

Everybody's In the Band
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
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In the fall of 2003, long before I was connected to this congregation, the Board appointed a task force to examine the committee structure of this church. The formation of the task force was motivated by the fact that, at the time, this congregation had over 30 committees, many with no members or only one member. In a report written a little later, the task force wrote:

Drawing...from many sources, [we] responded with an innovative proposal to replace the 30-plus committees with...seven ministries: 1) Communications; 2) Community; 3) Facilities and Operations; 4) Finance; 5) Lifespan Religious Education; 6) Social Action; and 7) Worship Arts.

The term “ministry” is commonly used by the Unitarian Universalist Association to refer to activity groups within a religious community that support the principles and purposes of Unitarian Universalism. [This] new organization aligns our activities more closely to our mission.

This congregation seems to have gained a better awareness of what these ministries do and how they differ from committees, but I still observe some confusion – both outside and within each ministry – about who is responsible for what activities, and who has the authority to make decisions. And some ministries, like the earlier committees, have very few people attend, some have no regular meetings, and we struggle with the process of finding and retaining facilitators.

It is important to remind each other why we are here, and what we want to do with our precious time and abundant energy. In his song, “Molly O’Malley’s,” Peter Mayer uses the setting of an Irish Pub as a metaphor for community. He writes that, “At Molly O’Malley’s, the patrons understand/ that the player’s fee is a pint or three/ ‘Cause everyone’s in the band/ Everybody’s in the band.”

In this church, everyone here is in the band, too. No one makes this congregation run but us. We are the ones who provide all the money, the time and the energy to make things happen here. In the largest possible sense, I’m talking about stewardship. Stewardship, in its largest sense, goes far beyond simply giving money; it is part of the definition of what it means to be a member.

Nonprofit organizations, health clubs, and children’s athletic teams all have membership requirements. Children’s athletic teams especially often have high membership expectations, including costly dues, the purchase of expensive uniforms, and the requirement of parents and children to be at every practice and travel hundreds of miles each season in order to compete. Parents will gladly shell out the money to have their kids be involved in programs like this. But when it comes to the liberal church, we typically balk at the notion of high expectations of our membership, and this mystifies me.

Over the past few years in our Unitarian Universalist Association, I have observed a shift among ministers and congregations as they also see this membership expectation discrepancy between secular organizations and our own congregations. The shift is toward higher expectations of membership.

I've seen many new formulations of membership expectations, but here is a list I like. I invite you to listen closely to this list and seriously consider whether these expectations are reasonable and appropriate for a religious organization:

1. Have a spiritual practice
2. Pledge
3. Serve the congregation
4. Serve the world
5. Attend Sunday services

I know this list may present a challenge to some of you, especially the expectation to have a spiritual practice and attend Sunday services. But if you are here this morning, you've already conquered that expectation!

We religious liberals often have difficulty discovering and articulating a corporate sense of identity, and a corporate understanding of why we gather. We often approach positions of power, or positions of perceived power, with a great deal of suspicion and mistrust. We also approach membership expectations with suspicion. We seem to feel that if our leadership has a sense of corporate identity, vision or awareness, then they will not be sensitive to individual needs. But if we do not have a sense of corporate identity and purpose, then how do we carry out the worship, mission and actions in which we say we believe? How do we come together as a cohesive community, and still retain our individuality?

In the video clip we saw earlier, Gil Rendle offers us a beautiful image about how we liberals may move through this bind. He reminds us about harmony. Harmony occurs when we each sing our own note, but we listen – as we *must* listen – to the notes everyone else is singing, so we can make a harmonic choir of our presence and ideas and action.

As I see it, stewardship in a congregation is very similar to harmony in a choir. Stewardship is much more than simply giving money, and bigger than simply agreeing to do something because someone asks. I now refrain from using the word “volunteer” when talking about people who get involved in church work. Instead, I have begun to describe members as “stewards.” For me, the word “volunteer” connotes someone who goes above and beyond normal expectations, whereas the term “steward” describes someone who understands that their church work is an integral part of what it means to be a member.

Membership in a congregation is not first about how other people may meet our needs. Membership is about stewardship. Stewardship is a matter of turning our individual desires around and making them into offerings. To be part of the community means to offer what we have in service to the community. It is a matter of adding our individual voices to the larger choir. It is a matter of creating harmony with the largeness of our purpose. Everybody is in the band. “Some join in with voices, some with pipes or reeds/ Some in the band clap their hands or laugh and slap their knees/ Some are still and listen with attentive eyes and ears/ And it's always strange how the music changes/ When they disappear.”

This past summer, as they recognized the need to spread this notion of stewardship and leadership, the Church Council decided to designate today as “Member Action Sunday.” They decided that today we would call our members and friends to action. They wanted to create space today to give everyone an opportunity to join and participate in some aspect of congregational life.

Today, representatives from all seven ministries are present. They each will have tables set up during the coffee hour after the service for you to go talk with them and learn more what they do.

If you are a newcomer or frequent visitor and are curious about who we are and what we do, I encourage you to try something that intrigues you. If you are a long-time member and have been one of the ministries, then I invite you to join a different ministry, and explore a different voice. And if you're a member and you are not involved in a ministry, or have not been involved in one for a while – then it is time you joined one!

If you teach in your day job and you want to teach here, or if you work with money and want to help us with our finances, we welcome your expertise. If your life training and work match the needs we have, we welcome your skill and talents and energy and inspiration.

