

**How Many Ministers Does It Take?
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
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How many ministers does it take to revitalize Unitarian Universalism? All of them – community ministers and parish ministers, interim ministers, settled ministers, ministers emeritae, candidates for the ministry and student ministers (who are called intern ministers). How many ministers does it take to revitalize Unitarian Universalism? All of *us* – lay people and clergy alike.

Ministry is not the sole province of clergy. Ministry is shared between laity and clergy.

Ministry is a collaboration between lay people and clergy. In the spirit of collaboration, this morning I am sharing what I learned at a recent continuing education seminar for ministers.

Earlier this month, I spent a week with over 350 Unitarian Universalist ministers at beautiful Asilomar conference center in Pacific Grove, near Monterey. This morning, I will not specify which person at the conference made which remark. I will include the attribution in the version of this homily which is posted on the congregation's website (click on the "minister" link to locate past homilies).

First, some background information on membership growth (or lack of growth) in organized religion.¹ Mainline churches overall lost about 2% of their membership last year. Growth within the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations has been about 1% per year over 20 years, though now this has leveled out. This 1% per year figure masks the fact that we have three types of congregations: those that are growing, those that are stuck, and those that are declining. Unitarian Universalism began in New England, yet today New England is the smallest District. Crossing the pond to old England, only 10 to 12 people typically attend a Unitarian service.

According to Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, the fastest growing religious group is "none of the above, which is 10% to 15% of the population. We are awash in seekers. We are overrun by people hungry for community. At

¹ Unless otherwise noted, this information came from Rev. Peter Morales, who lead a seminar track on the minister's role in congregational growth.

the end of World War II, most households were multigenerational. Now about 1% of households are multigenerational. Close to 1/3 of U.S. households consist of one person.

A 1985 study of close personal relationships found that people had about three people in whom they could confide personal information. The study was updated in 2005, and the number of close personal relationships dropped from three to zero. That is, zero was the modal answer (the answer given more often than any other answer). Twenty five percent of survey respondents said that they had zero people with whom they shared personal information. Another 25% said their romantic partner was the only person in whom they confided personal information. So one half of the adults in the United States have no one outside the home to talk to about personal matters. For many people, the need for community is unconscious.

Author John Kotter specializes in writing about organizations that thrive and organizations that fail, as well as about the leadership qualities necessary to help organizations thrive. The surprising and sad truth is that most organizations fail. The difference between organizations that succeed and organizations that fail is not related to strategic planning or staff or technical aspects of the organization. Instead, the “emotional system” of the organization accounts for the biggest difference between organizations that fail and organizations that thrive.

Focusing on congregational life, ministers must imagine, communicate, and lead changes. People want something that is not instrumental or superficial. Many growth plans preclude growth, presumably because they focus on technical aspects related to membership growth, not on the congregation’s emotional system. People want to be part of congregations having a positive, lively, exciting atmosphere. What works is to “do church better.” Membership growth will follow..

What about a dysfunctional congregation, a minister asked. How can it grow? “You need enough white corpuscles to detoxify the system,” Rev. Peter Morales said. The Pew Research Center studied declining vs. growing congregations. The best predictor for a declining congregation was agreement with this statement: “My congregation feels like a close-knit family.” Ouch! After all, how does someone join a close-knit family? The best predictor for a

growing congregation was agreement with this statement: “My congregation is a moral beacon in the community.”

I see Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation as a moral beacon in the Inland Empire. Together with the Universalist Unitarian Congregation of Riverside, we serve the I-10 corridor between highway 57 to the west and highway 15 to the east. We are doing an adequate job serving as a moral beacon in the Inland Empire, though I believe we can become even more effective in the future.

Regarding cultural change within congregations, Unitarian Universalists are skeptical, almost paranoid regarding power and authority. We must identify and recruit leaders and develop them, and then trust them to lead. Instead, too often, we “disempower everyone and call it democracy. We substitute “process” for democracy. We need agility and the ability to seize opportunities. We have a tough time saying to people, “Here’s your portfolio; go get ‘em.”

