

Draft

THE CALL OF THE MINISTER
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
April 10, 2011

What is the call of ministry? I ask us to consider this question because soon as a congregation you will consider if, when and how to call a new long term minister here. My tenure here as interim minister will be over in July of 2012 and I look forward to greeting my successor before I leave.

My predecessor Cynthia Prescott was here for 12 years. She was installed as your called minister but she had been appointed to come here as part of an old program called Extension Ministry out of the UUA in Boston. That program ended some years ago but the intent was to partner congregations like this one with ministers who were felt most likely to help the congregation through a major transition. After three years, the congregation and minister might decide to make the relationship permanent as a covenanted bond.

You and she did that together. As far as I can see she had a very successful ministry especially in the first six or so years when a strong ministry was most essential. I hope someday you'll consider having pictures of all your ministers – past, present and future – on a wall in a prominent space in this building. They did, do and will work their hearts out for you.

That's one essential call of the minister.

But once again what is that call really mean? In Christianity, if someone has a Call to ministry, it is considered to be a calling from God. We might remember the passage from the Gospel of Matthew that reads “**many are called but few are chosen.**” This statement comes from Jesus' parable of the Wedding Feast and may well have several interpretations. The saying is, however, well known as a statement of the struggle so many people have with their calling.

Judaism and Islam also have similar versions of calling.

I looked to see what version of Calling and Buddhism might have when I googled it and this was the most common link of Buddhism and call: “...[The Buddhist gold-plated cell phone](#) is meant to appeal to the largely Buddhist population of China complete with jade adornments, traditional Buddhist instrumental music, and Buddha-vision which offers an always available video image of the great Buddha. The battery is even embossed with a likeness of Buddha. Fitted with a lot of fabulous

tools and options this technology is certainly bridging into new territory.”

I can assure you and hopefully Debra can as well that a call to Buddhism is not picking up a Buddhist gold-plated cell phone. There might be an inner voice but there's no God or even the Buddha at the other end of the line. It's not that simple.

My own call to ministry was cantankerous. I didn't wake up one day in 1986 or thereabouts and decide "I am going to become a minister". There was no flash of insight or a conversation experience. I had had visionary experiences from childhood through my mid-30's that kept hinting about vocation. I had been an insurance adjuster, university of administrator, graduate student in medieval Icelandic culture, and also a bank manager. They were all jobs but they weren't vocation.

In the spring of 1985 I had a vision experience one afternoon while at home in the Bay Area. I'd not partaken of any mind-altering substances but I was bemoaning a failed relationship and wondering what love was all about. I suddenly sensed myself separated from my body and in a dark place standing alone. I saw myself reach with my hands into my chest and pull out a glowing white sphere of light. I then held it up. It faded when liquid was poured on it but then came back to full light. The scene shifted and then I saw myself as a silhouette in stony armor. A crack appears in the armor and that same pearly white light pours from inside out. More cracks appear and then the armor falls away. The scene then shifts for the last time and I see myself standing in the doorway of our library room on the farm in Maine. The air is tinged in blue and I feel hands touch my shoulders and I am slightly lifted up. The vision ended but I believe to this day it expressed my future vocation.

Other ministers' stories will be different. I hope one of the questions you ask a potential minister is **“what is your sense of calling?”**

The call of the minister doesn't stop there. A minister does little good without a congregation as a partner. What is the call of a congregation?

There are many things you seem called to do. We've talked about your mission statement in recent weeks and that's one way of expressing your calling to important ministry. You have put tremendous time and energy into social justice works. The Lifespan Religious Education program continues to grow. There's Green Sanctuary and Welcoming Congregation. I would add here I hope the Welcoming Congregation program can be renewed this coming year.

I wondered what might have been your initial calling as a fellowship. I was fortunate enough to find this history for the 35th anniversary of the

Fellowship written by Gene Kellough in 1990. It was a fascinating read.

The speakers on your 35th anniversary service spoke of hard times and fun ones, too. The South was a difficult place in the 1950's and '60's and it echoed much of America even to today. I hadn't known you had a consulting minister for awhile and also a Minister on Loan. In 1954-55 there were 12 members in your first year. Your budget in your that year was \$135.25 and your expenditures were \$135.94.

