

Ministry Among Us
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church
Committee on Ministry Service 4/17/16

OPENING WORDS

Good morning. My name is Noel Genova and I am a member of the Committee on Ministry. As part of our work this year we have been exploring the various facets of ministry in our church community. This service is intended to share some of what we learned.

Ministry Among Us

By Rick Grover

What is ministry and where do we find it at A2U2? As a member of the Committee on Ministry I thought it was a good idea to learn more about the meaning of ministry. Task in hand I consulted Webster's dictionary. Here is what I found.

Ministry is...

1. the office, duties, or functions of a minister
2. the body of ministers of religion (i.e., clergy)
3. a person or thing through which something is accomplished

While familiar with the first two definitions of ministry, I found the third definition about accomplishing something rather promising so I continued my search, this time consulting an on line dictionary. There I found ministry to be defined as "to attend to the needs of someone else". Now this definition seemed even more promising. I was looking for something that made sense to me in terms of what I experience here at A2U2. For me, our Sunday services help to guide me in my spiritual journey, but I see lots of "caring" going on around here at other times and in other venues.

Well at this stage I suspected that I was on to something so I dared to move on to the next stage of inquiry. This time I bravely typed "what does it mean to minister?" into the google subject box. Now I need to offer a cautionary note for anyone who dares follow my path. There is a lot of stuff out there on what it means to minister. Numerous invitations to join all sorts of religious groups ranging from the seemingly nice to the downright frightening. But, much of what I found seemed to stem from various Christian traditions. Realizing I am likely oversimplifying here, I would say that most of this material is exemplified by the following quotation from Martin Luther.

The idea that service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt but the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that the service of God takes place only in the church and by works done therein. ... The whole world could abound with services to the Lord ... not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, and field. - Martin Luther

Powerful stuff, but aside from the important idea that ministering goes on beyond the altar, the seemingly singular focus on serving the Lord didn't really work for me. For me, a better way of thinking about ministry is described by something else I found:

“The Greek word in the New Testament that is often translated as “ministry” is diakonia. The basic meaning of this word is “service.” It can refer to tasks as basic as waiting tables, caring for the poor through monetary gifts, or proclaiming the gospel. The term is not limited to the service of a select few appointed to particular offices within the church. In fact, the exact opposite is the case. Paul said that those who hold offices in the church are given gifts for the purpose of enabling all of God’s people to do ministry”- (source: on line Bible.org)

So what does all this mean for ministry at Allen Avenue? Well, ministry is certainly what Rev. Myke does when she delivers our Sunday services. Her words help to ground me. They remind me of our principals and our mission. They prod me to think more deeply about my actions. Am I truly living by our UU principles and our A2U2 mission? But Sunday services are also about our community. When I look around the sanctuary on Sunday mornings I am reminded that I am not alone. I am a member of a community that supports me. A community that is here to help me in my spiritual quest. A community that is here when I need other forms of help. And like our community, ministry in our church goes beyond our Sunday services. It is there in the spirit of service as the pastoral care and caring connections people do their work. And ministry is what happens in religious education and our adult education programs. And ministry happens every week in our spiritual enrichment groups. But we here at A2U2 do so many more things? Might it be possible that other, perhaps less obvious activities, are also part of our ministry? Ministry among us?

Ministry as Worship

By Noel Genova

One obvious task in the job description of a minister is delivery of services, on Sunday mornings in our case. Some refer to this part of ministry as “worship”, which can be a term loaded with unintended baggage, evoking images of God worship, adherence to the Word of God, or strict following of a liturgy which has become meaningless for the participant. I have found a completely different meaning of the word Worship during my 50 years as a UU, 30 years in this church, and 10 years with Reverend Myke as my Minister.

Our denomination allows, even challenges us, to draw on many sources for inspiration, consolation, joy, compassion, meditation, and understanding of oneself in relation to the Universe. Many use worship to find and deepen all of these, and more, in ourselves. Ministry as Worship comes from our history, our Minister, our friends in fellowship in the Congregation, and from ourselves. When we feel moved to do so, we Minister to others, within and without the walls of the Sanctuary, the church, and our beautiful church grounds.

