

Defining Community Ministry

*a paper prepared by Daniel D. Hotchkiss
for the UUA Department of Ministry
August 1995*

Summary. The UUA has many things to do before the promise of the 1991 community ministry bylaw will be fulfilled. Among these are raising money to support community-ministry employers, honoring lay ministry, and improving services to community ministers. One barrier to such action is the lack of a common understanding of community ministry within our congregational tradition. This paper proposes definitions of community ministry for use in specific situations: at the granting of Preliminary Fellowship, at ordination, and in determining what kind of work qualifies as “active service” in community ministry. The aim is to interpret congregational polity to permit a wholehearted commitment to community ministry while maintaining institutional coherence and a sense of shared purpose in our ministry.

Behind the UUA’s recognition of community ministry lies the conviction that the UU movement has a mission and an opportunity beyond our congregations. To succeed in this larger sphere we need ministers with special training and a special calling to ministry outside the parish. This is not a new idea for Unitarian Universalists, but neither is it a field where we have distinguished ourselves. A few other denominations have a strong ministerial presence in schools, colleges, hospitals, and the military—even in proportion to our membership, we do not. One barrier to effectiveness in community ministry is the lack of a common understanding of the place of community ministry in congregational ecclesiology.¹ This paper will propose some understandings of community ministry in continuity with, but not narrowly bound by, a congregation-centered understanding of the church.

The UUA General Assembly wrote Community Ministry into the bylaws in 1991. The delegates were motivated both by a sense of fairness toward UU ministers working in community settings and by a vision of increased social outreach through ministry. The bylaw has led to changes in the requirements for Ministerial Fellowship and improved service to community ministers by the UUMA and the Department of Ministry. The number of theological students who say they plan community ministry careers has increased sharply. However, we have done little so far to increase the number of positions available for ministers who wish to work in community settings.

Much remains to be done. Most of the action to date has responded to demands for fair treatment by ministers already committed to community settings. Worthy as this is, it is notable that we

¹ For a strong statement of the difficulties involved in reconciling congregationalism with community ministry, and for a stimulating statement of some of the historical and theological ideas behind the present paper, see: Starr King Community, Ministry Project, *Community Ministry: Opportunities for Renewal and Change* (Starr King School for Ministry: February, 1995). Especially helpful for its theological and historical reflections is Rebecca Parker’s paper “A Hand is Laid Upon Us?”

have done almost nothing to increase the number or effectiveness of UUA ministers in community work. Among the barriers to such action is the lack of a common understanding of how community ministers fit into our traditional ways of thinking about church and ministry. Such an understanding needs to be consistent with our congregational traditions, but not needlessly limited by them. It should foster a sense of equality and common interest among ministers. It should focus our resources where our expertise is without closing the door on new opportunities for service. Before attempting to propose such an understanding, let us review briefly the practical steps we would need to take in order to strengthen the UU presence in community ministry.

First among these necessary steps is to raise money. The job market for community ministers is highly competitive. Because of contracting budgets in government and healthcare institutions and the decline of mainline ecumenical denominations, jobs in chaplaincy, councils of churches, and community agencies are getting scarcer.

If the UUA wanted to increase the number of our ministers in community settings, it would need to raise money to support the institutions that employ ministers. The mission and budget of the Department of Extension or Social Justice could be enlarged to include this. Possibly a joint effort with the Service Committee could be negotiated. Money for community ministry could be raised either locally or through the UUA. A few congregations raise serious money and social advocacy ministries; matching grants from the Fund for Unitarian Universalism have encouraged this. The UUA might usefully study the United Methodists, Reform Jews, and other religious bodies that have excelled in funding community ministries.

A greater institutional commitment to community ministry would compete with present priorities, including service to congregations. If we want to do it, we have political groundwork to lay before we can. An adequate theory of community ministry is needed in order for this debate to begin.

