

Call and Covenant
Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
Sunday, September 23, 2007

Selection From the *Congregational Record*, 2006 Ministerial Search
“Profile of the Minister We Seek”

- Someone who is excited about the potential for UUCM to become a “break-through congregation”
- Someone who is confidently grounded in what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist...and who will use his or her life experiences when speaking from the pulpit to teach and illustrate spiritual growth
- Someone who is mentally healthy, takes care of himself or herself, leads a balanced life and has a network of support from family and/or friends.
- Someone who can minister to a congregation with varying religious traditions, spiritual perspectives and beliefs in the divine.
- Someone who recognizes and respects personal boundaries when interacting with staff and congregants.
- Someone who is an able, confident leader and administrator who provides strong, consultative leadership so skillfully that it is barely recognized for what it is.
- Someone who has a sense of humor about himself or herself and can help us see the humor in our struggles.
- Someone who genuinely likes us and exudes a sense of happiness and joy with us.
- Someone who is skilled in conflict resolution and who can model that behavior for the congregation.
- Someone who can help us regain confidence in ourselves and overcome our risk aversion particularly in relation to financial matters and change.
- Someone who is accepting of us and is excited about tackling the challenges we face and can direct change in a loving way.

Isaiah 6:1-8 (edited)
Hebrew Scriptures

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne in the temple, and angels were in attendance above, and one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of God’s glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen God, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the angels flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The angel touched my mouth with the ember and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Call and Covenant
Sermon
Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister

For his final service last July, the Rev. Rod Thompson spoke about his work with you during the past year as your Interim Minister. He reiterated an outline of the work of Interim ministry, provided an assessment of his work with you (and your work with him), and at the end of the service, in a ritual of transition, he handed me the keys to this building as a symbolic passing of the torch of spiritual leadership. Rod also commented that one of his jobs as an Interim minister was to tell the truth – and then get out!

As I sat in the chairs of the congregation that day, I felt as though a far off light of ministry was shining on both of us. Yet I also felt that the ministerial light was filtered and refracted through the stained-glass windows of our different roles. The particular light I see is colored by my role as your newly called and settled minister. In contrast to the role of an interim minister, a huge part of my calling as your settled minister is to speak my truth...and then stay with you and live with you and come back to be with you week after week, year after year. If we join together as a spiritual community in voluntary association and yet speak the truth to each other, then the only way we can tell the truth and still remain together is by speaking our truth in love.

This congregation has been through lots of turmoil, not only in the past few years after a difficult ending with the previous settled minister and through two interim ministers, but also pretty much for its entire 47-year history. I say this not as a source of shame, but as an observation that needs to be told. It is one truth about this congregation that needs to be spoken and addressed in the context of love. When this truth of the past is addressed with love and compassion, then I believe we can move forward with a clearer and more unified vision of our future together.

Though I learned a lot about this congregation during the search process, I learned even more last weekend. On September 14 and 15 the Board of Trustees and I completed a Start-Up Workshop facilitated by Nancy Heege, the District Executive of the Prairie Star District. On Friday night we reviewed some history of this congregation, and on Saturday we talked about a variety of expectations, set some goals and began some discussions about our covenant with one another. As the weekend progressed, two issues became more prominent in my mind: 1) I need to create more clarity around the difference between a “hired” staff position and a “called” ministry; and 2) the ambivalent relationship this congregation has had with its ministers.

To begin with, a minister’s role with a congregation is unique among professional relationships. We may understand this relationship a bit differently in our own times in our liberal religion, but it is a relationship that has ancient roots, at least as far back as life among the tribes of Israel as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. The notions of “call” and “covenant” originally emerge early in the Book of Genesis between God and Abraham and later is strengthened in the stories about Moses and the books of the prophets. Though God issues many calls to tribes and individuals throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the classic story of a “call” is the one we heard earlier from the prophet Isaiah: “Then one of the angels flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The angel touched my mouth with the ember and said: ‘Now

that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ ”

This is a powerful story. It is a thrilling and frightening story. To be in the house of God and be asked to speak for God is a great and terrible honor. It is an honor that requires speaking God’s truth to people who usually don’t appreciate hearing it. It is an honor that means the prophet must live among the people but not be of the people, and with the primary source of inspiration coming only from God.

As Unitarian Universalists, we typically do not believe in the literal truth of Isaiah’s story. Yet one of the most challenging aspects of any ministry is to see beyond the crisis or apathy or desire of the moment and hold on to the word of God – to see clearly that which is of ultimate importance.

In his exploration of what it might mean to hear and respond to a call in today’s world, the Quaker teacher Parker Palmer writes: “Today I understand vocation quite differently – not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth.”

A person’s “original selfhood” takes many forms, but for some, the urge to fulfill that original selfhood means entering the ministry; it means saying to ourselves and saying to the universe, as Isaiah said, “Here am I; send me.”

One difference between a hired position and a called ministry has to do with the issue of contract versus covenant. A hired position involves a contract that, at its most basic, is a legally binding statement between two parties that includes a specific list of duties and responsibilities. If either party does not follow through on their list, the contract is broken and the working relationship is finished.

A covenant, on the other hand, is a more broadly defined dynamic and evolving relationship. In contrast to being hired by a single person to carry out a specific list of duties, a minister in the Christian Protestant tradition (in which Unitarian Universalism has its roots) is called into the work of ministry by the entire congregation. This is the process you and I walked through together last spring. So rather than follow the belief that God speaks through a pope or bishop, the theology and history behind our process is the belief that the divine spark of God exists in each person. Therefore, each person must speak up about whether or not they believe a candidate is worthy to be the minister of their congregation.

