

What's It All About, Annie, or I Am a Minister and So Can You

Rev. Annie Foerster

September 28, 2008

When I made a contract to have work done at my house recently, the estimator created two documents – a work order and a financial agreement. I signed and received a copy of each. After the job was completed, I found that the workmen had left their copy of the work order behind. Before I could throw it away, I realized it wasn't the same as mine. Something had been added.

At the bottom of the page were four additional words, in large printed capital letters: LADY IS A PREACHER. Underlined. . . Twice. What was that all about? *Were the workmen being warned not to swear in my presence? Were the workmen being alerted that I might start to sermonize at any moment? Had the workmen been given the opportunity to opt out of the job because of my profession?*

I don't know. I could only imagine. The estimator had asked me what I did, but I know I didn't say 'preacher.' I said that I was a Unitarian Universalist 'minister.' But many people do translate minister into preacher. It's what they see: it's what they see ministers doing in the movies; it's what they see if their only experience with church is Sunday (or Saturday) morning; it's what they see a minister doing in their heads when they hear the word. A minister is a preacher. The lady is a preacher.

I have to admit that before I went to seminary, that's the part of ministry I rehearsed in my head most often. There I would be, standing up before a congregation, hands gesticulating, voice raised against evil, and raised again on the side of love and justice. Such drama in my mind. I had experienced my own ministers as teachers, as performers of sacred rites, as visitors of the sick, as counselors of the weary, as welcomers of the lost and lonely. But I thought that's the part of ministry I would really enjoy – preaching, sermonizing, being in the pulpit. I wasn't sure about the rest, the stuff I'd never done.

It turns out I like everything about the ministry, even attending meetings. What I really came to like about ministry, what surprised me, is the language of 'the call.' I love the idea of having a vocation, of being *called* to ministry, of letting my life speak. I thought of all the people who simply had *jobs*. I have had many *jobs* in the past and that kind of employment simply does not bring the same sense of fulfillment as having a *calling*. At first, I pitied those who did not have a *calling* or at least the language to talk of it as such; I thought such people could not let their lives speak.

I am wiser now. I know that people have callings even when they have *jobs*. I understand that people – all kinds of people – do ministry without needing to be ordained, without waiting to be called, without having to possess a language of the call. I know countless people in this congregation alone who are called to ministry within our covenant; possibly because of our covenant.

Jean Trumbauer, in her book, *Sharing the Ministry*, wrote: *The paradigms of ministry in today's churches are in the process of major change. The ministry of the church is a shared ministry. Each person is uniquely gifted for ministry, and these gifts consist of more than one's talents.*

This is new kind of language to most of us in the church community. It tokens a systems approach to church operations that includes ordained ministers, elected leaders and volunteers as mutual promoters of a shared ministry within the covenanted community. My new job description, my new ministry to First Church, if you will, is based in part on this concept and on this book. It says nothing about preaching.

A big task in any church community is finding people to do the work. Possibly, we have made it more difficult in the past because we think of the work of the church as broken up into *jobs*. Trumbauer says, "A common system in many churches might be called 'Fill the Slot.' The way this system works is that church leaders put all their time and energy into recruiting people to fill *jobs*. Get

the job done. Put someone in that slot. Anyone can do it. Part of the process of filling the slot she calls 'Fuss and Beg.' You know what that is. Every Sunday there is a fuss-and-beg announcement in the order of service. "We desperately need someone to do XYZ." Every issue of the newsletter carries a similar announcement. And those of us lucky enough to be online and connected to the First Church announcement list-serve get a third opportunity to be fussed at and begged to respond.

We are offering people all kinds of interesting and stimulating *jobs*. We think of them as just *jobs* when we could, says Trumbauer, be offering them ministries.

Before I get to explaining *my* new ministry, let me help you to understand this idea of shared ministry by introducing you to people in the congregation who are doing ministry. Some of them are people you probably already know. I mean, who doesn't know Linda Miltner? Linda is currently chair of the Membership Committee. She is at the Welcome Desk practically every Sunday morning. In addition, she doubles as staff. When our former Administrator Kathy Berger had surgery, Linda was in the office, taking on her duties. When Kathy retired, Linda took up the slack and then trained Marlo Troughton, the new Administrator. Currently, Linda is one of three people in the congregation who are adept at the new church database we are installing, a system that is going to revolutionize our recordkeeping and give access to information to you, as well as staff and elected leaders. She has trained the staff on its use and she will continue to tweak it and train others.

Now, that's a lot of work for one volunteer to be doing. What makes what Linda does a ministry and not just a *job* she has volunteered to do? Linda knows her gifts, her strengths and what gives her pleasure. That smile isn't fake. She likes what she does or she wouldn't do it and she does it out of a compassion at the center of her being. She has a ministry of administration and a ministry of hospitality at First Unitarian Church that gives her joy, and benefits everyone in this congregation. Linda follows her bliss and we receive the gift of her ministry.

If this were a choir Sunday, you would probably recognize among the familiar faces in the choir, both Nick Payne and Cynthia Heinrich. Together they have more than 40 years in the choir, both having sung long before they signed the membership book. Both have been vocal soloists on many occasions here and Cynthia has inspired us with her flute playing. Cynthia is the choir librarian and, I'm guessing, Nick is her unnamed assistant. But they are not just volunteers in the First Church choir. Their ministry of music goes beyond these walls. Every Christmas they have an open house, inviting people to sing Carols with them, partake of a fine repast and have an opportunity to contribute to feeding the less fortunate at this difficult time of the year. In addition, they offer through our Heart and Hand Auction an annual opportunity to *Sing For Your Supper*, to eat and sing with them in their home and raise money for the church at the same time. They each have a gift of music and they want to share it with as many people as they can. Do they feel a call? Do they let their lives sing as well as speak. Clearly they do.