A second essential step is to honor more fully the ministries of lay persons. No matter where we draw the boundary of professional ministry; there will be skilled, dedicated, and effective lay persons who live out their faith in service outside that boundary. To make it clear we mean no dishonor to these ministries by calling them "lay," our theory of ministry needs to include a higher recognition of the ministries of lay persons. Such recognition might combine elements of the New Testament diaconate, the Canadian chaplaincy, the Commissioned Lay Leadership program, and an acknowledgment that much of the ministry of lay persons occurs outside the church. When we honor lay ministry more fully, we will be more convincing when we say that the professional ministry is set "apart" and not "above."

A third concern is with the services and support provided to ministers and their employers by the UUA and local congregations. The practical barriers to this include: the reluctance of community ministry employers to support participation in UUA institutions, employee-benefit laws that make it possible for the UUA to provide services to UU congregations that employ ministers that it cannot provide to other employers, and attitudes among parish-based ministers that their calling is somehow "more ministerial." Our lack of a common theory leaves community ministers free to demand whatever they like, and other UUs free to take simplistic positions that place community ministry at the margins of denominational life.

In moving toward a definition of community ministry within our congregational polity, let us begin with the definition of ministry used by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. This definition has broadened as the MFC has acted, one by one, on requests by ministers for recognition. Ric Masten's twelve-string ministry of music was once the stock extreme example; today it seems nearly conventional. By recent standards, virtually any service or advocacy work would seem to qualify. Our ministry could, if this trend continues, include many people who work at apparently secular jobs, but who hold Fellowship and regard themselves as ministers. Their congregations, too, might celebrate and honor them as such. There is nothing irrational or even new in this possibility—Ralph Waldo Emerson esteemed himself a minister long into his lecturing career. In ordinary speech, “ministry” can refer to a defined profession, or it can mean any activity that renders service, seeks justice, or reveals the divine. The step we are taking, looked at in this light, confirms this movement from a narrow to a broad meaning of the word “ministry.”

On the other hand, as we decide how far to broaden our concept of ministry we need to be aware of practical and theoretical difficulties that accompany too broad a definition. Shortly after granting Fellowship to Ric Masten in 1971, the MFC retreated to the position that it could grant Fellowship only for ministries it knew something about. In practice this meant candidates had to demonstrate competence in ministry to UUA congregations even if they meant to work in other settings. The MFC felt it could credibly claim competence to certify parish-based ministers because the UUA consists of congregations. To certify the plethora of other ministries, the Committee was not (and, I would say, still is not) competent. The MFC can limit the range of ministries it certifies without impugning those who stand outside the limit.

A related problem has to do with the Committee's ability to judge work performance for the purpose of granting Final Fellowship. For ministers in parish settings this is difficult enough; for chaplains the committee's claim to competence is more attenuated; for folk singers, math educators and community organizers it is close to zero. If the committee is to certify competence at all (as distinguished from good character, psychological health, and “presence”) there needs to be a reasonable match between the skills assessed and those of the assessors.

A theoretical difficulty that we must solve concerns the traditions from which we inherit the term “minister.” Is “minister” an office of the church, a spiritual quality in ministers, or some mixture of both? In seventeenth-century congregationalism (the major source of Unitarian polity), the local church made the minister by calling him to service. Apart from a call to a particular church, a minister was not a minister. In more connectional polities (e.g. the Universalists) the church makes ministers not through the local congregation but through synods, presbyteries, or the bishop. This regional approach, which has obvious practical advantages for recognizing ministers-at-large, retains appointment by the church—embodied, in this case, in the regional body—as the essence of the ministerial office.

Today, thanks to Emerson and others, we think of “ministry” in far more individualistic terms than any orthodox church polity would countenance. For us, “ministry” is both an office of the church and an inner glow that burns whether the church recognizes or ignores it. This concept of ministry affects our institutional practice. In discerning ministerial qualities, we use charismatic language and speak of an individual's “gifts” and “call” and “presence.” In assessing ministerial preparation we speak the language

of professionalism, using terms like “competence” and “preparation” and “requirements.” The focus in each case is on the individual and whether he or she has what it takes to be a minister. The place of leadership the individual has earned within the institution is—more seldom named as a criterion.

