask what a minister is, that a psychologist is not, or that a professor is not, or that a comic is not. In an age of specialists, the ministry seems fragmented. Indeed it sometimes seems that a minister can only be a fake, pretending to do the work of all these professionals and others,

with only a fraction of the skill required of them.

"Fragmentation, inefficiency and mediocrity hang over the modern ministry like specters."

It is these specters I believe we should address. They can best be addressed by our specialized ministries. We each have individualized strengths we bring to our ministry. Our educational institutions are beginning to educate to these strengths and our laity are beginning to affirm and support specialized ministries within our congregations. More and more congregations are creating the ministry of a life span religious education and calling a minister of religious education or a credentialed professional religious educator. At least three of our congregations have called parish ministers who focus their ministry on pastoral care. And many are now settling community based ministers to fulfill the mission of social action in the larger community.

It is our task to make the three ministries the strongest possible so as to provide our congregations with the best ministry they can have. To do this I propose we strengthen the lines of distinction between these ministries and concentrate our teaching and practice of ministry in areas of expertise and on the strengths of individual preference for the ministry each has chosen to follow, or been called to fulfill. Ministers of Religious Education need more teaching techniques to better develop our lay leaders in areas of congregational life and personal growth in a life-long educational enterprise. They need to do teaching that, as my colleague Scott says, "will knock the socks off the congregation." Majoring in religious education studies for the minister of religious education will enable her or him to fulfill the increased skills required, whereas only minoring in religious education will not.

A minister of religious education should have the expertise to bring alive the religious understanding of ourselves as Unitarian Universalists. Our religious communities are the only places our people have the opportunity to learn about Unitarian Universalism. Our increasingly fundamentalistic society certainly won't tell them. The minister of religious education has the responsibility to develop in our people the ability to grow in personal religious faith, in depth and knowledge of our unique history, theology and traditions, to the extent each one can articulate who we are as Unitarian Universalists. Our ministers of religious education need to receive the training necessary to fulfill this vision of their ministry. The leadership and support of the Department of Ministry, the Fellowship Committee and the Theological Schools is crucial to the success of this new ministry

The parish minister challenges us from the pulpit. The minister of religious education

challenges us through empowering educational in programs for children, youth and adults. The community based minister challenges us to practice our faith in the community. All three work together to engage all ages in the enterprise of a vibrant liberal faith.

We cannot ground the ministry of RE in the structures of parish ministry. It is distinctive in focus, function and constituency. Its focus is education, its function is the development of people as liberal religious people and its constituency is children, youth and adults. We cannot ground the community based ministry in the parish based structures. They need to be out in the community connecting our congregations to the vital areas of social witness where our unique voice is needed. All of our ministers need to be administrators and givers of pastoral care.

Many of our own programs for adult education have been the source of understanding for these new ministries. Richard Gilbert, in his Doctor of Ministry Dissertation, The Prophetic Imperative, puts forth an understanding of the liberal church wherein he develops a model of the church as a circle within a circle. The inner circle represents the spiritual worshipping life of the community in all its forms, adult, intergenerational etc. and an outer circle with three segments representing life span religious education, the caring community of pastoral care and of moral discourse and social action which constitute what I name as the ministries of the liberal church. The key for him is that, "each of these segments touches every other segment. They are understood, not as administrative categories but as functions of the church occurring at many programmatic places." If we accept this model then we can understand how these areas provide the grounding for specialized ministries for our ministers.

In, Building Your Own Theology part II, Richard Gilbert provides a liberal religious model that articulates a theology from which to develop these concepts for a congregation. In the program's session entitled, "The Doctrine of the Church: Is There One?" He defines Religion as "that core of ultimate meanings and values out of which we live or lives. It is more than mere beliefs (which are intellectual constructs); it is an existential construct which permeates the total life of the self. It has to do with meanings and the values that affect the way one lives. Theology is the intellectual process of analyzing, clarifying, criticizing, articulating, and symbolizing those values and meanings that grow out of experience. In this sense, everyone is a theologian. Religious education is the cradle-to-grave process by which we grow those meanings and values."

He asks participants to write a covenant for their congregation "regarding their common obligations to each other, to the wider community and/or to the transcendent." He asks them to respond to the question, "Are there religious dimensions in your Unitarian Universalist Society's

community?" He is seeking to encourage an articulation of a theology for the liberal church that is meaningful to Unitarian Universalists. I believe that a doctrine of the liberal church is predicated on the idea of ministries active within the congregation. Leadership is provided by ministers and professionals and lay leaders.

Let me share with you some little known or now forgotten history. It has been an interesting statistic on our Unitarian Universalist growth over the past eighteen years that the ministry of religious education has been in existence adult membership has grown on an average of 4 % while the religious education enrollment has grown 46 %. I believe this ministry of RE has made a significant difference for Unitarian Universalism. In the 1960's when we grew denominationally we did not have in place an operative concept of life span religious education. We had Directors of Religious Education who had spent years struggling to gain empowerment within our congregations, but there was no concept of the enterprise of educating our children and youth as a ministry and no understanding of the need for programs of adult education as an extension of a ministry.

