

Rev. Rick Koyle  
Thunder Bay  
April 13, 2008  
Sermon

## Some Things a Minister Can Be Good For

As the Ministerial Search Committee begins its work, you know that parish ministers can do about eight basic things:

Preaching and worship  
Teaching  
Pastoral care  
Administration  
Fundraising  
Social justice  
Denominational work, and  
Interfaith work

This morning, I want to share with you a dozen, less obvious things that a minister can do. Apart from dying his hair purple, or “chill plum,” for the very successful Service Auction last night. Shameless fund-raising is the best kind. And the most fun.

A minister can be good for saying what is.

“Saying what is” is particularly helpful in starting public prayer. In seminary, I used to wonder, How can I ever pray in public, with so many folks who neither pray themselves, nor believe in prayer, and with so many different backgrounds in faith?

My preaching professor in seminary, and my flight instructor, taught me how to pray publicly. I was learning to fly in the San Francisco Bay Area, in crowded airspace, where good radio skills are critical.

Communicating with the ground is easy, my instructor said. Just: tell them who you are, where you are, and what you want. Thunder Bay Tower,

Cessna Two Zero Four Three Niner. One seventy-two slant uniform. Seven southeast. For landing, with information Victor.

Public prayer can be just as simple. Tell 'em who you are, where you are, what you want.

My preaching instructor got the same place by a different route. He began his public prayers with three words: "We are here . . ."

As a hospital chaplain, I'd ask a family, Do you want to pray together? If they said yes, we'd all hold hands. Then I'd begin with:

who "we" were – a chaplain, and the Smith family;  
"where" we were – in the hospital's waiting room; – and  
"what we wanted," what brought us together – concern for Mary Smith.

These prayers took what the family had already shared with me, and reflected it back to them, translated to the language and rhythms of prayer. In saying what is, ministers can help people find the words that capture whatever needs to be captured. Often, people already have those words themselves -- they just don't know they do.

So -- one deep breath and the words "We are here" can get public prayer started, and starting is often the hardest part. After that, Spirit kicks in, and you just hold on, until the calliope stops playing, and the wooden horses conclude their up-and-down, and the merry-go-round is over.

Sometimes saying what is, can be more pointed.

When there is an 800-pound hippopotamus in the living room that cries out to be named, a minister can do that naming, that particular "saying what is." The hope, of course, is to tell the truth, in love.

A ministerial colleague visited the hospital bedside of an older woman, who had been badly hurt in a car wreck. Her daughter was gushing about how great it was going to be, to have Mom come home soon, just as good as new.

My colleague said quietly, “That is not going to happen. Your Mom will be as good as she is, but not as good as new.” The older woman burst out, “Oh, bless you, pastor. That’s what I’ve trying to tell my daughter for the last week.”

Often naming hippopotamuses takes courage. Ministers are no more courageous than anyone else. But when we find we lack it, we can ask for it. And often it is given.

Last December, I screwed up my courage and told you that a canvass that raised \$82,000 would probably not support full-time, settled ministry next year. I did not want to tell you that. But it goes with the job.

Some days, you’re the pigeon, some days you’re the statue. And some days, you really earn your paycheck.

In addition to saying what is, even prophesying, ministers can help connect the dots. Congregational polity – the principle that each church is independent – can create a sense of isolation. When churches don’t talk to each other -- and most don’t -- members of one church may feel like the first human beings to ever face a particular problem. Ministers know that others may have walked the same path before, and their wisdom may be useful and available, through the district, the denomination, or outside consultants.

One little church wanted to consider becoming a Welcoming Congregation, welcoming to all but especially welcoming to gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgender people. Their brand-new minister – me -- said fine, let’s figure out what to do.

Fortunately, in Boston, the Unitarian Universalist Association has developed wonderful materials on G-B-L-T issues. The church wrote to Boston, got the materials, everyone studied them carefully, and spent a full year having the most remarkable conversations, both public and private.

Here’s one. An older couple I’ll call Dick and Teri, long-time members, highly respected, said, “We’re already a welcoming congregation, aren’t we? Why do we have to become an official Welcoming Congregation?” As their minister, I invited them to join one of our big-

circle public conversations after a Sunday service – one of about ten that year.

They showed up, and they kept an open mind, as they had promised. After their third or fourth meeting, they stood up and said, publicly, We thought we were a welcoming congregation already, and didn't need this new program. We have changed our minds. This is a good program. Our congregation needs it. We need it. We're backing it -- 100%.

Listening, I thought to myself, this program is going to succeed. And it did.

For when the Mr. and Mrs. Smiths of the church weigh in, when moral authority in a church speaks, often it speaks quietly, and yet is heard loudly. Those once-a-month welcoming conversations started out honest and heartfelt, and just kept on going deeper and deeper. They transformed that church – month by month, you could just feel it. As their minister, I got to help connect the dots, and offer invitations.