In terms of congregational growth, “For a group of people skeptical about miracles, we sure rely upon miracles a lot,” Rev. Peter Morales noted. Ministers underestimate the power of stubbornness. Ride the chaos with self confidence. Use a flexible style of interaction, not a style where we do things the same way all the time. It is helpful to tease out authority, responsibility and accountability for ministers have more responsibility than they do authority.

The key question is this: In a rapidly changing environment, can a congregation be lead to change fast enough? Author John Kotter writes that when organizations fail, it’s never because of their problems, but rather because of their past success. Past success becomes part of their identity, and they would rather kill the organization than give up a part of their identity. We must use the past as a platform and not as a prison.

We must pay attention to the role of narrative. We can tell multiple narratives with the same facts. For example, think of the Transcendentalists – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller. We could say that the best and brightest days of Unitarianism are behind us. Or we could say, “We are the people who know how to let go.” Same facts, different

implications. We are afraid of success and find comfort as a marginalized religious group. You can tell congregational history as a comedy, a tragedy, and as a fairy tale.

According to *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner, these are the five practices of effective leaders:

- 1) model the way
 - a) find your voice
 - b) set the example

- 2) inspire a shared vision
 - a) envision the future
 - b) enlist others

- 3) challenge the process
 - a) search for opportunities
 - b) experiment and take risks

- 4) enable others to act
 - a) foster collaboration
 - b) strengthen others

- 5) encourage the heart
 - a) recognize the contributions of others
 - b) celebrate values and victories

What people look for and admire in leaders is honesty, a forward looking perspective, competence, and inspiration. The essence of leadership is credibility. We all have habits. Do they get us to the next level of functioning? Within Unitarian Universalism, clergy may actually be a conservative force in contrast to lay people.

In *The Heart of Change* by John Kotter, he writes that we tend to teach skills for a previous era. For example, when big, complex organizations such as railroads were new on the national scene, we needed management skills. In that era, teaching management skills was appropriate. Today, we need a different skill set. We need skills to *lead* change, not to *manage* change. In order to lead change, we must take on these tasks:

- 1) Create and sustain a sense of urgency regarding the change we need. Half of the organizations that fail, fail at this step. Urgency is not panic; it is not frenzy or paralysis. Urgency is heightened awareness. Urgency is an emotional state, not a cognitive state. Until you affect people emotionally, their behavior doesn't change. Urgency is not anxiety.
- 2) Build a guiding team.
- 3) Get the vision right (note that building the team precedes precisely crafting the vision. You need a sustained sense of "this is important!" Regression into habits will happen unless we're emotionally moved.
- 4) Communicate for buy-in. Have the guiding team drive the message home with an amount of repetition that is stifling. You cannot overcommunicate the vision because that sustains the urgency.
- 5) Empower action (remove obstacles).
- 6) Create short-term wins. This will reinforce the new. Look for low-hanging fruit (not fruit that's ripe 6 to 12 to 18 months from now).
- 7) Don't let up.
- 8) Make change stick.

The ministerial styles in growing congregations are all over the map. For example, Michael Schuler, who serves First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin, is a “sheepdog.” He is constantly moving around the congregation, urging them to go in this direction or that direction. Marilyn Sewell, who served a Portland, Oregon congregation, is “Joan of Arc.”

Regardless of the minister’s personal style, the minister’s responsibility is to be the leader that the organization needs now, not to change the congregation to suit our own strengths because that usually means it suits our weaknesses. Ministers should try to help the congregation make its longings and dreams come true. This work cannot be done in a committee of the whole. The upper limit of a congregation’s level of functioning is set by the minister’s expectations. If we help our congregations be what they aspire to be, membership growth will take care of itself. Once a minister was venting to a more experienced minister about how hard ministry is. “Ministry is impossible,” was the response. “Start there.”

