

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Our Shared Ministry”
The Rev. Dr. Morris Hudgins
May 23, 2010

I first want to thank Alex McGee for her assistance in this service today and for her community ministry. I will focus my remarks this morning on Community Ministry as it relates to Shared Ministry. In 1991 the Unitarian Universalist Association formally recognized the specialization of Community Ministry. Community Ministry is a phrase used to identify a series of specializations recognized by the Association—individuals who have been especially to fulfill a kind of ministry. We have known about the others: Ministers of Religious Education; Ministers of Youth; Ministers of Music. All of these are different from the traditional parish minister—ministers who carry out the varied responsibilities of a church-- preaching, teaching, administration, and pastoral counseling are some of these.

I have admired those who choose Community Ministry or the other specializations. They are the ministers who acknowledge and accept the fact that no minister can do all of the aspects of ministry well. They are called to do the ones they are especially interested in or skilled at doing. If you would have voted to call a settled minister last month, this sermon would be different today. I would be talking about the ten or more skills required of a parish minister. I would have said: “The reality is that no one person can do all ten.” This is why David and Leslie Takahashi-Morris were so successful here at TJMC—UU. They complimented each other and together their ministries were more than the sum of the parts. This is true about Shared Ministry.

In the coming weeks we will be completing our evaluation of the Interim Ministry here at TJMC,UU. I hope you will be honest in this evaluation and with your future ministers. The Board is prepared to do so. They acknowledge they have not written a new vision in almost ten years. I also hope you will be realistic about your future ministers. Acknowledge their strengths, support them in areas they need help. You did this with me when you hired Tony Perrino as your Minister of Pastoral Care. I don’t know what I would have done these two years without Tony. I also applaud the Board for their help with some very difficult issues during these two years. We have truly worked together to move forward. This is what I will say in my final evaluation next month. I could not have asked for better leadership from the Board and the Councils.

One of the strengths, I will mention in my report is your prophetic ministry to the community. An important aspect of this is the Community Ministry of Alex McGee. Community Ministers are called to a specific kind of prophetic ministry in the community. These ministries have been around for many years, such as hospital, hospice, university, or prison chaplaincy. The primary income of a Community Minister is the agency that hires them. Community Ministers sometime need to be very creative in their designing of their ministry. In Alex’s community ministry she will combine work with hospice, spiritual direction, and teaching yoga, guiding individuals in their personal lives, their health and well being.

What I want to emphasize is that Community Ministers serve the cause of liberal religion and Unitarian Universalism. I was so pleased when I learned of the development of the category of Affiliate Minister. It is important for the Community Minister to know they are helping to carry out the mission of the church in their community. They are also connected to the Association. They receive special training by our theological schools, are evaluated in their work by a larger body, expected to have covenants with their congregations, their colleagues, and the organizations in which they carry out their work. They can be ordained by a congregation and receive Fellowship by the Association. This means they have fulfilled their educational requirements and carry out their work in a professional manner. Some potential ministers see this as a waste of time, having to jump through hoops.

These are not easy tasks. It costs close to \$100,000 to get a M.Div. degree. Many students graduate with \$50-80,000 of student loans, more than they are expected to make in their first year, the maximum recommended amount for student loans. Many potential ministers try to cut corners, and challenge the process.

One such person was Jim Jones, who was turned down by the Unitarian Universalist Association. He went on to found his own religious community in California, then took them to Guyana, and led them all to commit suicide, in Jonestown. There is a reason for the many requirements of our Association. I am glad they are there.

I will confess that I haven't always appreciated them. When I first met with the UU Fellowship Committee, having recently transferred from the Methodist Church, I was given a list of about five things to do. I knew it would take several years before I would be able to fulfill them. I had already spent six years in theological school, had served three churches, and now I was being told I had more work to do. I cried all the way home, from Boston to West Palm Beach, FL, on the airplane. A member of the Search Committee at Northwest read that story in an old sermon, and saw it as unfair. I felt it was at the time. I also wondered if I had made the right decision to transfer from Methodism to Unitarian Universalist.

