

Mission: Possible

One of the things you keep hearing me say is that this is a busy congregation. I've been happily surprised by how busy this building is during the week and how many different things are offered to our members and friends.

But all that busyness has a price. Raise your hand if sometimes it all feels like too much. I know the feeling. It's not just here; it's everywhere. Something has happened in our culture that encourages or even creates a harried-ness. I have plenty of ideas about why or how that's happened and I've blogged about it on our new website- another really fabulous but completely time consuming task for a small group of committed volunteers.

As this new year begins, it might be a good time to ask ourselves what we're doing that we'd rather skip. Take a moment. These things usually jump right to mind. That thing we dread. It's often some detailed thing that we took on thinking it wouldn't be a big deal, but it has a tendency to creep into every empty corner. And, usually, it's not fun and we're doing it alone and sometimes it's thankless. Sometimes it **can't** be avoided, but often it can.

Now, be honest. Is that thing related to this congregation?

I can't tell you how much I want your answer to be "no". I want everyone in this room to think "Gee, First Unitarian is the one place I get more than I give. It's the place I feel taken care of, where I feel like I'm really part of a community, where the time, talent and treasure I offer is joyfully given and joyfully received. I love the life I have here."

I might be new, but I'm not completely naïve. Some of you feel overburdened here. You feel alone on some committee or stuck with some task that you now feel obligated to continue, but exhausted by the thought. Some of you are afraid you'll be asked to do one more thing. I've even heard a few of you are avoiding signing our Membership Book, thereby entering our covenant and fully joining our community for fear that if you sign, you'll be asked to do something! Some of you poured yourselves out for a project or committee for years, only to discover that you burned out so badly, you weren't sure you wanted to be part of this congregation at all. (Of course, plenty of those people aren't here today.)

Those stories break my heart. I do not want to minister to a congregation of people who are that weary. Or, maybe what I mean is I don't want to minister to a congregation that has created a structure that enforces two choices: depletion or disengagement.

As your minister and the only person committed to this congregation full time, I'm taking on my fair share. I'm going to every committee meeting and trying to provide support in whatever way is appropriate. I'm working to fill gaps and supply leadership and otherwise take up whatever I can.

Unitarian Universalist theology, though, calls us to something more. In a traditionally hierarchical church, the minister or priest is in charge of everything. The congregants simply do what he (usually a he) says. In our tradition, we believe in shared ministry. We believe that the minister is called to leadership and a certain amount of heavy lifting, but that the Church or Society, in this case, is owned by the members of the congregation. I don't own First Unitarian. We do. Mine are not the only working hands, mine is not the only prophetic voice.

Again, this isn't about saving money or the minister not wanting to do the work. As some of you are getting to know me, you're finding the opposite is true for me; I'm one of those people who would rather just do it all myself and get it done. But, that's not our theology. Shared ministry is about understanding that we all have equal value and are equally necessary. Theologically, we are all needed. The minister has a particular skill and lots of experience, but must remain open and teachable. Ministers are not on pedestals, we are not set apart. Members are not on pedestals and are not set apart. We are here, as one community, fully engaged in the life of the congregation as partners in our work.

But that doesn't mean that this should be a burden for you. In fact, I believe it is a liberation and I want it to be your joy.

These challenges aren't limited to us. Every minister I know, every congregation I've seen, is struggling with the same issues. That's why, on Saturday, January 28th, members from Mt. Kisco and Croton and

Danbury are coming here to meet with us and with Mark Bernstein a paid consultant, to learn new strategies. (I'm begging you to put that date on your calendars and to come here to participate in this very important conversation.)

For better or for worse, things are changing. We need to rethink our approach. I don't know where we'll end up, but for now, I'm suggesting something a little different. Rather than thinking in terms of work to be done and committees to do it, I'd like us to think about ministries. This isn't just a new name for the same thing. I'm talking about something different.

I'm willing to bet that not a single person in this room is here today – or walked in however long ago – seeking to join a committee. You came looking for inspiration, for comfort, for community, for liberal religion, for values education for your children, to make a difference in the world. You didn't come in asking to organize the cleaning crew, to rake leaves, to make coffee, to manage or govern or teach or fundraise...but you're doing it now!

You might have come in to love more deeply, to learn to become the person you've always wanted to be, to have a place you can feel entirely at home with others, a place you are not alone in your thoughts, a place you can feel powerful in the world, a place your principles will be reinforced for your children. You came here with hopes about what you'll get, but you joined a UU congregation knowing that our theology is grounded in shared ministry and that part of getting all those things requires your involvement. Nonetheless, I want to end the notion that it means adding to your busyness.

Starting today, it is about renewal. My question to you is not "What do you think needs to be done" or "What are you willing to do" but "What inspires you!" Who do you want to be? How do you want to love?"

Again, this is about ministry. It's about how you engage the world. As part of this re-imagining, the Council and in turn, the Board, decided to depopulate all of our committees. Many (but not all) of our committees have a few members who are partially engaged and a chair or two who tend to carry the load. Depopulating is a way of releasing everyone from whatever obligation you think you're fulfilling. You're done. No one expects you to show up again next month. Let it go.

