

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
February 12, 2012
Rev. Kathryn L. Ellis

Words of Inspiration: Ministry: Commitment and Call

Consulting or Settled Ministry

My dear ones, I find myself a little anxious this morning. My head tells me that I should not be, but my heart is full. I love you and I know that many of you love me. Maybe, it is a holy anxiety. We are in a luminal space that is that we are on the threshold of an important choice. This morning we are talking about taking our relationship to another level of commitment, and we should be serious about this commitment. We should not take this step just because I am here, but because we both see our ministry together as the future for the Church of the Restoration at this moment in time. On April 15th after our worship service, members of the congregation will vote about calling me to be your settled minister. This afternoon the Committee on Ministry will lead the first of several small group discussions about this decision. We hope that all members will participate in one of these groups.

What is this commitment? What is the difference between a consulting minister and a called, settled minister? The simple difference is that as a consulting minister, I was hired by the board for a definite time period; we have a letter of agreement that ends on June 30, 2011. Although this status could be continued for another year, consulting ministry is intentionally time limited. It's something like hiring a temp worker. Going from consulting minister to settled minister is something like going from being a temp worker to becoming a tenured professor.

A settled minister is called by the congregation; a significant, super majority of the congregation must affirm that you would like me to continue as your minister. There is no outside authority, no bishop or hierarchy to tell the congregation who your minister should be. A called and settled minister commits to being with you indefinitely, as long we all feel that our ministry together is meaningful. Settled ministry allows us to deepen our commitment to each other; it allows us to grow and learn together. The first question that I have heard is whether or not I want to be called and settled with you.

Sometime in December, I realized that I saw myself continuing to minister here at the Church of the Restoration, but that I was only contracted to be here until the end of June. Maybe, I shouldn't sign a lease for a new apartment. Around the same time, a denominational leader invited me to apply for a job which would allow me to mostly work from my home in Carlisle. I told her no.

I said some of this out loud to a board member who said, "Can we call you now?" Last year, some people had asked about calling me and I said no, it was too soon, we should get to know each other more. This time, I said yes and in January the board voted to begin a call process.

Call

The day after the board vote – really, the day after! - I was asked to take a job twenty miles from our house. It was not something that I applied for; I haven't applied for any jobs. But it was attractive. I thought about leaving here, leaving you and I felt that my heart would break. I wasn't sure that what we had started would continue; there's just more work for us to do together. As I discerned my own feelings and what feels like a call from something beyond, something more – God? I already began to feel more settled.

For me, much of the feeling of call also involves surrender and even some sacrifice, but that sacrifice brings much joy and blessing. There is sacrifice in working in Mount Airy: less time with my family, time spent each week in traveling. It costs me \$12 to 15,000 to work here. All this is sacrifice that I am more than willing to make because I already feel that you are my people now, that I am called to be here.

So, to that first question some of you are asking, “Does Kathy want to be called to be our settled minister?” Yes! Yes! Yes! And another question is “What about her husband Rick, her home in Carlisle?” So you have a letter from Rick to you in your order of service. He speaks for himself. He has told people in Carlisle that he sees that I have a call here. He values and supports my ministry here with you.

There is another sense of the word, “call” besides the congregational vote, one that is more mysterious, harder to explain. I feel called to the Unitarian Universalist parish ministry. I was motivated to enter ministry by the feeling that I must do so. I must do so to live my life authentically and to serve as I seemed to be called to serve. I feel a sense of call that seems to come from outside of my ego.

For a some time after feeling called to be a minister, I tried to push the feeling away by telling myself that was already ministering as a psychotherapist and that all are called. I do believe that we are all called and that there are very many ways to minister in the world, to the world. This was not enough. The feeling of being called persisted. When I surrendered I felt joyful, healthier and more content.

I learned to value the inner voice grounded by feedback from the community. For me, the community response is necessary to confirm the call. I have been overwhelmed by the positive response that I have received in ministry. I feel blessed and affirmed, and I feel responsible to give back to the community.

As Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, wrote, “This mystery is a creative, sustaining, commanding, judging, community-forming and transforming power

that grows not old, ever calling for individual and corporate response.”ⁱ Rebecca Parker wrote about her charge from process theologian, Charles Hartshorne to “Be a blessing to the World.” “The purpose of life, then,” she stated, “is to discover the joy or well-being that simultaneously please us and blesses our neighbors. Every act we commit is a contribution to the world; the question is whether our actions will be a blessing or a curse.”ⁱⁱ

I now wonder what took me so long. I am very happy in ordained, parish ministry. I am happy in my relationship with God. My faith feels vital, alive and present. The center of my faith is an immanent, transcendent and relational God. This is not an anthropomorphic God. I think of God as energy, as life force, and as the energy of love and compassion.

My choice now is to pay attention, to discern and respond to ongoing call. Your responses help me to continue to discern my ongoing call. Will it continue to be with you? I hope that I can bless the world as I have been blessed.

Vision

Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed wrote about reaffirming his call to ministry, “I had chosen ministry in order to help sustain religious community – a place made holy by what people experience there – the seasons of their lives and the healing of their souls.” (Mark Morrison- Reed, *In Between*, p 208) His words could have been my own. As part of the ministerial formation process, I wrote this personal mission statement “Working with authenticity and integrity, I will use my relationship and teaching skills as well as old and new knowledge to enhance others’ spiritual and emotional development so that together we may increase compassion, hope and justice in our community.” Spiritual practice, love and compassion are basic in my theology and in my ministry.

