

Shared Ministry

~ by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Worship Director

I begin with a Hasidic tale:

There was once a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Only five monks were left: the Abbot and four others, all over 70 years old.

*In the deep woods near the monastery there lived a rabbi. It occurred to the abbot to ask the rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The abbot and rabbi spoke at length, but when asked for advice, the rabbi simply responded by saying, "I have no advice to give. **The only thing I can tell you is the Messiah is one of you.**"*

The abbot returned to the monastery and told his fellow monks what the rabbi had said. In the months that followed, the old monks pondered the words of the rabbi. "The Messiah is one of us?" they each asked themselves. As they contemplated this possibility, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they also began to treat themselves with extraordinary care.

As time went by, people visiting the monastery noticed the aura of respect and gentle kindness that surrounded the five old monks. Hardly knowing why, more people began to come back to the monastery. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought more friends. Within a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order – thanks to the rabbi's gift.

This story reminds me of a definition of "ministry" crafted by Gordon McKeeman in his piece titled "Anyone's Ministry":

Ministry is

a quality of relationship between and among human beings

that beckons forth hidden possibilities;

inviting people into deeper, more constant more reverent relationship with the world and with one another . . .

The word minister is etymologically rooted in a Latin word meaning "to serve," "to be a servant," or "to be near at hand to offer assistance." I'm also very pleased to know, thanks to Robert Walsh, that the words "**minister**" and "**minestrone**" are derived from the same root. As a working artist who intentionally chose "Stone Soup" as the framing metaphor for her story work, finding that piece made for a very happy moment.

When I shared with my mother what the topic of my "reflection" was this morning – you'll notice that I still struggle with calling whatever narrative I manage to cobble together a "sermon" – when I told her

I'd titled it "Shared Ministry" and then proceeded to expound passionately in a somewhat manic manner (you see, I'd been working on this for some time and accumulated lots of resources) about all the various ways we can and do serve as "ministers" to each other, regardless of our ordination status, her first reaction was, "**Well, I hope you don't scare them!**" Until that moment, that possibility hadn't occurred to me. Somewhat deflated, I returned to my office to pare down my message to more reasonable proportions. Sensing that I didn't quite understand her caution, she later told me that her real concern was that folks might be afraid they would be expected to be "ministers". . .

She was right to be concerned.

The concept of shared ministry addresses the non-financial aspects of stewardship within a faith community – the sharing of our time and talent.

In a weird way I feel more comfortable talking with you about this aspect of stewardship than I ever do about the money side, because of my unique position here. I am blessed to be working professionally in an intentional shared ministry construct – the UUFCM is, as far as we know, the only UU Fellowship in the country that utilizes this particular form of shared ministry. We have achieved an effective collaborative blend of ordained clergy and lay professional worship and ministerial leadership. But I am also a pledging member of this fellowship – I tithe of my "time, talent and treasure". My commitments to the Welcoming Congregation Initiative and the newly formed Mid MI Interfaith Coalition are part of my "time and talent" member contributions to my church, this fellowship.

I was also incredibly fortunate that when I arrived here and walked through the doors of this place back in the Spring of 2007, **practically weeping with relief** to have found you, that I was quickly assessed and put to work almost immediately by Jim Dealing. But you need to know that I arrived pretty much juiced up and ready to go. I jumped in with both feet.

I wonder, though, what would have happened if, say, the UUFCM had been a larger community at the time and I didn't stick out quite so obviously, or hadn't been so clear about my intentions . . . would I have felt needed? Would someone have helped me along? Would someone have taken the time to match my gifts with the needs of the fellowship or have helped me find the work of my heart?

As we grow as a congregation, we will experience growing pains. More people – more stuff – more needs – more work. This is why the concept of "shared ministry" is so powerful and helping congregations who embrace it to flourish. The reality is that even with a congregation this size, it is not possible for one minister (or the joint efforts of one ¼ time consulting minister and one full-time worship director) to meet all the needs of a congregation.

Georgette Wonders, a UU minister once said "We have dreams and plans about becoming a great church, a place to grow our souls, enlarge our minds and hearts, teach our children, and from which to do good and make a difference according to our religious principles and values in the community and the world. **But we have to be connected in order to do any of these things.** And that means when we are invited to the banquet, we need to show up. Not because you don't have food at home, but because when you break bread – or animal crackers – with others, you make community and the community is the source and the foundation for all the rest."

Each person arrives here not only with needs, but with a unique set of gifts to offer. And as Robert Walsh said, “**If we do our job of organizing well**, each gift will be creatively matched with a need – so that the whole becomes a warm, nourishing, life-giving religious community.”

That little phrase “If we do our job of organizing well” is the sticky wicket for a young and growing congregation. It’s difficult to get systems and protocols in place at a rate that keeps pace with our growth. This week the UUFCM will take a giant leap towards improving our communications with the launch of our new website this coming Wednesday. This website has the potential to be a powerful communication, resource and networking tool for this congregation, but that potential will not be realized if we don’t utilize it. Part of what we ask of you in service to this community is to be willing to keep yourself informed and engaged. More info about the website launch will be forthcoming this week.

And when you visit the new website, you will see a new program name under the “Ministry” section – The **UUFCM “Arms Around” Shared Ministry Program** – the following is the draft overview of the program:

The *Arms Around* program (and the title of this program is a grateful homage to the People’s Church of Kalamazoo, MI) is the UUFCM shared ministry of congregational care and concern. *Arms Around* is about caring for each other and building a supportive community within the UUFCM congregation where we can all find comfort in times of need and share our joy in times of celebration.

Arms Around bridges the gap between caring people and those in our fellowship who are in need of help during difficult times.

The aim of the program is to provide basic support services to lessen the burden on an individual or family who is dealing with a difficult circumstance. Services we hope to provide include:

- Meal preparation
- Baby or child care
- Hospital or home visits
- Shop or run errands
- Transportation assistance
- Call to be a friend
- Provide assistance with electronic communications
- Perform yard work, home maintenance, or help move
- Take homebound person out
- Provide respite care to caregivers
- Share a holiday

- Help with memorial services
- Provide pet sitting during hospital stay
- Offer overnight accommodations

Protocols are still being developed, but in brief UUFCM members and friends would sign up to provide these services, and then would be contacted by a facilitator when a need arises. A survey will be up on the website soon that will give you the opportunity to let us know what tasks you would be willing to do or feel called to do in the *Arms Around* program.

We are a religious cooperative and need the hearts and hands of everyone in our family ready to care when appropriate.

Giving care to others in our religious community renews our own souls.

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But as the Traveler said at the close of the story *Stone Soup*:

“I could be wrong –
 maybe it’s different here in your village –
 but so far on this journey
 I have found that people
 have much more to share
 than they think they do.”

Shalom and Salaat, Blessed be and Amen.

Sermon delivered Sunday, April 10, 2011 at the UUFCM.

(Printed text does not include extemporaneous narrative included during delivery ☺)