I suggest that in refining our thinking about ministry, it would be well for the church to reclaim its historic power to name its own leadership. Ministry is more than a profession, more than a set of competencies or even traits of character.² It is a relation between leaders and followers—a covenant, a mutual commitment. The “church,” in our mixed polity, is primarily the congregation, but includes also the MFC and others who act in the congregations’ behalf. For community ministers, too, a principal criterion for recognition should be the degree to which the people of the church have recognized the minister as a leader among them.

Perhaps luckily, since we can hardly hope to get complete consensus on broad questions of ecclesiology, our policy choices arise in narrow contexts. As a denomination, we define ministry at three moments: when granting Preliminary Fellowship, at ordination, and when determining whether someone is in “active service.” My proposals for these occasions follow:

Granting Preliminary Fellowship. In granting Preliminary Fellowship, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee relies on theological schools, internship supervisors and committees, career assessment centers, Clinical Pastoral Education supervisors, and a 40-minute interview with each candidate. The stress here is on emotional and psychological health, academic preparation, and professional skill, including the ability to respond effectively to a group in a stressful situation.

However, the MFC is not simply a credentialing board; it represents the congregations of the UUA. It certifies competence, discerns qualities of leadership, integrity and compassion. It evaluates the quality of relationship between the candidate and the UU movement during the years of preparation. The final question is not, “Did this jump through the necessary hoops?” but, “Is this person ready to become a religious leader in our movement?”

Most members of the public who encounter a UUA community minister understand him or her to come “from” the UU church. This is especially true of those community ministry employers that require denominational credentials. A UU community minister should enter chaplaincy or counseling or advocacy or summer camps or UUA administration with firm roots in the church. From our congregational tradition we receive—and I believe we should retain—an understanding of “the church” as meaning primarily (though not narrowly or exclusively) the life of congregations.

For this reason, I would require all candidates for Fellowship to have substantial experience and strong roots in congregational life. This does not mean that all ministers bound for the chaplaincy would need to be skilled preachers. It does mean that the MFC should be prepared to say (as for all other ministers) “This person is ready to become a religious leader in our movement.” As noted above this is a question not only of qualifications but of relationship and personal standing in our denominational

² “The leader can have the skill for his or her role, the occasion for its use, and still lack followers who can respond to the person or the moment.” Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders*, (Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 14.

community. Having been recognized as a leader *among us*, a minister who then serves in a community setting can fulfill the expectation that he or she “comes from the church.”

Ordination. In our tradition, ordination by the local church, not Ministerial Fellowship, creates a minister. In practice, even in the 1600s, church members relied on colleges and mentors to attest to academic preparation, and on synods to assess doctrinal acceptability and professional skill. Today, congregations generally look to the Ministerial Fellowship Committee for advice before ordaining, as the MFC in turn relies on schools, CPE supervisors, and internship committees.

What, then, is the contribution of the ordaining congregation to the making of a minister? I believe that congregations ordination primarily a testimony to relationship. Ministers are typically ordained by a “home church,” an internship congregation, or the congregation that first calls them. Any of these choices is appropriate if the congregation owns the person as one of its leaders and claims his or her ministry as an extension of its own.

In ordaining a minister who plans to serve elsewhere (as most ministers eventually will), a congregation affirms its own connections to the outside world. If an ordinand will be a community minister, it is the congregation’s social mission that the minister is charged to help fulfill. Ideally, the ordaining congregation will remain in relation to the minister throughout his or her life.

Even in its classic formulation, congregational polity never meant that congregations should turn inward or exist to serve themselves or their own members.³ What congregationalism means is that the church is primarily the gathered church, the lay church. However far the church’s tendrils may extend—to storefronts, clinics, counseling centers, college campuses, even unto Beacon Street in Boston—the root and source of claim to church-authority is in the local congregation. Ordination is a valuable symbol of the roots of ministry.