Ministers are also great for celebrating. Marriage, or a service of union. Someone you care about dies, and needs to be remembered. People join the church, and it's time to make a fuss. A child comes of age. A new home needs a house blessing.

Last spring, I officiated at my very first Blessing of the Animals. I was a little apprehensive, but it turned out to be a kick in the pants. (Because rank has its privileges, I did not bless the snakes, and I did not bless the rats. I'm just not that spiritually evolved -- yet.)

Ministers can help celebrate all kinds of holidays, sacred and irreverent. We Unitarian Universalists are lucky, because we get to acknowledge lots of holidays.

But it's also true that ministers are themselves worth celebrating. When you get a brand new minister here, act like you're proud of them, and yourselves. Celebrate them! Splash them all over your website, put them out front on Algoma, show 'em off – respectfully, of course. Put all their sermons on your website! Rewrite the Google homepage for this fellowship that starts out, “We are a lay-led Unitarian Universalist congregation . . . .” Getting a minister is, or ought to be big, wonderful news, something to be

proud of, something that other people in the larger community would be interested in knowing. Celebrate your minister!

Ministers can also offer context. Call it professional detachment, invoking a sense of history -- or just plain curiosity.

We have talked about how the men around Jesus disappeared when he died. Peter, denying three times that he even knew Jesus, for example. The male disciples doubting Mary Magdalene's account of talking with Jesus at the apparently empty tomb.

But the women in Jesus' life stepped forward when he died -- they really blossomed. How come? Ministers aren't necessary to initiate conversations like these, but we can help. We can provide a context, can make some things respectable for discussion. That's what I was trying to do on Easter Sunday, when I spoke about some of the more problematical doctrines that have grown up around Jesus.

Ministers can also be useful in setting boundaries. Once, I facilitated a course called Language Matters. Afterwards, several students decided to continue meeting. One emailed me, asking if I would just meet informally with them, structure a few classes for them, perhaps suggest some topics for them, and -- basically, wouldn't I just keep teaching the course even though it was over?

I thought, Maybe I didn't teach them as well as I thought I did.

I said, Thanks -- but no thanks. My job was to get the bus on the road. Your job is to keep it rolling. You know how to structure a class. You can create good topics. I pointed out how they had taken some so-so topics of mine, and turned them into much better topics, simply by the way they interpreted them.

They knew more than they realized. I told them -- own the course now, and have yourselves some fun.

An 18<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic rabbi used to say, Some rabbis get up in the morning and pray that their congregants will bring them all their problems, so they can help them, and be honoured for helping them. But the rabbi of

Ropchitz – he meant himself -- prays that his congregants will solve their own problems, so he won't have to.

Setting boundaries empowers people.

Ministers can also take us places we may not have been before. Be tour guides for the spirit.

A class called “Reclaiming the Bible” asked, When all the nonsense in the Bible is cleared away, is there anything left?

The answer turned out to be, Yes – and it's fascinating stuff. Two hundred years' worth of meticulous, no-nonsense scholarship, that's refreshing, reasonable, and almost completely unknown to the public. You do not have to check your brains at the door, in order to enjoy the Bible. (I'll have more to say on this subject in a couple of weeks.)

And there are other equally hard subjects that UUs have avoided, just because they're hard – like God, Jesus, evil, forgiveness, faith. A minister can help a congregation tackle this slippery stuff.

Visiting new places can involve body and soul, as well as intellect. One minister's office I inhabited was breathtakingly tiny. Luckily, there were beautiful walking trails nearby. So a congregant and I would sometimes take a pastoral-care hike. My role was to listen, provide a shoulder, sometimes a Kleenex, to clarify now and then, encourage, perhaps offer a prayer, and, not least of all, to find our way home.

That Reclaiming the Bible class also showed another thing that ministers can do: model. One student was a fellow I'll call Thomas. Long, long-time member. Utterly brilliant. He could hold you spellbound for ten minutes on some esoteric subject. Then he'd say something like, “Well, that's what I thought before my brain transplant . . .”

Everyone loved Thomas, but no one in the congregation had the slightest idea what to do with him.

My ministerial colleagues, bless their hearts, suggested techniques that had worked for them. They said, Be sure to save a seat for him – right next to you. Welcome him warmly when he arrives, but don't overdo it.

Include him regularly in the discussion. When he really gets rolling, listen respectfully, until -- the class gets antsy, which they will tell you, through drumming fingers and tapping feet and rolling eyes, provided you're paying attention.

Then break in gently, and say, "Thomas, we've talked about this brain-transplant business before. Let's give others a chance to share their thoughts. And if you want to talk some more about this, why don't you come see me after the class?" And then, my colleagues said, make absolutely sure that someone in the class jumps right in to share their thoughts.