Instead, start thinking about your ministry. Do you have a ministry of hospitality? If so, maybe you'd like to join Membership- which I think is one of our most important ministries. Or maybe hospitality is your ministry, but you're more of a task-oriented person and would like to start thinking about coffee and snacks on Sundays. Today, for the first time, I'm gathering Worship Associates to create clear lines of authority regarding how we worship. Do you love to teach or become taught by our children? There's plenty of room in Religious Education. Do you want to celebrate our diversity and fight for civil rights for GLBT folks? So do the folks in Spectrum. People looking to think differently about how we eat and feed others might want to jump in with the new Community Garden folks. Maybe you're a closet curator and want to join Visual Arts or have been wishing for years that you had time to change the world through social action. Now you can. Let go of whatever is holding you back, and grab onto whatever propels you forward. The choices are dizzying.

Which is an important point. There's lots to do. Don't worry. Either it will get done...or it won't. It's OK. Remember, you didn't come here, you aren't staying here, because the light bulbs are florescent. Or, maybe you did. Maybe joining a community that is finding ways to live gently on Earth is exactly what you need. Good. We need you too. All I'm saying is that, we will survive if everything isn't done. We'll find a way, together. Don't worry.

Worry only about being true to yourself, being true to what you're called to do. Worry about being part of a vibrant community, filled with people living into their deepest selves and working together to create a new world. There are sign-up sheets in the front hall. Put your name down on the list where your name should be. Put a YES next to your name. YES, this is who I am. YES, I want to try something new. YES this is what I value, YES, this is exciting or interesting or meaningful. Please don't write your name with a "Fine, I guess this needs to be done" or OK, it looks like you need help." That's committee work, not ministry.

And, it's only for one year. Next January, we'll do it again. The lists will be empty, your name removed. You might decide this is your ministry for a long time, but things change. There's room for that here.

I'm also going to ask everyone-every member – to declare a ministry for yourself this month. To

become the congregation we want to be, we need active engagement from all of us.

Once everyone has found their place, we'll talk about instituting a sabbatical year. I've wanted to do this everywhere I've served. I think every volunteer should be allowed to say "enough". For 6 months or a year, every member should be able to take and take and take without giving anything back. Maybe you're grieving or have a new baby or entered the job market and you need to show up on Sundays for renewal- and that's all. That's OK. In fact, that's good. A few of you have told me that you've reached your limit, and yet I hear your names coming up over and over again. "Why don't we ask so-and-so to take on this huge task?" I've been throwing myself in front of those people, begging committees not even to ask. That's what I'm hoping for. 6 months, renewable once, of no one asking you to do anything. But, we aren't there yet. For now, I'm hoping everyone will find your ministry and begin to embody it.

I'm also hoping you'll all respect the choices other people make. I suspect that some, maybe many, of you will plant yourselves very much where you've been. I suspect that's true particularly for the music folks and our choir, our Finance Committee and our teachers. At the same time, a good number of you might take this opportunity to walk away from something you've been doing. I'm asking all of us to welcome the truth other members speak about what they are called to do.

This is what I want us all to do. Discover your ministry. And I'm hoping this ministry will begin in love. We are a community of devotion that understands love is a way of being, a choice. I'm asking you to make that choice, to remember that, when the fault lines shake beneath us, that love is the ground on which we walk together.

From this pulpit, I've talked about our mission. I believe we have a mission as Unitarian Universalists and as a Society. We are shaping the world in our image of love. That speaks to our passionate advocacy of civil rights outside our doors, but it also speaks to the way we are together.

The folks on our Committee on Ministry have declared the work of clarifying and living our mission as their ministry. I've said this before, but it's worth repeating. Mission is what we're here to do; ministry is how we do it. So, shaping the world in our image of love might be the big picture, but the details are found in our ministries. The folks who organize and participate in our Midnight Runs are carrying our image of love to NYC streets with blankets, food and conversation; our Worship Associates are bringing it to Sunday mornings by preparing a seamless worship service that meets the needs of our community; and our building folks are caring for our space, ensuring that we have a warm, lit, clean building we can call home. Our Committee on Ministry holds our mission and does what they can to support the rest of us as we embody that mission in our ministries.

What makes them so good at this has entirely to do with who they are. COMs are always made up of trusted members, people with great authority emanating entirely from who they are rather than an outside source. It's not an easy job, at least in part because you have to pull out of the mainstream of congregational life in order to be effective. There's an isolation that can come with that reality. But, there's also a reward. It comes from answering the call to serve a congregation you love in a broad and important way and it comes from the ability to shape the world – our world – in our image of love.

Because the COM is new here, I'll take this moment to tell you that Lisa deMauro, Mark Davis and Sarita Roy comprise our Committee on Ministry and will for at least one more year. They've been doing a very good job so far, serving this congregation and seem, to me, to be inspired by the vision of a congregation filled with people who have found their ministries and are living out of their deepest passions.

That's the congregation where I want to be the minister. I bet that's the congregation you wanted to join. The one where everyone wants to create the world in our image of love. Where everyone is inspired by their work and comforted by their community. Where everyone who walks in, wants to enter our covenant of hope and companionship.

The first step is on those brightly colored papers in the front hall. That's where your ministry begins, where you will find yourself coming alive, where you can declare yourself ready to shape the world in your image of love, where you can proclaim who and how you want to be in this world and where hope lies in this new year.