

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Effective Power Sharing and Ministerial Partnership”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 6, 2011

Spoken Meditation

Winter, your days are numbered.

We've suffered your dirty, crusty snow
 and your frozen arctic blasts long enough.

We want to park near the curb again
 and no longer stumble on icy patches.

We long to shed our winter coats,
 and feel the warm sun on our chests.

We hunger to glimpse crocuses and snow-drops
 peeking through frozen soil.

We yearn to see the riot of green leaves
 bursting forth from tree tops.

Yes, it's still early March.

We know you've got more misery in store for us.

But we're watching our calendars.

We know spring is just two weeks away.

Winter, your days are numbered.

And ... we're counting them down.

Reading

1 Samuel 8:5-22 (NIV)

5 They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." 6 But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. 7 And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. 8 As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt

until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. 9 Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do." 10 Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. 12 Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. 15 He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. 16 Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. 17 He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. 18 When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day." 19 But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. 20 Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles." 21 When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. 22 The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."

Cambridge Platform (1648), CHAPTER VI

Of The Officers Of The Church, And Especially Of Pastors And Teachers.

1. A church being a company of people combined together by covenant for the worship of God, it appears thereby that there may be the essence and being of a church without any officers, ...
2. Nevertheless, though officers be not absolutely necessary to the simple being of churches, ... the Lord Jesus Christ, out of his tender compassion, has appointed and ordained officers, which he would not have done, if they had not been useful and needful for the church; ... for the perfecting of all the saints...
5. The office of pastor and teacher appears to be distinct. The pastor's special work is, to attend to exhortation, and therein to administer a Word of wisdom; the teacher is to attend to doctrine, and therein to administer a word of knowledge;

Sermon

I look forward to General Assembly, our yearly meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations at the end of June . Our ministers meet right before GA starts. I enjoy attending the opening reception, usually in a hotel ballroom, to catch up with my beloved colleagues. I cherish spending time with them and sharing our passion for ministry.

One year I encountered a minister who I greatly respect. I was surprised to see he looked tense. After some small talk, I bought him a drink and asked how things were going. He hesitated... then said, "My congregation and I are having some troubles right now. I'm thinking it may be time for me to move on." My heart sank. I thought to myself, "If someone as good at ministry as this fellow gets into a church fight, what hope is there for the rest of us!"

Several days later, I saw a dedicated lay leader I knew well in a convention center hallway and approached her. She had been president of midsized congregation. Her congregation had a reputation as a "plum," a great place to be a minister. She looked a little beaten down. I asked how she was doing. She said with a tear forming in the corner of her eye, "It's been a tough year. We just worked out a negotiated resignation with our minister."

She too hesitated, then said with her voice trembling, "Why can't we all just get along?"

Whenever good ministers and good congregations have trouble with each other, I tremble too. What kind of trouble might be lurking around the next corner for any of us?

Most days, the congregational boat sails along happily. The sun shines down and all's right with the world. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, a storm blows in ... and the minister and the congregation find themselves driven onto the submerged rocks of conflict. And those rocks often have the names "power" and "authority" on them.

Are congregations and ministers just victims of capricious congregational weather conditions ... or is there something we can do? Is there a way to help ministers and congregations get along with each other, even in tough times?

The Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal might find an answer or two to these questions as part of its current area of study.

I think of the Commission as our elected UUA think tank. In a four year cycle, they study some element of Unitarian Universalism then generate a report about it for General Assembly. In the past, they have studied:

- Empowerment: One Denomination's Quest for Racial Justice, 1967 – 1982
- Belonging: The Meaning of Membership
- Engaging our Theological Diversity
- Interdependence: Renewing our Congregational Polity
- Our Professional Ministry: Structure, Support and Renewal

Their latest study topic is:

- Whose in charge here? The Complex Relationship Between Ministry and Authority.