But I also want you to know that this is a place where you can explore and expand your avocation as well. If you have a corporate job during the week, perhaps you'd like to get involved with worship here at church. If you deal with paper or people all week, perhaps here at church you'd like to get involved with some hands-on building maintenance. Or maybe you spend your days supervising other people, so when you come here you just want to help make coffee.

My approach to church includes the notion that church is a place where we provide the opportunity for transformation. This is a place that both invites and challenges us to be whole people. Rather than compartmentalizing our lives into “work” and “family” and “church,” this religious institution has the potential to empower our spiritual sustenance and transformation, uniting our separate and individual discord into a single harmonic choir.

This congregation has seven ministries, and each ministry has a facilitator. The facilitators gather once each month as group called the Church Council. Each facilitator is not supposed to do all the work of their ministry, but is supposed to *facilitate* the work of that ministry. As I talk briefly about each ministry, I invite each Facilitator to stand when I mention your name so that people, especially newcomers, can see who you are.

In alphabetical order, first we have the Communications Ministry. The two Facilitators are Lisa Stevens and Claire Cunningham. Among other things, Communications is responsible for the church website, writing press releases for church events, updating the sign in front of the building, standardizing the appearance of congregational communication, and coordinating information with our church office administrator who compiles and edits our church newsletter.

Next we have the Community Ministry. The facilitator position for this ministry is currently open. “Community” in this context refers to our internal church community. The Community Ministry is one of our larger ministries, and includes people who work on membership, Sunday morning greeting, spiritual care, soup suppers, circle suppers, and other church events and programs.

Third we have the Facilities and Operations Ministry. Lee Kaster is the facilitator of this Ministry. Facilities and Operations maintains our physical building and the grounds it occupies. Among other standard operations, they paint, rake, and repair. They also oversee maintenance of the building's heating system, and recently, the construction of new steps out at the front of our building, at the Rice Street entrance.

The Finance Ministry coordinates and oversees our congregational financial operation. The Facilitator of this ministry is Chris Hermann. Finance includes working with our Bookkeeper, Rita Jelinek, and the congregation's treasurer to monitor the operating budget, the capital campaign funds, the annual auction, and the annual financial canvass and pledge drive.

This ministry is currently beginning work with the Board to develop a long-range financial plan for the congregation.

The Facilitator of the Lifespan Religious Education Ministry is Michelle Maxwell. Lifespan Religious Education – also known as LRE – is responsible for the religious education of the children, youth and adults in our community. LRE works closely with Andrea Heier, our Director of Religious Education for Children and Youth, April Kaissen, our Youth Advisor, and also with Jodi Holden, our coordinator of Adult Education. This year we are working to improve and expand our adult religious education programming, so please see Jodi Holden if this is what you want to do.

Our sixth ministry is the Social Action Ministry. The facilitator for this ministry is John Crossen. Having recently agreed to be the Facilitator, John is already doing good things, and plans to do more. But I am aware that Social Action – and this is no reflection on John or any one particular leader – is an area of church life that most of us value highly, and yet we each have differing opinions about what is most important. One tendency that often occurs in church social action groups is to be ineffective because so many different people have so many different ideas that none of them occur – or people feel hurt or burned out if their project does not occur. So one of my goals and hopes with social action is for us to connect with the staff at our Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters in order to have them to support and guide us toward a more unified congregational direction in social action.

Finally we have the Worship Arts Ministry, facilitated by Weld Ransom. Because worship is such a large part of my role in this congregation, Worship Arts is the ministry I am probably most intimately acquainted with. The Worship Arts Ministry, also known as WAM, works closely with our Music Director, Greg Membrez, and our choir director, Mark Brekke. WAM helps to plan the liturgical year, schedules guest speakers when I am not in the pulpit, facilitates the ushers and chalice lighters, operates the sound system, and oversees people who work on aesthetics – a position that is also currently empty. Because of its connection with the music program, WAM also coordinates the annual concert series. This year, WAM is also working closely with the Committee on Ministry to develop workshops to help this congregation gain a greater sense of identity and purpose.

Gil Rendle talks about the need for the existence in congregations of both leadership and management. As Rendle describes it, management addresses the question, “Are we doing things right?” and leadership addresses the question, “Are we doing right things?” He also challenges us with the assertion that “Leadership requires us to learn how to make the rest of the congregation appropriately uncomfortable with itself.” Leadership in these times is not about finding the one right answer that will make everyone happy; leadership involves finding the courage to experiment with many new ideas all at once, to stand them up against one another at the same time and see how well they work.

In general, the congregation’s Board of Trustees and minister are the ones who engage in leadership, while the Church Council engages in management. But if each of our seven ministries has a clear understanding of itself and of its role in the larger congregational community, and if our ministries are populated by enough people, I also see a huge potential, too, for each ministry to be empowered to act for that ministry in ways that challenge the rest of us to be appropriately uncomfortable with our selves.

So today I intend to make you appropriately uncomfortable with where we are as a congregation. Today I am not going to theorize. Today I am not going to ask you to contemplate. Today I am not going to ask you which of our seven ministries sounds *interesting*.

Today I challenge you with a Unitarian Universalist altar call. Today I challenge each one of you to find your voice or pick up your instrument. Today I invite you to make a joyful noise. Today, before you walk out of this building, I call upon each one of you to decide which ministry you will join, and then go to that table and sign up for it. Today I call upon you to dig deep, make a commitment, and fully engage with one of our seven ministries. Without you our song will not play.

Today I call upon you to find your note in the choir, your part in the band, and to sing or play that note in harmony with the rest of us. As our closing hymn calls out, "Help us bind ourselves in union, help our hands tell of our love."