Two years later, I met with the Fellowship Committee again. This time they gave me a standing ovation for the work I had done, and they welcomed me into the Association. This time, my tears were tears of joy, not regret. I look back on this period of my life with a different perspective. I am proud to be a part of an Association that expects much of their ministers.

We have the same expectation of our members. We are truly a Shared Ministry. I want to describe the Affiliate relationship between a Community Minister and a Congregation as a symbiotic relationship. The minister benefits from having a building with office and teaching space and a congregation to be a part of and supportive of their ministry. The congregation benefits from having a minister, whom they do not pay, to help them carry out their mission. In some cases, the congregation does support the community ministry out of their budget. Money is raised in the budget and on Sunday morning, not to give to other ministries in the community, but to pay a minister to do this work.

Community Ministry, though not always labeled as such, goes back to the 19th century in New England. Individuals and churches helped support what I would call prophetic and social ministries in the community. A prime example is the Benevolent Fraternity, an organization supported by many UU churches to create a more fair and just world in Boston. I could see where in the future TJMC—UU helps fund several community ministries. I see Impact as a part of your community ministry. Unlike many charity ministries, Impact is focused on social change, is involved in the political work of creating a more fair and just world. Many of you have been involved in this shared ministry, shared with other denominations and churches, and funded by your budget and special offerings. Impact does not alleviate the need for charity the other part of your community work --feeding and housing the homeless is part of your community ministry, providing food in the Food Pantry for families in need.

Shared Ministry is an affirmation of the great needs in our society. This community needs liberal religion to be a part of this community. Alex McGee is and will continue to be a representative of liberal religion in this community. She will help to heal the sick, mend the broken, give a message, not of hell, but of "hope and courage" as John Murray once wrote. She will "possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. She will preach the kindness and everlasting love of God to this community. She needs your love and support.

I will end with a prayer by Gordon McKeeman:

A PRAYER FOR ANY WHO MINISTER

O Thou Vast Life in which our little lives dwell
O Thou spirit who art parent to our spirits, we rejoice in one great truth
that our little lives can be partners in great enterprises
that our little minds can contain great ideas
that our little hearts can engender great hopes
that our little spirits can conjure up great visions
that our greatness is not of size, but of purpose

that our strength is not of numbers, but of intent
that our importance is not of duration, but of direction

In the quiet and confidence of our own hearts, we have committed ourselves to holy orders
to seek the holy in a world fragmented
to seek peace in a world discontented
to seek sanity in a world oft demented
to seek health in a world oft tormented.

In our hearts we need great courage, let it desert us in peril.

In our minds are shining visions.

let them not be tarnished by the smothering fog of the traffic
and the obscuring mists of nay-sayings, doubts, and fears.

In our souls is the unquenchable impulse toward the holy.

let it ever remind us that the ministry is about wholeness, about healing, about health.

Steel our wills to venture into dark, dismal, and dreadful places.

May we hear the call to minister to the grieving

the confused, the bewildered, the bruised

the ecstatic and the gloomy

the faithful and the faithless

to the youngest, the oldest, and all the in-betweens, to the noble, the ignoble

and all the rest of us whose nobility is a sometime thing

to the forbidding, the boring, and the forbearing

to humans of every sort or condition.

We ministers (with our without portfolio or title) are seekers

after the holy wheresoever it is hidden

to beckon it forth that it may shine with the ineffable splendor of human possibility

and of human fulfillment.

Remind us, now and then, that such revelation is

reward enough

satisfaction enough

paradise enough

heaven enough.

And if, perchance, you are called "Reverend" may you have the grace to smile, remembering that you have been

faithful to your calling

persistent in your search for wholeness

and committed to compassion for all.

I wish this for Alex McGee and for all of you.