That authority relationship with professional ministers is usually clear in any congregation's bylaws. The members collectively own the assets. The Board and officers of a congregation raise and spend the money. They write the policies and make the rules. The minister gets control over what happens for an hour on Sunday morning – or at least during the 20 minutes he or she gets to offer a sermon. The congregation grants any other power a minister wields.

This kind of religious organization is called “Congregational Polity.” We inherited it from the Puritans who first formalized it in a document called the Cambridge Platform in 1648.

Ministers were not integral to their congregational design. The Puritans recognized themselves as living saints, selected by God for salvation, before they were even born. They didn't think ordained clergy were necessary. Their favor with God made them capable of any needed ministerial duties. They saw pastors and teachers as functional aids to the community, identified through their special gifts from God.

We inherit this anti-hierarchical authority structure as our slice of the Reformation. When Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses to the Wittenberg Church door some 500 years ago, he rejected the authority of the Pope. In those days, by buying an indulgence, Catholics believed they could rescue their less than perfect dead relatives from purgatory and help them on their journey to heaven. This didn't fit with Luther's understanding of scripture. It didn't fit with God's radical grace to save whomever God chooses. Luther was disgusted with the idea that God could be bought off with a bribe. And so he rejected the authority of the Pope. Luther embraced the authority of a reasoned approach to scripture, and fractured the Christian world.

Of course power struggles aren't new. The balance of power between leaders and their followers endlessly causes problems. That's why I find this morning's reading from Samuel instructive. Give too much power to leaders and they are quite likely to abuse it. Yet we hunger for the saving power of great leadership. The Jews saw how effective kings were at projecting military power. Empowering ministerial leadership can also yield terrific results

... and also unexpected problems.

The benefits of ministerial leadership are achingly clear to any small Unitarian Universalist congregation without one. How often, at a UU District meeting, have I heard this hunger for the help and the inspiration they know a minister can provide ... the right minister of course. One that will do what they are told, not rock the boat too much, and not meddle in congregational affairs.

But meddle they do, usually with the best of intentions, and conflict ensues.

The solution to the problem seems transparently obvious. Ministers and congregations have to share power effectively with each other. The more power they share with each other, the more effective they will be. Congregations that don't share power with their ministers undermine their own potential for growth and development. Ministers who grab power and autocratically try to control their congregations divide them and undermine their base of support.

The successful implementation of power sharing, however, challenges the most healthy congregation and the most talented minister. I don't want to jynx myself or our congregation by sounding like I'm bragging, but I think we do a darn good job of it here. Today, I'd like to suggest one thing I do and the congregational leadership here does, that is critical to our success. I see it as a key component in power sharing. Without it, power sharing is next to impossible.

What do we do? We continually work to build trust in each other.

Here five of the ways I do it.

First and foremost, I love this congregation. I care deeply about the members and the institution. I pour my time, talent, money, energy and enthusiasm into this place day after day, sometimes 10 to 12 hours a day. Yet my love extends beyond the individual members and the current leadership and staff. I love and have faith in a Spirit, a Vitality, a collective being that is at the heart of FUUSA. That Spirit was here before we came and will be here after we're gone. That Spirit has continuity with our over 165 years of history. That Spirit lives in the present and in the vision we project into the future. This Spirit transcends each one of us yet includes us. I'm deeply committed to protecting, nurturing, and encouraging the being, growth and development of that Spirit.

Second, I bring that Spirit into language. By pointing at it and naming it, I celebrate, and encourage its growth and development. Undefined, each of us projects our own personal

preferences on it. This can cause endless conflict since many of us want to make it in our own image. Ministers sometimes want to turn a congregation into a vanity project too. This is a big mistake. My job is to help the Spirit of this congregation, a Spirit bigger than any one of us, *become known to itself* so it can grow and develop.

Third, I use *self-definition, partnership* and *transparency* to advance this definition process. By defining what I think, what I sense and what I feel, in relationship to the whole, I model a healthy way of being in partnership with our congregation. I demonstrate my commitment to telling my truth AND my commitment to hearing your truth. When we appreciate each other's truth or *internal* reality, we can continue to clarify a shared institutional identity. Little ... fosters that process ... like openness and transparency, without hidden agendas.