The religious educator has been a position of responsibility in Unitarian and Universalist congregations for close to sixty years. But there have been cycles of support and prestige given to religious educators and religious education throughout those years, with long cycles of little or no support or prestige. The average religious educator stays in the position an average of 2 to 5 years. There was no consistent leadership in religious education for the most part, and our congregations and movement as a whole suffered. The ministry of religious education has changed that.

A major factor in this struggle for recognition of religious educators and the work of religious education is the reality that the church school had its roots in the secular realm, having been created in the 1780's by Robert Raikes in England to educate young boys who worked during the weekdays in factories. Religious Education is historically a step child of the church.

The formal training of religious educators in our Universalist heritage began in the 1920's at St. Lawrence Theological School and Crane Theological School at Tufts University. The first Certification in Religious Education was granted in 1927.

When St. Lawrence Theological School closed in 1965 the religious education program was a seven year program in which one earned an undergraduate degree and a divinity degree with a certification in religious education. It was possible to major in religious education and receive a certificate in religious education as well as the Master of Divinity degree. Ministers like Gene Navias, David Pohl, Dick Gilbert, Betty Baker, Fred Ward, Frank Robertson, David Weissbard and Nancy Wynkoop Doughty, became, in reality, Ministers of Religious Education.

A letter dated March 26, 1968, from Dr. Raymond C. Hopkins, Acting Director of the Division of Education, to Applicants requesting a study program leading toward Accreditation of Directors of Liberal Religious Education by the UUA, started the process that led to the Ministry of Religious Education and the development of the concept of religious education as one of the ministries of the church.

In 1974 a Special Committee on Education and Certification for Professional Religious Leadership, known as the Benson Committee, was appointed by the UUA Board. This committee ultimately recommended in 1977 that there be a two year process for a C-By-law change to establish the Ministry of Religious Education. The votes came in 1978 and 1979.

To keep this in perspective to the ensuing struggle, the final vote was a required two thirds majority vote and the new ministry was created by a one vote margin. But we celebrated anyway. No support committee was appointed to follow through with the implementation and education within the congregations about this new ministry, and those of us who entered this ministry of religious education in the early years have had to spend the last twenty years laying the groundwork for whatever success has been known. I was very proud to be a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association for recognizing the crucial significance of a ministry in religious education and of creating an ordained ministry of religious education. I was filled with hope and optimism. You must note that I am a birthrite Universalist and I can't help it.

I believe strongly that this ministry is crucial to the future of Unitarian Universalism, for our children are our future, as is an informed and connected adult membership. And yet the specialization of minister of religious education as a separate and specifically trained ministry is in danger, and the ministry of religious education in our congregations is still regarded as marginally necessary to the health, viability and vitality of Unitarian Universalism. The quality of Unitarian Universalist religious education is my central concern.

This is why I strongly advocate for the increased specialization in the ministry of religious education. I believe that community based ministry will gain significance with the same increased specialization. Do we want a vibrant, expert ministry of religious education in our congregations? Do we want our liberal religious voice actively participating in our communities? Do we want to thrive as a strong liberal voice into the 21st Century? If we do then our three specialized ministries must not only survive as the unique ministries they are, but become even more distinctive and expert than they currently are. We need the expertise of the ministers of religious education and of the community based ministers as well as those of the parish ministers. For a minister to hold only a

minor in religious education or community ministry just won't cut it.

The centrality of the ministry of religious education to children was demonstrated vividly to me one Sunday when a woman in my congregation in Syracuse called to tell me that her daughter, then age four, had overheard a conversation her mother was having with other adults after the worship service that day. The name, Liz, was spoken at which time the little girl interrupted them saying, "I know Liz. She is my minister. But you probably don't know her because she is our minister." "Our," being the children. For children to comprehend their church takes them seriously enough to have a minister for them speaks volumes about how they feel valued within the congregation. The mother then proceeded to thank me for my ministry with all of the congregation.

Tony Larsen, in the book and video, Salted With Fire, brings the message home with his usual flair for humor. As does the Unitarian Commission of Appraisal in 1936 where it is stated, "the curve of concern for religious education has been closely parallel to that of the general denominational progress." We must take seriously the place of the ministry of religious education for the future well-being of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

He tells the story of what poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said to a visitor.

"The visitor told Coleridge that he believed children should not be given any religious instruction. Then, when they grew up, said the man, they would be free to choose their own faith, without bias.

Coleridge didn't argue with the man, but he did decide to show him his backyard, which was overgrown with weeds. He told the man, 'I'd like to show you my garden,' but when the man saw it, he exclaimed, "Do you call this a garden? There is nothing but weeds here!" Coleridge replied, "I did not wish to infringe upon the liberty of the garden in any way. I was just giving the garden a chance to express itself and to choose its own production."

If we do not take professional and expert religious education seriously we will wind up with a lot of weeds and no children for the future to potentially become Unitarian Universalists. Which, is what we have been up to since the beginning.