Active service. In order to achieve Final Fellowship, a new minister must complete three years’ satisfactory, evaluated, compensated, full-time “active service?”⁴ (Actually “full time” includes anything over half time.⁵) Once in Final Fellowship, a minister must remain in “active service” or be placed in Associate Fellowship, thus losing priority access to ministerial aid. Ministers in Associate Fellowship

³ The Cambridge Platform, with its emphasis on mutual succor and support, is sometimes cited as evidence for an inward-turning tendency in congregational churches. While this tendency in virtually all churches is too evident to deny, the Platform’s words need to be understood in contort. The kind of citizen activism we have in mind when we think of a socially involved church was hardly thinkable in Puritan Massachusetts. The churches of that and place did practice passionate concern and intimate involvement with the regulation of community life and amelioration of the lot of the unfortunate. Cf. Rebecca Parker, Starr King Community Project, *Community Ministry*, p. II, 9.

⁴ MFC Rule 16, “Final Fellowship.”

⁵ MFC Rule 18, “Full Fellowship.” “For all three tracks of ministry, full-time active service shall be defined as engagement in compensated ministerial activities which constitute fifty percent or more of a typical work schedule. This requirement may, at the Committee’s discretion, be waived when it determines that the ministerial service is substantial enough to warrant Full Fellowship.”

remain in the UUA Directory, but must give evidence every three years of “active involvement in denominational, district, local society and collegial activities.”⁶

The rules do not define precisely what kind of work qualifies as “active service” in community ministry. This choice is left to the Fellowship Committee, guided by the phrase “counseling, chaplaincy, social justice, education in religious studies, or such other ministries as the Ministerial Fellowship Committee may recognize.”⁷ Increasingly often, the MFC must judge whether a job is ministry or not.

We are beyond the point where we can rely on common assumptions; we must adopt a written definition. Such a definition should be both clear and open-ended —covering, so far as possible, parish-based ministries, conventional chaplaincies and newer forms of ministry.⁸ Community ministers should be required to maintain an institutional tie to a congregation, District, UUA affiliate or, in exceptional cases, to the UUA itself. Implied in this requirement is reciprocal obligation by UU institutions to keep their side of the relationship alive. The Department of Ministry has proposed a definition of active service as an addition to the Policies of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

For those whose work falls outside whatever definition is finally adopted, it is worth noting that there is nothing dishonorable about Associate Fellowship. It does not imply that the person’s work is unimportant, that the person is no longer a minister, or even that the work is not, in a broad sense, ministry. On the contrary, it affirms that ministers sometimes find work outside professional ministry, and the UUA does not necessarily view this as “leaving the ministry.”

By defining how our ministry is rooted in the life of congregations but not limited by congregational boundaries, we open the UUA to a transforming future without rendering our ministry diffuse. Clear definitions enable us to focus our resources where our expertise is, and maintain institutional coherence and a sense of shared purpose in our ministry. Common understandings of the roles of congregations, districts, and the UUA help each to be effective in supporting ministers and sharing ministry.

Healthy institutions define themselves clearly but not rigidly, and have the capacity both to say yes and to say no. Without limiting our embrace of persons and their gifts, we can choose institutional commitments that harmonize with our abilities, our history, and our purposes.

⁶ MFC Rule 19, “Associate Fellowship.”

⁷ MFC Rule 8, “Community Ministry.”

⁸ The IRS has its own definition of ministry. We do not need to follow it, but we do need to make it clear that UUA recognition does not guarantee that a minister will be recognized as such for tax purposes. “In deciding if a person is a ‘minister’ for federal tax purposes, the following five factors must be considered: (1) the person must be ordained, commissioned, or licensed; (2) administration of sacraments; (3) conduct of religious worship; (4) management responsibilities in the local church or a parent denomination; (5) considered to be a religious leader by the church or a parent denomination. It is not clear how many of these factors must be satisfied in order for one to be minister’ for federal tax purposes. Some Tax Court and IRS rulings suggest that all 5 factors must be satisfied, while others suggest that a more flexible ‘balancing’ test may be applied (under which some of the factors need not be satisfied).” Richard Hammar, *Church and Clergy Tax Guide* (1995), p. 56.