

**Essay Title: Community Ministers
Connect Congregations & Communities**

Audio Essay: Disc 2 track16

Reaching out into the larger community can be a challenge for congregations. Social justice volunteers in the congregation only have so much time. Parish ministers have to devote most of their time to the congregation. But an increasing number of congregations are finding another way to connect with the communities outside their buildings and that is with ordained community ministers.

There are three types of ministers currently in fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association: parish ministers, ministers of religious education, and community ministers. Community ministers are generally those who are employed outside a church setting. Typically they do either healing or justice work, being employed as chaplains in a medical setting or working in a wide range of social service and social justice organizations.

Community ministers, officially recognized since 1991 by the Unitarian Universalist Association as a category of minister, are required to have a relationship with a UU congregation, district, or UUA-associated organization, in order to remain in fellowship with the UUA. Such an association, called “endorsement,” is helpful to both the minister and the congregation. The community minister benefits by having a place that supports her or him spiritually and provides social connections. The congregation gains by its connection with a minister who has insights into local social justice work.

Additionally, community ministers generally preach at the congregation at least annually and can conduct funerals and weddings and perform other services in the absence of the parish minister. The congregation and its members often also support the minister by making contributions of time and money to the minister’s social justice work and to the minister as well.

There is no precise figure as to how many congregations have relationships with community ministers, but there are several score. The practice is expected to become more common because more than a third of UU theology students describe themselves as focusing on community ministry.

The UU Congregation of York, Pennsylvania, has had a formal relationship with a community minister, **the Rev. Kathy Seitz Bortner**, for five years. Since 1986 Bortner has been the crime prevention coordinator for the York City Police Department. A year prior to that, she had joined the York congregation. In the mid-1990s, convinced that the work she was doing was ministry, she went to theology school and then was ordained by the York congregation. She continues to work for the police department.

As a community minister endorsed by the congregation, she does the following for it: attends half its board meetings, writes church newsletter articles about her work, serves as a consultant to social justice groups in the congregation, meets with every New UU class, and helps lead the Build Your Own Theology class. In turn, the church provides her with professional expenses and some office space. It also supports her in her work.

The Rev. Robert Renjillian, York's parish minister, says that having Bortner in this capacity is a plus. "It means," he says, "that this congregation has more than one minister paying attention to what's going on in the congregation and the community. Just this week there were two community luncheons and I couldn't do both, so we each took one."

He adds, "I'm committed to social justice also, but because I'm a parish minister I need to mostly focus on the preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Knowing I have a colleague who is helping maintain the UU connections in the community takes an immense weight off my shoulders."

The Rev. Maddie Sifantus is a community minister endorsed by First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts. Sifantus is the longtime director of a community elder chorus, The Golden Tones. The chorus does 60 concerts a year at nursing homes, schools, and churches. Sifantus's ministry is to the 58 members of the chorus.

Many of its members are unchurched. Some are First Parish members. Sifantus says, “I deal with all of the issues around aging and death and dying. I do pretty much all that a parish minister does except there’s no church building to do it in. I visit people in hospitals, do counseling, funerals, strategic planning, and budgeting.” For First Parish, Sifantus conducts workshops on aging issues, serves as liaison with an interfaith prison ministry group, and occasionally preaches.

The Golden Tones is considered one of the ministries of First Parish, and the congregation provides some of the financial support for the group, and it supports Sifantus spiritually and emotionally. The Rev. Ken Sawyer, parish minister at Wayland, says, “It’s been a wonderful thing for the town and for the congregation. The congregation enjoys helping to provide her ministerial presence in the larger community. Her ministry contributes so much to the town and the surrounding area.”

The Rev. Dorothy Emerson is editing and co-writing a book on community ministry. She believes that community ministers provide one of the most effective ways for congregations to reach out beyond themselves. She says, “It’s hard for congregations to do social justice work with only volunteers. They burn out. But community ministers working with a congregation can help organize the whole congregation around a project and keep it going. And they tend to be well-connected in communities and know where the needs are.” She adds, “Community ministry is where the potential today for Unitarian Universalism is.”

The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd is president of the UU Society for Community Ministries, a professional organization for community ministers. She encourages congregations to be open to connections with community ministers. She herself is endorsed by UU Society: East at Manchester, Connecticut, where her responsibilities include consulting with three of its committees. Accessibilities, Journey Toward Wholeness, and Social Justice. She occasionally preaches and fills in at other times for the Rev. Josh Pawelek and is available to conduct rites of passage. In return, the church pays her for preaching, and pays a stipend for her to attend General Assembly. Congregation members serve on her Committee on Ministry. They also help support the nonprofit she works for, The Arc of Farmington Valley, where she is director of community services, helping people with disabilities make connections with other people in their communities.

Relationships between congregations and community ministers typically come about when the minister, already employed in the community, approaches a congregation and asks for endorsement.

Lloyd believes many congregations are not aware of community ministers until one approaches them. She says, “We hope that congregations will be excited about having another trained minister in their midst and that they will see that this can strengthen their congregation. And they should remember that since every community minister is required to have an endorsement from a congregation in order to remain in fellowship with the UUA, when they turn them down it can affect their livelihood.”

The UUA’s ministerial credentialing director, **the Rev. David Pettee**, says, “Community ministry is something we want to encourage. I think of these ministers as the people who are taking the mission of a congregation directly into the community. Our congregations have been at risk for not engaging in the community and now we have people who are trained and they can become a pathway to help congregants live out the congregation’s ministry.”

For more information and resources, go to: uua.org and click on Leaders

Resources

Go to: <http://www.uua.org/aboutus/professionalstaff/ministryprofessional/index.php>
or the website for the Society for Community Ministries: <http://www.uuscm.org/>

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