I see my ministry as helping individuals to heal and to grow spiritually and to create healing, spiritually vital and healthy religious community. As individuals grow spiritually and as they commit to regular spiritual practice, the community also grows spiritually. I want to equip and empower you.

We are called into community to fully live as the embodied, embedded, relational and meaning-making beings that we are. We are not called just for ourselves. We are called to love. We are called to be ourselves so that we can be effective in our work to serve and to transform the world. In community, we grow and we are transformed. We dream and act.

We have good news to share; I see us sharing this news of inherent worth and

dignity, abundant love and healing for all. Our theology calls us to work to build the beloved community, to work to bring more equity, more social justice into the world. We can help people to heal, to change and to grow. Change from frequent despair, exhaustion, anxiety and fear to feelings of calm, hope and wholeness.

What do people and congregations need to heal? How do we regain hope and feel empowered? I believe that we need connection and trust in our communities. We need to tell our stories and know they have been heard. We need a safe place and deep listening so that we can mourn and lament. We need to be affirmed in creative expression; feelings do not always come in words. Humans need to be recognized for the individuals that we are, with the thoughts and feelings that we actually experience. We need to be able to use ourselves to serve the world.

I see Restoration as the holder of Philadelphia's Universalist history and tradition. I see us learning that story more deeply and sharing it more widely. My vision for this congregation is that we will be a spiritually vital community. As the community grows spiritually, grows in health and joy, it will also grow in numbers. As Jeanne said, now she wants to invite people to Restoration. I see us as becoming even more diverse than we now are. I see us growing and sharing Unitarian Universalism. Maybe we'll have to have two or even more worship services, maybe these worship services will not be on Sunday mornings, and maybe they will be different worship styles. We'll continue to have excellent and varied music. We'll have a bigger choir, drums in worship more often. Maybe we will have a community minister affiliated with us. I see us having many more family events, fun and fellowship including all of us. I see full classrooms, more hours for our religious exploration coordinator. I see more social justice work that includes all ages. Maybe we'll have a children's choir.

What I Want

My ministerial colleagues tell me that I should tell you what I want from you. It's really pretty simple. Of course, I want to be paid fairly which you do. Please know that calling me to be your settled minister will not change the kind of minister that I am. In discerning my gifts, I know that I am not a social justice activist. My desire is to empower those of you who are activists to use your gifts with clarity and I want our social justice work to be spiritually grounded.

Mostly, I'd like you to do your best to live up to the Restoration Covenant, remembering that "love is the doctrine of this church." I hope that you will be honest and open with me, not be afraid to tell me when you disagree. I hope that you will tell me what you want and need. I hope that you will engage in deep, respectful and compassionate listening within yourself, in the Restoration community and in the wider community. I hope that you will listen, pay attention to the universe, to the stirrings of the holy. Notice the presence of the holy. Notice that which comes to you without

words.

I hope that you will grow spiritually and help this community to grow stronger. I hope you will welcome the stranger as the Hebrew proverb says, “hospitality to strangers is greater than reverence for the name of God.” I hope you will welcome children and younger people and be open to the changes that they bring to the congregation. I want us to worship together, laugh and cry with each other, have fun together and learn together.

I hope that each of you will continue to discern your own gifts and how you can use them to serve this community and the world. Most of all, I hope that each of you will choose to bless the world as Rebecca Parker calls us to do in her poem.

“Choose to Bless the World” Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

Your gifts
whatever you discover them to be
can be used to bless or curse the world.
The mind’s power,
The strength of hands,
The reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting,
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
 bind up wounds,
 welcome the stranger,
 praise what is sacred,
 do the work of justice
 or offer love.
Any of these can draw down the prison door
 hoard bread,
 abandon the poor,
 obscure what is holy,
 comply with injustice
 or withhold love.

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will
 a moving forward into the world
with the intention to do good.

it is an act of recognition,
 a confession of surprise,
 a grateful acknowledgement
that in the midst of a broken world
 unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.
There is an embrace of kindness,
 that encompasses all life,
 even yours.
And while there is injustice,
 anesthetization, or evil
there moves
a holy disturbance,
a benevolent rage,
a revolutionary love
protesting, urging, insisting
that which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their life
as a gesture of thanks
for this beauty
for this rage.

The choice to bless the world
can take you into solitude
 to search for the sources
 of power and grace;
 native wisdom, healing and liberation.
More, the choice will draw you into community,
 the endeavor shared,
 the heritage passed on,
 the companionship of struggle,
the importance of keeping faith,
the life of ritual and praise,
 the comfort of human friendship,
 the company of earth
 its chorus of life
 welcoming you.
None of us alone can save the world.
Together – that is another possibility, waiting.ⁱⁱⁱ

Life, love, hope call us on into the future – whatever we decide, let us choose to
bless the world.

Amen. Blessed Be. Ashe.

ⁱ Adams, James Luther. George Kimmich Beach (ed.). "By Their Roots Shall You Know Them" in *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses*. Boston: Skinner House, 1998, p. 147.

ⁱⁱ Parker, Rebecca. Robert Hardies (ed.). *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*. Boston: Skinner House, 2006, p. 161.

ⁱⁱⁱ Parker, Rebecca. Robert Hardies (ed.). *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*. Boston: Skinner House, 2006.