I like the way Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, expresses the need to care for one’s own self, which he accomplishes through meditation, a practice which is included in many of our Sunday services.

"Caring for yourself, reestablishing peace in yourself, is the basic condition for helping someone else. You can help another person stop bringing suffering on himself and others. Once you know how to defuse the bomb in yourself, you will know how to help your friend defuse the bomb in herself. To be able to help, we need to have at least a little calm, a little joy, a little compassion in us."

Our denomination supports us in our diverse methods for achieving inner peace through prayer, meditation, or other means. Here is a line from the turquoise hymnal:

“When I breathe in, I breathe in peace, When I breathe out, I breathe out love.”

In addition to regular Sunday morning services, sometimes referred to as “worship services”, our ministers perform functions such as child dedications, marriages, and memorial services. These services often involve moments of prayer and reflection, which for me are aspects of worship. During my time as a member of A2U2 I have received and enjoyed these services from several ministers, including Reverend Myke, who prayed with my late husband Paul as he reached the end of his life, led a prayer service at his bedside with close friends and family the night before he died, and, along with Rick Kimball, led the service memorializing his life and death. Notice that these acts of worship included not only the Minister, but many members of this congregation, as well as others, who wished to join us in prayer as we witnessed Paul pass from this world into the unknown.

So far, I have spoken of Ministry as Worship from a personal, congregational, and denominational point of view. Ministry as Worship can also function to bring us together, as individuals and UUs, with others, particularly as we work toward social justice, shoulder to shoulder with people who worship differently from us. I speak of the importance of joining in the greater community, however large that might be. Again, I quote the Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh, referring to the great Christian Minister and social activist, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King:

"When I met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1966, during the Vietnam War, one of the things we discussed was the importance of building community--or, as we call it in Buddhism, sangha. Dr. King knew that community building was vital. He was aware that, without a community, little could be accomplished. A solid sense of brotherhood and sisterhood gives us strength when we feel fear or despair and helps sustain our power of love and compassion. Brotherhood and sisterhood can heal and transform our lives. Dr. King spent much of his time building a community that he called 'the beloved community'.

I have participated in many social action projects over the years which commenced with a prayer, or moment of silent meditation, often led by a minister, as we centered ourselves, and prepared to enter into community with others, to work toward a shared goal. Service is our prayer. The power of love and compassion is, for many of us, the source of the drive to serve our communities through social action.

My point here is that we minister to ourselves, each other, and the greater community in many ways. I will give an example of learning a form of worship from John Howard, a member of the Worship Committee.

Several years ago, John did a 2 part workshop on making of prayer beads. These are my beads. I use them frequently when I have need to settle and center myself.

We start with 4 beads. The bead's holder can meditate in whatever he or she wants to on these beads. For me, they are the 4 directions—East for clarity of mind, South for comfort and warmth, West for beauty and creativity, North for strength. I face the 4 directions as I use the beads.

Next is the bead used for contemplation regarding whatever or whoever we are praying to. For me, this is easy. God and the Universe are One. I won't elaborate. I totally respect that many do not experience God the way I do.

The next 5 beads are the breath beads. I thought long and hard about these beads, which are repeated 3 times. I use part of the Lord's Prayer, which I learned in public school at the age of 6, and have never forgotten. I'm sure my parents were horrified that I was forced to learn this prayer in school, and repeat it every day until the practice was stopped by the US Supreme Court. I'm glad that I am now allowed to say it if I want to, not when I am expected to, while others are not forced to mouth words which are untrue for them. In any case, here are the 5 lines of the prayer I send out into the Universe, taken from our gray hymnal:

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our debts,

As we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

But rescue us from evil.

In truth, I say it a little differently:

Thank you for giving me enough to eat.

Allow me to forgive myself for harm I do to others, for without this I will not be able to accept forgiveness from God or other people.

