

Ministerial Leadership in Action

The Challenge

The transition of a lay led congregation to full time ministerial leadership can be like walking through a minefield. As the Fellowship's first full time minister I was very careful to enter the congregation not as a savior or a judge or an architect but rather as a student. I spent the first year of my ministry learning what people valued and what they wanted changed. The changes I initiated in the Sunday service liturgy were done with care testing the waters with each change. I wanted the congregation to know I respected their traditions, habits and history.

The congregation hired me on a deficit budget which would draw down a special ministerial fund over several years. Their desire for a minister was strong enough to open them to growing the size of the congregation. As the congregation grew, so would income and when that fund was exhausted, the congregation would be in the black.

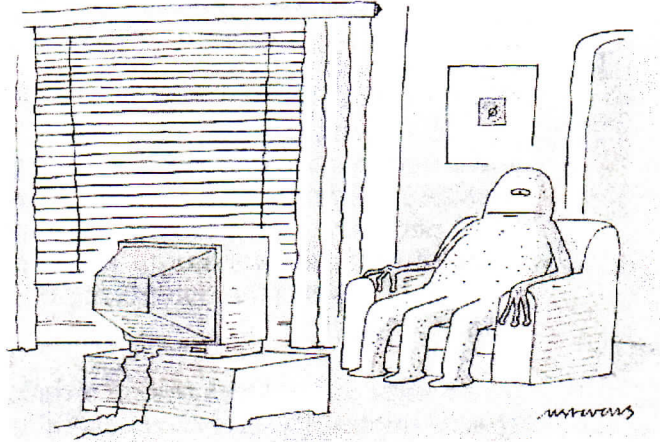
From the beginning I realized that the congregation's traditions, habits and history were at odds with the desire for growth. The services of the congregation were almost entirely directed to the retired and elderly. The congregation had no religious education program for children. No activities happened at night. The Board met at a time when people who worked could not attend. To grow, this congregation would need to diversify.

Facing the Challenges

If the congregation wanted to attract anyone with children we would need to **start a religious education program**. Our son Andy was our first participant. The board hired a baby sitter in the first year to come in and be with him during the service. In the spring a member of the congregation and I organized a Saturday workshop to figure out what kind of children's program we wanted and how to get it off the ground. To help in recruiting teachers, we decided to have the children's educational program from 9:00 to 10:00 Sunday morning and then have a recreational program for the children during the service. Having religious education at a different time than the service allowed me time to teach a class and get to know our kids. To help the children feel they belonged and increase their acceptance by adults, I included them in the adult service making a timeslot for them called "kid's time." The program is solidly established with a number of families in the congregation now.

Our facilities do not have any classrooms for our children nor is there much space that could be converted for this use. A generous donor suggested we build an addition for this purpose. Tension mounted when the costs came in and people wondered how we would pay for the minister and the addition. My spoke out against the addition and gained respect for caring about the Fellowship's financial situation. Instead of an addition we **built a screened in deck** which helped with the coffee hour overflow in the busy winter months. Another kid friendly facilities project was **building a playground for the children**.

The Fellowship was not well known in the community when I arrived. If we wanted to attract a more diverse congregation, we would have to be more visible. To address this problem, I became **active in the Charlotte County Minister's Association** and participated in their programs. I also experimented with **direct mailings to new residents** of the County. My **web site** has brought in new members. I encouraged the Southwest Cluster of the Florida District decided to **sponsor Prairie Home Companion on public radio** and have our name mentioned each week. While we could do much, much more, the Fellowship has improved its public image for all these efforts.



"Funding for 'Nova' is provided by Merck and Lockheed, by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and by annual financial support from viewers like you."

Developing the Infrastructure for Growth

In a socially driven congregation, as many Unitarian Universalist congregations are, people join if they feel like they belong. The feeling of belonging usually means a recognition of sameness. To increase the diversity of a congregation, there needs to be a way to identify with the congregation beyond racial, cultural, intellectual, class and social sameness. Identifying the passion which drives a congregation, articulating the dream that inspires action, and inviting visitors to share that passion and to help fulfill that dream opens a bridge across the barriers of difference. To open an aging congregation to young families, to open a suburban white congregation to racial diversity, to open a conservative congregation to sexual diversity requires a passion and a dream to bridge the differences.

One of my goals to promote the growth and health of the Fellowship has been to bring them back again and again to the issue of congregational purpose and passion.

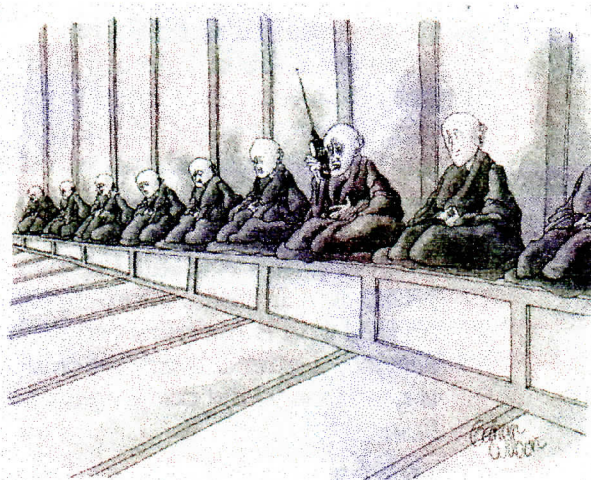
Motivating the congregation has not been easy. Part of the reason has to do with the rootless-ness of a "manufactured" retirement community like Port Charlotte. Almost every resident has come from someplace else leaving behind their civic loyalty.

