

## **A Case for a Collegial Model of Ministry** *in the United Church of Christ*

One of the most popular myths about ministry in general and in the UCC specifically is the singularly obnoxious idea that a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can act with complete autonomy, sort of a spiritual ‘lone ranger.’ This characterization of ministry as something less than collegial and accountable can feel like a cruel stereotype, given the amount of isolation and loneliness that some professional ministers report--sometimes due to isolation in rural or urban parishes cut off from opportunities for companionship with like-minded ministry professionals, and sometimes because individuals can feel an ultimate responsibility to be present and available to their congregation, so much so that they must justify every moment and meeting outside of the parish that pays one’s salary.

While The Ordained Minister’s Code asks clergy to enter Partnership in Ministry through “supportive relationships” with colleagues, and as “responsible participants” in larger UCC connections and the Church Universal, as well as conduits of communication and connection, often in the busyness of the ministerial calling such efforts, along with self-care, are the first casualties on a demanding calendar. Although ministers often call members of their congregations into covenantal, accountable relationships in the church’s fellowship community, some of us fail to embody that same engagement within Association, Conference, National UCC and ecumenical connections. We need to model balance and sensible boundaries, wholeness and spiritual, physical and emotional health in our own lives. One way to do that, to act proactively, is by staying connected with peers and colleagues beyond the life of the parish.

This call to covenantal association strains against at least two false assumptions. 1) It’s every person/congregation for themselves -- that we are in a, de facto, competition. In reality the opposite is often true. Many lay and clergy participants have grown in faith and understanding, when they have become part of larger associations of congregations, whether in UCC life or community organizing. It can be truly empowering to learn that others share our struggles, that we are not unique or alone.

And, 2) That completion of seminary training is the end of spiritual formation and, in and of itself, adequate for ministry. A more honest and faithful understand acknowledges that it is a beginning, an intensive learning phase, an educational requirement that helps to give direction and shape to an on-going life-long learning for the benefit of the minister and the congregations that person serves. When active clergy brag - as some have been heard to do - that they haven’t read a book or

attended a seminar or continuing education event since graduation, they exhibit a dangerous arrogance and self-satisfaction that refuses to learn and grow and engage in ever more insightful and faithful practices. Such church leaders limit themselves, and thus the effectiveness of their ministry. The church this person serves deserves better.

Thus, a reminder of why we need and desire to stay in contact. If you will, a humble theology of ministerial connection.

1). Ordained clergy have often received a unique call to serve in the Church of Jesus Christ. But as practitioners of special gifts for ministry, we remain part of the whole body of Christ. We need each other to be faithful and whole. (1 Corinthians 12).

2) This organic understanding of life and ministry helps us grow as spiritual humans, learning from each other, encouraging and supporting one another (“Iron sharpens iron, as one sharpens another “ -- Prov. 27:17).

3) Meeting regularly counters many of the dangerous impulses that can diminish and destroy a ministry, hurt a congregation or our denomination. When we can share our concerns, insights and learnings in a safe and supportive environment, we become better equipped ministers, we model the very spiritual practices we hope to instill in the members of our congregations.

4) Asking for prayer, for help, for support from colleagues who intuitively understand the work and stresses of lives in service to the mission of the Church, reminds us who we are and whose we are. We remember that we are not alone, that we have companions and co-laborers, to walk and work beside.

5) The fruit of the Spirit doesn't develop in isolation. Listen to the qualities and characteristics of the spiritual life in Gal. 5: 22-23: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” These fruit are nurtured and developed best in the give and take of human relationship. For many clergy, we need these kinds of relationships beyond the demands of our congregants' needs.

And, 6) Let us not neglect to meet together. Heb. 10:24-25 -- “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” We're better together.

So, how then can we stay connected, and thus fulfill our responsibilities spelled out in the Minister's Code, and embody the kind of spiritual health and accountability that brings out the best in us?

Attend UCC (and other) meetings in your area: Attend Association, Conference and other gatherings of ecumenical or UCC clergy in your area. Get E-Connections and then stay connected.

In St. Louis there's the Ministerium. State-wide there is the Persons In Ministry retreat, the Annual meeting/Faith Works, and regular opportunities to connect with our Wider Church family, and engage in mutual support and connection with other clergy.

Join (or start your own) a weekly lectionary/support group. Gather clergy together to swap sermon resources and ideas, to reflect prayerfully on the texts, to lift up one another's concerns and joys as life happens in and around you. If there are no obvious collegial connections for an informal gathering, Care & Counseling provides a more formal program that brings support groups together.

Attend continuing education courses. Audit a class at Eden Seminary, enter the doctoral program. Watch for inexpensive workshop and growth-in-ministry programs at Ladue Chapel, or Missouri School of Religion or anywhere that clergy are likely to gather. Start a theological book group that meets around a different book every three months, with sister/brother clergy in your area.

These of course are only a start: you can join any of the Association or Conference ministries, committees and task forces; often these folk are looking for help. But remember we are called to live and work in harmony. And disharmony often comes more often not from angry and competitive disagreements, but from complacency and lack of effort. Great choirs have to practice, have to learn to meld their voices as one. We too require faithful practice at blending our gifts to achieve fruitful outcomes.

If we acknowledge that we are better together, that we are not intended to do this in isolation, and in fact are unlikely to succeed on our own, then we can move toward a more reflective and supportive understanding of our covenantal relationships, and the benefits of association.

Respectfully submitted to the St Louis Association Committee on Ministry,

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