Fourth, even carefully clarifying our shared institutional identity honestly, openly and transparently will still yield conflict. We'll disagree, get angry, fearful, upset and mad. That's normal. That's human. That's just how people are. *How each of us responds to conflict* matters a great deal in the trust building process.

I'm committed to using persuasion rather than manipulation. I'm committed ... to preventing the discomfort of my own anxiety ... from immobilizing me or alienating me. I'm committed to moving toward my opponents and staying in relationship with them. I'm committed to finding appreciation and understanding, even when we can't find agreement. And I'm committed to keeping my mind open enough to be changed in the process. These commitments build trust and reduce systemic anxiety.

The last way I build trust I'll mention is by *being patient*. The world doesn't revolve around me. Forces outside my control often determine how fast things happen. The Spirit that drives FUUSA has its own timetable. My responsibility is to keep my shoulder to the wheel and do my part.

Here are five of the ways our congregational leadership builds trust.

First, just as I'm committed to openness and transparency, so is our congregation. Every major decision gets publicized. If controversial, we're likely to have a congregational conversation creating the opportunity for member input. We'll be having one next Sunday to discuss modifications and improvements in our Safe Congregation Policy. We strive for near consensus to make sure all voices are heard and carefully considered. I particularly appreciate how dissenting voices are respectfully heard here as part of our open and public process.

Second, members carefully select our leaders here. Our bylaws require we have competitive

elections for key positions, using proportional voting techniques. We elect Religious Education Council and Social Responsibilities Council members. The ballot for all these positions is cast at our Annual Meeting each year, the third Sunday of May.

Third, our leaders responsibly manage our financial resources. We budget carefully and conservatively. We make a full accounting of income and expenses each year in our annual report. Safeguards protect the whole process.

Fourth, beyond running the institution, there is a personal kind of responsiveness here that inspires trust. Our Caring Network and our new Pastoral Care Associates program work together to support our members in need. Whether it is friendly visiting, transportation, meals, calls, or emotional support, our congregation wants to be there to help.

And fifth, that caring extends beyond our current membership. Our congregation has a special interest in welcoming those marginalized by society that share our values. Being a Welcoming Congregation, we are committed to welcoming those who identify as part of the Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual and Queer communities. We strive to welcome those with sensory and mobility impairments. We strive to welcome those from historically marginalized communities. Most recently, we've moved toward greater openness and better support of our veterans of military service.

In these ways and others, we signal our congregational trustworthiness to our members, friends and visitors.

That trustworthiness builds commitment.
Greater commitment leads to greater satisfaction.

And also know ... trust is fragile. It takes years to build trust and only a few moments to undermine it. Knowing trust's vulnerability keeps me vigilant striving to protect and encourage its growth and development. I don't want to show up at General Assembly, yet another casualty of a church conflict... and ... I'm humble. I know it can happen to the best of our ministers too.

Ultimately, it is up to each of us. No iron-clad bylaws, policies or practices can protect us completely. People make mistakes and hurt each other. We share power imperfectly, at best.

Our willingness to return again and again to our first principle matters most. No matter what, the person I'm in conflict with has inherent worth and dignity at the core of his or her being. Period.

Let that radical love at the heart of Unitarian Universalism, be our guiding authority in ministry and in congregational life.

Benediction

Emerson said, "Trust men and they will be true to you;
treat them greatly and they will show themselves great."

Let us go forth committed to see the greatness in each other,
offering trust in that worth and dignity we intuit
and sense in each other.

Let us not be discouraged that others
do not always rise to that greatness.

Our faith in that greatness
is one of our greatest gifts to each other.

All of us benefit from someone who has confidence
in what we can do and accomplish.

Let trust be the foundation that helps keep the peace
and facilitates our ongoing partnership.