In this past year we started a mission statement committee. While progress is slow, I'm practicing patience with the process for I know that a useful mission statement requires soul searching and reflection. An effective mission isn't something I can impose on the congregation. For it to be effective, it must touch something deep inside them to inspire their commitment. Only their commitment to their mission will energize them and attract new members.

Growth in Unitarian Universalist Identity

Many members of the Fellowship in their 70's and 80's joined before merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists. Their sense of denominational identification hasn't changed with the institutional ones. Others have a narrow view of what how much diversity Unitarian Universalism can contain. To foster a wider, expanding sense of what and who can be included in our movement today, I've used the vehicle of adult education to share with them the possibilities and opportunities that come from congregational diversity. Here is a sampling of some of the classes I've taught.

- **Buddhist Meditation** (in the Vipassana style I practice. I wanted the participants to begin to discover and develop their awareness of the processes of their minds.)
- **UU History and Principles** (using contemporary UUA Videos and resources to get the most current thinking about UU identity.)
- **Build your own spiritual practice** (exploring ways to deepen the experience of living without changing anything but attitudes, attention, concentration and awareness, discovering the spirituality already present in one's life)
- **Videos from General Assembly** (I videotape workshops from General Assembly to bring back to the congregation. I used a videotape of Diversity Day, for example, to grapple with the problem of racism in our congregation)
- **"Searching for God"** (based on the PBS series and used to help participants explore their religious identity.)
- **Ken Wilber's Sex, Ecology, Spirituality** (using this book as a class on his interesting "theory of everything - its 'holons' all the way down")
- **Experiential Religion** (based on a book by a Catholic Priest from India rediscovering his mystical heritage I met at a Buddhist meditation retreat titled, Song of the Skylark. The focus of the class was to show the importance of personal experience in religious formation and growth)
- **Four Faiths** (by UU minister the Rev. Fred Campbell "A Unitarian Universalist exploration of the diversity, roots and growth of religious belief systems". The goal of this class was to expand tolerance for the different ways people believe in UU congregations)
- **Six Leaders Of The Reformation** (based on a video series distributed by EcuFilm. covering the pivotal lives & ideas of these Protestant Reformation Leaders (one each week): John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Martin



"None of this seems to be doing me any good at all!"

Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, the Anabaptists and William Tyndale helping us explore our Protestant heritage.)

Nurturing Connections

The growth of a congregation depends on building the fabric of connection and relationship within the congregation. Social occasions are useful tools to build these networks such as potlucks, lunch and movie outings, and of course chatting during coffee hour. Unfortunately, too often these connections are superficial. My favorite way to build intimacy in a congregation is to encourage small groups. Here are some of the small groups that I've created and worked with::



- **Conversation Among Friends** - an open and spontaneous discussion group which meets every Tuesday morning. It began long before I arrived and is the most regularly attended event besides the Sunday service. I attend every week as it provides a way to be in touch with what is going on in the congregation. If there is a problem, it shows up here first.
- **Minister's Vegetarian Lunch** - a regular Wednesday affair I hosted my first year to provide a way to make contact with people in the congregation and expand their minds about eating vegetables, fruits, grains and beans.
- **Dream Group** - was modeled on the work of Rev. Jeremy Taylor with whom I have studied. The group members kept a dream journal. Each week we would share dreams and work on one or two remembering that only the dreamer can truly know the correct meaning of a dream.
- **Circle Worship** - scheduled in the evening to appeal to younger people and break the taboo about having programs at night. Designed to appeal to members of the congregation wanting something more spiritual, participatory, or contemporary.



- **Common Concern** - comes from a UCLA program for designing leaderless support groups. The group members are trained in the use of “talk tools” over a period of 10 weeks. The group we formed was for people dealing with addiction issues, mostly food. This was a very successful group and created a strong supportive community for the members as they dealt with addiction and life’s ups and downs.
- **Inner Work** - a self-exploration and growth group I led to both help people who are experiencing personal challenges and those who are wanting to understand themselves better with the goal of inner transformation.
- **Tao of Practice** a “kata” or set of exercises which articulate all the joints and stretches the major muscle groups combined with relaxation and meditation outlined in the book, *The Life We are Given* by George Leonard and Michael Murphy. It is a more accessible practice than meditation and provides significant health benefits. I’ve taught it for about a year and have a small committed group of participants. This is an effective practice for those who want a more kinesthetic experience of religion.



The Results

After five years my ministry in the congregation is well established, generally respected and praised. The congregation is growing in a wider diversity of new members. The last two years we have balanced the budget. Things are still tight and a great deal more needs to be done to expand the Fellowship’s services. Most importantly, the congregation has proven to itself it can support a full time minister.