Now I’ll share some panel discussion questions and answers. *What is required for UU to live into its promise and be a transformative religion for our people and world?*

Excellent leadership in the form of ministry.²

Make congregations places of embodiment to practice now so life can flourish; congregations should be sites of transformation: multicultural, multi-religious, counteroppressive, and countercultural. Strengthen worship life as a sacramental practice. Renovate our approach to educational work in congregations. Think rigorously, bravely, counterculturally.³

Know our history. Since the time of the Transcendentalists, we’ve been spiritual but not religious. Reclaim the openness to insights from the world’s religions exemplified by Unitarian involvement in organizing the 1893 Parliament of World’s Religions. Answer the question,

² Rev. Dr. Bill Hamilton-Holway.

³ Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker.

“Liberalism, but for what?” We must not be so apologetic regarding taking a stand on controversy.⁴

Understand the difference between a technical problem and an adaptive challenge. Learn a new repertoire of skills. Speak honestly regarding the gap between our ideals and actual Unitarian Universalism.⁵

Refine our proclamation. Engage with spiritual and emotional disciplines (work with our woundedness and integrate intellect with emotion). Be inclusive in terms of class in our congregations. Engage in informed social action; do not charge off into do-goodism.⁶

Our ancestors mythologized our past. Democratic societies hate to come to terms with limitations. It’s hard for us to decide where to invest our resources. Have humility and show mercy as we focus on the few things we can do. We are stewards of the morale of our souls and the souls of others. Have charity and patience.⁷

This is from social movement theory. A movement is collective intentional action. It is organized by those who have outsider status. It has a transformational world view, proposes a collective identity, and is in a contest for ideas. George Lakoff writes of the “frames” we use for communicating. The left has been talking about our priorities in the right’s frames. The Unitarian Universalist focus on freedom of belief reinforces the right’s frame of the priority of the individual. The next frame is the intersection of identities, interconnection rather than alienation; interdependence, not individuality of rights. We should imagine the new “we.”⁸

Panel discussion questions and answers: *What do we need to let go of?*

We need to let go of elitism and fear. We must engage the passions of congregants and potential congregants. This is not cognitive but emotional. We need to identify, nurture, train, and

⁴ Rev. Dr. Gary Dorrien.

⁵ Rev. John Millspaugh.

⁶ Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Read.

⁷ Rev. Dr. John Buehrens.

⁸ Beth Zemsky, MAEd, LCSW.

empower and deploy leaders. Balance the intellectual and the affective. Get beyond individualism. Cross borders of culture and class. The values we espouse has nothing to do with the package that we use to present them with – compassion, peace, freedom, stewardship of the world. People come to our congregations asking “Is this my place?” It’s a question of affect/emotion.⁹

Grandiosity. We don’t do outreach to enough allies. We should lose the notion that “there’s only us.”¹⁰

Lone ranger ministers.¹¹

Let go of having any idea what we’re doing.¹²

Hannah Arendt on the “banality of evil” (lack of thinking). Arendt said we must return to the senses as a return to connection to the earth. The American Empire is Not Thinking. Resist the unholy empire. We need to lose the confusion of Unitarian Universalist identity with white identity.¹³

We need to cultivate a sense of responsibility. We need to lose the confusion of Unitarian Universalism with liberal religion as a whole and the lack of curiosity about compatible traditions on account of an allergy.¹⁴

Resistance to change.¹⁵

There is no church that is growing that sings out of the hymnal. Unitarian Universalist congregations have a mildly depressed sensibility in Sunday services.¹⁶

⁹ Rev. Peter Morales.

¹⁰ Rev. Dr. John Buehrens.

¹¹ Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed.

¹² Beth Zemsky, MAEd., LCSW.

¹³ Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker.

¹⁴ Rev. John Millspaugh.

¹⁵ Rev. Dr. Bill Hamilton-Holway.

¹⁶ Rev. Dr. Gary Dorrien.

May we discern ways to promote the health of this congregation and of Unitarian Universalism.

May self-awareness, humility, and vision guide us. May it be so!