Here's someone you probably don't know. She's a relative newcomer and she volunteers in RE, so you might not have had an opportunity to meet her. Her name is Beth Molinario. Beth, when she was asked about her gifts, said thoughtfully that she has a ministry to new mothers. She told the Extended Ministry Committee, when they invited her to join them, that she didn't have time for committee meetings. But, she said, she would like to be a part of their effort of pastoral care by contacting new mothers in the congregation and offering them help with of meals for the family until they get settled into the new baby-is-here routine. Wow! How I would have loved that. See, Beth doesn't know many people here yet, but she does know from experience the special needs and exhaustions of new mothers and she offers what ministry she has the gift and time for, by reaching out to them. She is an adjunct member of the Extended Ministry Committee, but this was her idea, her personal ministry, her calling.

In the past we have made distinctions that didn't foster this concept of shared ministry. We said that ministers are called to the church, staff are hired and volunteers take up the slack when we

can get them to respond to our fussing and begging. Yet, here I am, an ordained minister, hired to do a job, but I took it because it allowed me to continue my ministry at a level that suits my idea of retirement. It allows me to let my life speak. The door is definitely open to the concept of shared ministry at First Church.

There has been some *conversation* around my new job and its title. What does it mean? Congregational Coordinator and Pastoral Caregiver has been abbreviated to CC / PC. Co-president Carol Lloyd has been heard to remark, “We have our own R2D2.” I’ll say more at the congregational meeting this afternoon and in the newsletter that comes out today, but in part my job, my ministry, is to help Committees and Council organize themselves to better support the growth we are experiencing, to help continue the sense of community when we begin our experiment in two services after the first of the year, and to offer you opportunities for shared ministry in this beloved community. The Pastoral Care part is self-explanatory and I will say more about it later.

Loren Mead, author of *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, wrote that “congregations are called to a dual task: 1) to assist more and more people to identify what needs of the world cry out to them; and 2) to nurture and support each person and send each one forth to respond to these needs with his or her unique gifts.” That is my ministry; that is my goal. New members may recognize that we have already started this process. Ray Sinclair has been for more than a year now interviewing new members in their homes and helping them determine their gifts and where they might have an opportunity to do ministry. He is not doing volunteer recruitment. He is showing them how to connect in this large and growing community, and how to find their own special place for ministry within it. He shows them a path and offers them a language of shared ministry. He helps them be part of our covenant. That’s one of the reasons they are joining. That’s why they are staying. That’s why we are growing.

I don’t know if you noticed it as much as I have, but lately Sharon also has been using the language of ‘shared ministry’ -- in her column, and from the pulpit. I get a kick out of hearing her using this phrase, because it is close to my heart and I really believe in it. I love knowing that she does, too. One of the ministries we share is the ministry of pastoral care. This is such a huge ministry for any congregation, but especially one that is growing, as ours is growing. That is why congregations have Extended Ministry Committees, so that lay ministers can share in this ministry of compassion. But the bulk of pastoral care is usually on the shoulders of the pastor – the minister. In my new position, I’m able to lift some of that ministry from Sharon’s shoulders and free her for visionary ministry, prophetic ministry, administrative ministry, ritual ministry, the many, many tasks of a parish minister, that, by the way, include preaching.

Someone once asked me, with a note of concern, if I didn’t hate doing memorial services or visiting the sick in hospital. The question took me by surprise because, when I am performing these sad and necessary tasks, it’s when I feel most useful as a minister. I mean, weddings are fun and celebratory and I like doing them, but memorial services give me the opportunity to do healing ministry, to offer something to someone in a time of great need. Sharon feels much the same way. We are sharing a ministry we love.

That’s what it’s all about. That’s why I’m here; why I didn’t move to Texas this year. The call to ministry was once again too strong to ignore. I’ll be telling you more about my goals and tasks as the year progress, but here’s the bottom line. In one language system, I am here, in my Congregational Coordinator capacity, to help increase volunteer recruitment. Churches need volunteers to operate. Growing churches need a growing number of volunteers. But I am not kidding about this shared ministry thing. I will not help you fill the empty slots with warm bodies. I will not fuss and beg. I will try my darnedest to do away with fuss-and-beg announcements altogether. In the next few months I will be offering you, every one of you, except those whom Ray

has already interviewed, an opportunity to discuss your gifts – not your skills and talents; not an extension, necessarily of what you do for a living – but your potential for doing ministry. I will not be twisting your arm. I will help you locate places in this congregation and in the community at large – because this is about your life ministry -- places where you might practice your ministry, your calling, your covenant with all other potential ministers. And I will do this with the full knowledge that as professional ministers need sabbaticals from time to time, periods of rest and renewal, so do volunteer ministers. You will get no guilt from me or from any committee or task force I work with, if you want to take off a year, or change your ministry, or simply renew yourself by being ministered to. That's the beauty of shared ministry. We can do that for one another. We need one another.

In the meantime, I invite you to get to know all the ministers here. Look for the people with the biggest smiles and the most energy and ask them what they do and why they do it. They will be glad to tell you. And look for the people who seem sad or harried or lost, and ask them what you can do to minister to them. It's a start. It's a great start. You, my friends, will not be accused of being preachers, but you will be doing ministry. To paraphrase Stephen Colbert's new book, *I am a minister, and so can you*.