Just a little extra time and attention from the minister meant that someone on the sidelines could now fit in. The congregation felt less awkward around him after that.

Ministers can give permission.

In one church I served, the UU district decided to investigate domestic abuse, and they selected three churches, including ours, to receive a survey that was designed to smoke out domestic abuse. Unfortunately, they weren't as clear as they might have been about their intentions, which our congregation only discovered part way through the process. I protested -- actually, screamed bloody murder --, because I didn't feel qualified to deal with the skeletons that I was afraid were going to come dancing out of the cellar.

So, the Director of Religious Education and I betook ourselves to a day-long workshop about domestic abuse. There was, unfortunately, a great deal to learn. Our presenter said the best estimates were, about one household in three, perhaps one in four, has experienced domestic abuse.

The district collected and evaluated the data from the survey, and returned the results to us. Guess what? Survey said: Not a single trace of domestic abuse in our lovely little church. Zip. Zero. Zilch. Nada.

After doing this research and self-education on domestic abuse, I found myself inclined to believe our presenter's estimate more than this survey. I decided -- to preach on the subject anyway.

During most of that service, you could hear a pin drop. One person whose response I was particularly interested in, spent the service partly hiding behind a large green plant, a Chinese evergreen I believe. In the receiving line afterwards, people were exceedingly polite.

But, over the next few months, here and there, around the church, little peeps began to be heard -- peeps suggesting possible abuse, or harassment, or just general creepiness.

When the issue was raised from the pulpit, that is, people felt they now had permission to talk about something that was important to them, that they hadn't felt free to talk about before.

Giving permission is one of the most important things that a minister can do.

I absolutely adore encouraging people to do what they are probably going to do anyway – provided that seems appropriate.

I have told some of you about an incident several years ago, when the war in Iraq was heating up, and a long-time church member said to me, “I think I might actually be in favor of this coming war, unlike most people in our church. Can I still feel welcome here?”

I said, “Philip, suppose a brand-new member approached you and said, ‘You’ve been around for a while, I’m worried that I might have a point of view, on a public issue, that differs from some of my new church friends,’ -- what would you say to that newcomer?”

He thought for a moment and said, “I think I’d tell them about our history of protecting minority views, our tolerance of dissent, our promotion of diverse opinions, our belief in the ongoing conversation.”

I said, “Excuse me, but -- didn’t you just answer your own question?” He laughed and said, “Gee, I guess I did.”

Incidentally, that’s how ministers get reputations for being brilliant. But I just held up a mirror to this man. The underlying wisdom was inside of him, all along. He had just lost contact with it for a time. He needed

permission to believe what he most deeply believed. As his minister, I gave that permission.

So – in addition to the usual suspects – preaching and teaching, marrying and burying -- what do we know about what ministers can be good for?

1. They can give permission.
2. Serve as tour guides to uncharted territory, or models.
3. Set good boundaries, encouraging people to solve their own problems.
4. Provide a context, or a history.
5. Ministers can be for celebrating – and being celebrated.
6. Can offer invitations.
7. Connect the dots.
8. Prophecy. Map out the future.
9. Identify 800-pound hippopotamuses, and call them hippopotamuses.
10. Pray publicly: “We are here . . .”
11. And ministers can say what is.

That’s 11, but only 11. You know the rule. You have to have 12. So  
–

One last thing ministers can do. Challenge. Lovingly, supportively, challenge. Calling you to be your best selves, to do what you don’t think you can do – even what you know you can’t do.

And speaking of challenges. The Board of Directors has rolled out the draft of a Covenant of Right Relations, a list of ways we want to be with one another, at our best.

It's your list. You supplied the aspirations that make it up, at eight workshops after Sunday services this winter. Suzanne Hansen and David Belrose and the whole board, and I, helped to polish and combine them. Now, once again, it's your turn. Look them over, see if you can locate your own suggestion, if you made one – realizing it may have been combined with another one – and suggest ways to improve them.

A Covenant of Right Relations works only if it is owned by the whole congregation. Once you make your suggestions, we'll incorporate what we can, and then put the whole business up for approval. When enough people have signed on, presto – you have your Covenant of Right Relations. Your Covenant of Right Relations.

Most institutions have covenants, but only a few write them down.

And having it all written down will make you much more attractive to a prospective minister – as well as newcomers. All congregations have their share of problems. But some congregations treat their problems as an opportunity, to discover their deeper hopes and aspirations for how they want to be with one another. Believe me, those are the congregations that ministers want to work with.

As you set out on your marvelous adventure, I invite you to chew on some of these not-so-obvious things that ministers can do. Happy searching!

Amen.