I wondered what you believed your call – your vocation – to be in 1954. Most of the documents in this book don't go back to 1954 but your by-laws do. Under the section called "Purpose" these words are written: **"The purpose of this Fellowship is to further individual freedom, of belief, discipleship to advancing truth, the democratic process in human relations, and brotherhood undivided by nation, race or creed."**

I would suspect your calling, your art; your vocation has evolved from those words in 1954. A new version of your "Purpose" might be this one very familiar to you: **"Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another."**

If this is indeed your words of calling now, I find it striking that the words 'love', 'covenant', and "peace" have evolved into the language of your calling from back in 1954. A (dare I say) somewhat dry academic statement has grown into a rich emotional declaration of intent.

So you have a calling and your minister-to-be has a calling. How do they fit together? Is there a possible marriage or are there endless dates?

There are a few things that a covenanted ministry of congregation and minister are not. It's not like speed dating as it was with picking your interim minister last year. My name came out to you and other congregations on a Monday, your search committee interviewed me on a Thursday and I was hired by your board on Saturday. That's fast.

It's not a blind date because no one in Boston or elsewhere is telling you that you should pick this or that minister. No one will be appointed here to Clemson and you'll have choices all along the way as to what kind of minister you want.

A first step will be to generally agree that you want to continue ministry here. You've now had two very different types of ministers in Cynthia and me. You'll now begin to consider what skills you want for future clergy here. Cynthia was skilled at pastoral care; I am not especially gifted in that area. Some ministers love social justice; I adore budget sheets, planning strategies and committee meetings.

A search committee will be formed that will represent the diversity of this congregation. There was a miscommunication recently that suggested you already have your search committee as the Transition Team. That's not correct. You and your Board must choose a search committee by fall. I have seen search committees of 5-7 people have veteran members, GLBTQ folk, young adults, and people not in leadership. Anyone who is on the search committee ought not to take on any other volunteer work for the church.

The search committee will then have to put together a Congregational Record to be online at the UUA website. This profile will be developed with your input about things like what's important about Sunday Services, what do you want a minister to be like, what do you see as your future plans, etc.

Then the dating will begin. Ministers will explore your online profile and express possible interest. They will have filled out their own exhaustive Ministerial Record Sheets as well that you will review.

Your search committee will interview possible candidates by phone and probably narrow it down to 3 or so people. Those clergy will then be invited to pre-candidate as the finalists. The search committee will interview them. There'll be a sermon presented at a neutral site like Greenville or other UU churches.

Hopefully one pre-candidate will be chosen to be The Candidate. If that person accepts the conditional offer, the exciting work will begin for all concerned. A criminal background check and references will be done. A schedule for a full week with you along with two Sunday services will be planned for probably April or May 2012. The minister's spouse or partner should be also invited for that week.

There would then be an unending series of meetings, events with food, Southern hospitality, and of course the two services. At the end of the candidating week after the Sunday service, there would be a congregational meeting and vote on the candidate. Usually the affirming vote must be at least 90% of those present.

What's the end result?

Ideally it's a marriage between two partners who have their own shared calling to good life, mutual support and a passion for the healing of the world.

This will not an arranged marriage nor is it a series of blind dates. The marriage won't be perfect but what relationship is?

Why think of a shared calling as a marriage? At the heart of it, I believe we all want to have enduring and loving relationships. Ministry is one of them and the marriage is a calling to your shared greatness.

I would like to close my comments with a brief reading from Rev. Richard Gilbert in his sermon to the Baltimore UU Church in 2002:

Each one of us is called to conviction if we listen to the still, small voice within a troubling voice, a disturbing voice, a compelling voice, an imperative voice. We are all called to this ministry of love and justice.

The German poet Heinrich Heine stood with a friend before a cathedral in France. “Tell me, Heinrich, said his friend, why can’t people build piles like this any more?

Replied Heine: My dear friend, in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than opinions to build a Gothic cathedral.”

And it takes more than opinions to build a religious faith that inspires; it takes more than opinions to sustain a movement that would repair the world; it takes more than opinions to build the Beloved Community of Love and Justice. If we aspire to be more than mere occupants of time and space; if we wish to be more than mere historical footnotes; if we wish to be creators not merely recipients of history, we had best open our ears and our hearts to hear and to heed the call.”

All of us are called to be our best.

So is your future minister whose name you do not know, whose face you do not yet recognize.

They await your offer of a date but secretly they hope for a marriage where the call comes every single day for you all.