I must forgive others, which is sometimes difficult for me to do.

Help me when I am in the time of trial,

And protect me from evil.

The second green bead is for self-reflection, on ways I want to work on myself. For me, this generally means focusing on being less judgmental, more kind, more compassionate, and more forgiving.

The third green bead is for meditation. I generally sing, at least mentally, a song, usually from the spiritual or gospel traditions.

The fourth green bead is for the very traditional part of prayer which includes asking for help from God. Now, I don't really believe in this, but I do take the opportunity to think about those around me, either close to me, or people in crisis such as after an earthquake or a bombing, who need assistance either in healing, or with worldly cares such as food, shelter, and freedom.

I am grateful to worship with a Minister and Congregation who support me in worshipping in my own way. I receive strength from all of you, and hope to give back in a form of Ministry when I sing during a Sunday service, spend time with your children in the RE wing, offer a summer service, or help out with the tasks of the church, including social action.

Blessed be.

And Service is its Prayer

By Rick Grover

As part of the Committee on Ministry's exploration of ministry in our church we met with the Social Action committee to seek their views on how they minister as part of the work that they do. This is some of what was said.

Social action work lives up to our mission statement. This work is the right thing to do. Doing this work is my spirituality

Doing social action work is putting our values into action.

Ministry is really all about helping others.

Sometimes I feel despair given the work that I do. Doing social action ministers to me.

Listening to these comments helped me to deepen my understanding of what it means to minister as a UU. The phrase “and service is its prayer” kept coming back to me as I thought about all the helping I see in our church. And then the answer to my question about what ministry means at A2U2 was revealed. Ministry is living our UU principles and our A2U2 mission. I guess I knew this all along at some level, but as our dialogues about ministry progressed I developed a deeper appreciation for just how widespread ministry is in our church.

So for me, ministry at Allen Avenue is truly ministry among us. It is living our lives according to our mission and principles.

I see how we value the inherent worth and dignity of every person as we treat each other with care and as we take the time to start our committee meetings with “check ins”

I see how we strive to promote justice, equity and compassion with our social action work.

I see how we support one another in our search for spiritual growth as we meet for our Sunday services, teach in religious education and join together with our spiritual enrichment groups,

Now this is probably a natural place to end this reflection, but I have one more learning I’d like to share with you. Over the course of our dialogues about ministry I couldn’t help but notice that sometimes I don’t minister as well as I might. For example, there are times while sitting in a committee meeting that I find myself praying -- for the meeting to end. Sometimes I am less than eager to head off to another church commitment. I have even been known to get a little grumpy about writing up a report for the annual meeting. Now all this might simply mean that I must double down to work harder to do a better job of ministering among us. But then again, maybe what I really need to do is strive to do a better job of keeping my greater purpose in mind. For this, I remember the story about Christopher Wren and the workers building London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral.

One day in 1671, Christopher Wren observed three bricklayers on a scaffold, one crouched, one half-standing and one standing very tall, working very hard and fast. To the first bricklayer, Christopher Wren asked the question, “What are you doing?” to which the bricklayer replied, “I’m working.” The second bricklayer, responded, “I’m building a wall.” But the third brick layer, the most productive of the three, the future leader of the group, when asked the question, “What are you doing?” replied with a gleam in his eye, “I’m building a cathedral to The Almighty.

Much in the same way the third bricklayer thought about his work, I want to think about all the little-- behind the scenes-- jobs that I can do at A2U2. Making coffee or ushering for Sunday services, serving on committees, teaching and helping out in RE, cleaning up the church building and grounds, working on the pledge campaign, helping out with the holiday fair and auction, and so much more. All of these things support our collective effort to live our lives in accordance with our principles and mission. As a member of the social action committee said, “Consider all of the little things that people do to keep A2U2 going. Isn’t this ministry? I think it is. What we do here at A2U2 ministers to me and helps me to minister to others. Here I get the guidance and support that I need to carry on. And service is its prayer. Blessed be.