Recent studies of the people who are returning to organized religion are not those who have come screaming out of orthodoxy as in the past, but the previously unchurched who come church shopping in a consumer browsing mind set. They don't know about Unitarian Universalists and they

don't know about any other religion either. It is our opportunity to provide a ministry to them through programs and ministries of education. The majority of them come for their children's education because the children are being bombarded in their schools and neighborhoods by fundamentalist friends and the parents don't have any answers to give.

They are also coming because large numbers of them are long-in-the-tooth baby boomers and they still have a restlessness about social justice. Because of our long and distinguished history of social justice and social action as Unitarian Universalists, and because most of any given community's activists meet in our buildings, they come to see what we have to offer. They come with a jumpy suspicion about organized religion and they look us over for indications of white, middle class smugness and complacency.

Just as we are called to educate ourselves about our liberal religious faith and heritage, we must educate ourselves and our communities about the significance of that faith and heritage. And we are called to do that through our historical tradition of social action out in the community.

I have focused my personal community action to maintain a congruency in my ministry. As a minister of religious education I have chosen to place my activism in places that work for the quality of the lives of women, children and religious educators. I am currently serving as President of the Board of Trustees of the Planned Parenthood Center of Syracuse. This June I begin my term as chair of the Modified Residency Program Committee at Meadville/Lombard, the committee that oversees the course of study for ministers of religious education. I was the first Minister of Religious Education to serve on the Board of Trustees at Meadville/Lombard Theological School for the express purpose of facilitating the move of the then, Independent Study Program for the ministry of religious education at the Unitarian Universalist Association to Meadville/Lombard and putting in place the current Master of Divinity Degree program for the ministry of religious education.

But there is so much else that needs to be done in our communities. I cannot fragment my ministry to my congregation, nor can I save the world by myself. Colleagues I have had the privilege of working with, Dick Gilbert and Nick Cardell, Jr have certainly made valiant efforts to do so. And Nick is, at this time, sitting in a Federal Prison for his efforts to close the School of The Americas. But we need a ministry based in the community. We need to get ourselves out of our comfortable doors and into the streets where the hurting people live. Not that we don't have hurting people in our congregations. and our congregationally based parish and religious education ministers need to focus on them. Community based ministers can reach out beyond our confines and bring significant ministry to the wider community. It is a proud tradition within Unitarian and Universalist history.

Conrad Wright states "that the church does not exist for its own sake, but for the community in which it is placed and the souls it serves." (139)

The community minister is one whose "call" is in the world, and they must find a place in the world within which to minister. The minister of religious education is one whose "call" is in the congregation's life long search for truth, knowledge and meaning, and they are entrusted with the formative education of children and youth, and in the continuing formative search of adults. The parish minister is one whose "call" is in the congregation's life of worship, celebration of life's rites of passage, and life-long search for meaning, and they are empowered to lead the congregation through worship, pastoral care and prophetic vision.

"...specialized ministries are a necessary and vital part of the Unitarian Universalism as it provides direct contact with the world at large. Community ministry, allows the us as a whole to experience the world and our faith within that world and to respond to the ever new and pressing spiritual needs of people beyond our church walls.

This reality of three tracks of specialized ministry is heady, new wine, and yet unseasoned, let us not risk losing it by pouring it back into the old wineskin of one track ministry with minimal concentrations and expertise in religious education and community based ministries. I do not want our ministers to become Jack-of-all-trade ministers, but rather experts in their chosen specialization of ministry. I want empowerment of the distinctions in excellence, not one single ministry with nuances of preference. Let us not risk the necessity of calling the Elder from Israel to find a new minister to replace one gone mad.

I want to be an excellent minister of religious education, I do not strive to be a poor Meryl Streep, Mother Theresa, Harry Houdini or, especially, Bill Gates! I want ministers of religious education to be educators like Angus MacLean, Sophia Lyon Fahs or Elizabeth Holden Baker, and that requires us to major in religious education studies and training.

For each of us to achieve the excellence desired in our ministry we must major, not minor, in that specific ministry. This is my response to the Ministerial Fellowship Committee and the Department of Ministry concerning the three tracks of ministry.

Resources:

109 Years: An Account of the Theological School of St. Lawrence University: 1856-1965

Ministry Together, Sermon by The Rev. Dan Hotchkiss, January 11, 1998

The Theological School: St. Lawrence University, 1927

The Education of the DRE, The Margaret O'Dell Lecture, Ohio Meadville, Michigan, Ohio Valley District Annual Meeting, March 16, 1991, by the Rev. Elizabeth M. Strong

Building Your Own Theology I, UUA, The Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert

The Prophetic Imperative, UUA, The Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert

Congregational Polity, UUA, 1997, by Conrad Wright

Matthew 9:17, Mark 2:22, Luke 5:37-38

Report of the Committee on Goals, UUA, 1967

UU Futures Report, UUA, 1981-1983

Our Professional Ministry: Structure, Support, Renewal, Commission on Appraisal, UUA, 1992

Unitarians Face A New Age, Report of the Commission of Appraisal, AUA, 1936

Meadville/Lombard Theological School Long Range Plan, 1991, M/L

Meadville/Lombard Announcements