So the minister is actually responding to two different calls. The first is the call from the Divine, from the original selfhood we were given at birth. The second call comes from a congregation. In order of response then, the minister is accountable first of all to that which is of ultimate importance, and secondly to the congregation.

Let me be clear about what I am not saying. Just because a minister is accountable first of all to that which is of ultimate importance, I am not saying that he or she is allowed to ignore, abuse, or despise the congregation. I am not saying that the minister can do anything he or she wants to do. And I certainly am not saying that the minister is always right. I am simply saying that the minister has been called to ministry by the gifts of their original selfhood, and as a result of their training and calling, keeps an eye on the greater mission and purpose of communal spiritual life. It is true though, that a tension exists between the call of God and the call of a congregation. And it is in the middle of this tension that the covenantal relationship between a minister and the congregation resides. To live fully and authentically in a covenantal relationship, the minister and the congregation must rely on trust and love.

In the old stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, God had a covenantal relationship with the Jews. Though there are plenty of stories about God's wrath, there are also lots of stories about how the chosen people strayed from their purpose and God called them back to righteous behavior. But stories also are told about how God strays and a prophet or the people must call God back into right relationship with humanity. A covenantal relationship is a two-way street. When healthy and loving behaviors are not fulfilled, the relationship is not like a contract that is then immediately broken. Rather, it is the responsibility of each party to continually remind the other one of their purpose together in relationship.

The relationship under the umbrella of a covenant is a relationship of love. It is a relationship constructed to engage, to confront, and to question. It is a relationship that continues to evolve and grow over time. It is a relationship that requires each of us dive down into the deep wells of our souls and to bring to the communal table that what is best in each of us.

Ever since I entered into a relationship with this congregation through the search committee last spring, I have provided some new ideas and some challenges to the way things are done here. That is why I strived to be direct and authentic with the search committee, and direct and authentic with the entire congregation when I was here during my Candidating week in late April and early May. I wanted you to know, as you looked me over, who and what you were considering. By calling me to be your minister with a 97% vote in favor, you told me you affirmed the calling of my original selfhood, you appreciated the challenge and compassion of my presence, and that you felt what I had to bring was in alignment with who you are and who you want to be. By accepting your call, I told you that you are a people to whom I want to commit many years of my life, that I love you, and that I believe who you are and who you want to be is in alignment with the experience and gifts I bring.

As you worded it in your 2006 Congregational Record (the first document I saw during my ministerial search that introduced me to this congregation) you wanted a minister "who genuinely likes us and exudes a sense of happiness and joy with us; who can help us regain confidence in ourselves and overcome our risk aversion particularly in relation to financial matters and change [and] someone who is accepting of us and is excited about tackling the challenges we face and can direct change in a loving way."

So it is in this context of call and covenant, truth-telling and challenge, compassion and love, that I want to make some observations and address some of this congregation's history, especially regarding its ambivalent relationship with its ministers, and how that history may impact our future together.

According to additional information in your Congregational Record, this congregation began in 1960. It was then known as Amity Fellowship and began meeting at the Burwell School in Minnetonka. At that time, 55 adults and 60 children were using rented space on Sundays. By November 1964 there were 127 adult members. Among them were current members Irene Chanin and Mary Opheim and their families. After engaging two successive part-time Interim ministers for the first five years, the congregation decided to seek church status and search for a professional minister. In April 1965, this building was purchased. One year later, the year I was born (!), this congregation called, on a part-time basis, its first settled minister, the Rev. Robert Brownlie.

In its 47-year history, this congregation has had six called ministers, five interim ministers, and three periods, totaling six years, when you did not have a settled minister but only had guest speakers.

I am not smart enough to know for sure what all these numbers mean. I *suspect* it may involve a systemic ambivalence toward the spiritual and institutional leadership a full-time settled minister brings. This congregation began as a fellowship, and fellowships are organized by lay-led leadership. From what I know about biology and chaos theory, I know that the subsequent development of open systems remains highly sensitive to initial conditions. In other words, the origin of a system has a way of deeply influencing its subsequent development.

So, as this newly called full-time settled minister merges with a 47-year-old congregation that originated as a lay-led fellowship, how do we overcome the oppression of this systemic history and move into a more healthy future together? Perhaps we may catch a glimpse of this healthy future in the words of our new choir director. When I talked with him about this service, Mark wrote this to me about the song the choir sang earlier: the singer of the song is "trying to figure out whether there is a fight looming, whether they should stay together, what the other is trying to tell him, whether he has acted right, etc... But he keeps coming back to the fact that at the core there is love in the relationship, and he wants to work at it to see if it can work over time."

A big difference exists between romantic love and the kind of love that exists between a minister and a congregation. But I agree that a core quality of love exists in the covenantal relationship between a minister and congregation, including a desire to make the relationship work over time. As Hosea Ballou, a great Universalist preacher once said, "If we agree in love, no disagreement can do us any harm, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good."

The quality and the length of our relationship, between the newly called minister and the fairly young congregation, will depend on the awareness of our motivations and the compassion of our behavior within the evolving covenantal relationship between us. Let us bring our gifts of truth and love to this dynamic, and let us bring our best selves to the table.