

Beyond These Walls

In the world of corporate consultants, oftentimes it is said that an Expert is someone who lives over 40 miles away. Well, this is certainly true in my case this morning. Hey, if you want to hear from an expert on doing Community Ministry in Peoria -- ask someone who lives over 40 miles away in Springfield as I do!!

I work at Methodist Medical Center as a Per Diem Chaplain but I still live in Springfield so as to allow my 3 teenage children to finish their high school education in a familiar setting with their friends.

However, when it comes to being an expert on community ministry, one might say that Unitarians and Universalists in general have always been experts in this area, have been PIONEERS at doing ministry out in their communities.

In the 1820's in Boston, a group of prominent Unitarians founded an organization called the Benevolent Fraternity to conduct charitable works in the community; it is still very active today.

Later on in the 1800's, Unitarian Samuel Gridley Howe, husband of Julia Ward Howe who wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," started a school for the blind near Boston which still exists today. Back around the same time, another Boston Unitarian Dorothea Dix was a pioneer at working with the mentally ill -- treating them like human beings -- and Boston Unitarian

Horace Mann helped to establish public education which was accessible to all children.

At the time of the Civil War, Universalist Clara Barton and Unitarian Rev. Henry Bellows helped to establish the Red Cross.

In the 1800's, Rev. Henry Bellows was by no means the only Unitarian or Universalist minister active doing ministry out in the community. In St. Louis, Unitarian Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot helped to establish Washington University. It is also not an exaggeration to say that he helped to found just about every social service institution in that city which dates from the 1800's.

All of the members of the Iowa Sisterhood – a group of female Unitarian and Universalist ministers in the midwest in the 1800's – were extremely active doing ministry in their communities. Rev. Caroline Bartlett even served as the Sewer Commissioner in Kalamazoo, Michigan where she was minister.

And how many many times when I have led Introduction to Unitarian Universalism classes, I have lifted up Universalist Lydia Bradley and her vision and generosity in establishing Bradley University. It is really great this morning to be speaking to our congregation where she was once a member. Nationally, the NAACP, the Urban League, the Humane Society, ACLU and Planned Parenthood all had Unitarians and/or Universalists active in founding them.

Unitarians and Universalists being actively involved in doing ministry in the community continues right down to today and right here in this community. Just ask anyone who is involved with Habitat for Humanity, Planned Parenthood, etc. etc. etc.

So many of our members give at least five hours per month doing ministry in the community. At All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, their minister, Rev. Forester Church, asks that each member make such a five hours per month of volunteer time in the community in addition to their monetary pledge.

The focus of Unitarian Universalist Community Ministry often involves the growing edges, the cutting edges of Unitarian Universalism in the current time.

I think of Interfaith work in the community -- so well exemplified by our own parish minister, Rev. Michael Brown, whose prodigious efforts here in Peoria were recognized when he was the much-honored recipient of the Humanitarian Award. Our Minister helped to found the Interfaith Alliance chapter in Peoria, has attended 2 Parliaments of the world's religions -- one in South Africa -- and helped to bring some of the excitement of these Parliaments to our community by having the contacts to bring the head of the Parliament of Religion to speak here at our church last Sunday morning during the worship service and at a community forum in the afternoon.

We UUs, as we do ministry in our community, bring our values and approach to life out beyond these walls. When we are out beyond these

walls doing community ministry we are influencing institutions – nudging them as we walk the way of Unitarian Universalism. I think for instance of Habitat for Humanity; when Unitarian Universalists are involved with it, we usually try to make it more religiously-inclusive – to go beyond its solely-Christian origins – to push for it to become truly interfaith.

Through community ministry we have contact with and impact upon groups of people we do not ordinarily see in large numbers in our sanctuary on Sunday morning – rural people, trade unionists, people of color, assembly line workers.

And we bring the essence of our UU faith to these folks as we do ministry in the community.

For instance, when I sit with the dying who have concerns about whether they will be going to heaven – I say with all the confidence of our Universalist tradition that I believe that G-d is a loving G-d --- and what loving parent would ever consign their child to eternal hell and damnation no matter what they had done!

I state with great certainty to the parents of a stillborn infant --- that this sad event did not occur because G-d is punishing them.

Currently at Methodist Medical Center, the protestant communion service in the chapel each Sunday morning at 11 a.m. is led by a member of this congregation – either by Sean Shannahan or myself. I believe that the Director of Pastoral Care recognized that if we Unitarian Universalists were involved, it truly would be INCLUSIVE and ecumenical to the greatest extent. It was our own Sean Shannahan who wrote most of the very beautiful and inclusive liturgy which is used there every Sunday. I

oftentimes wonder whether some more traditional Christians notice that there is no creed of belief said at anytime during the service.

I also ask forgiveness for my secret denominational pride that it is the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship's graphic - - a lovely representation of a cross -- that adorns the order of service covers in the Methodist Medical Center chapel. I think that my colleague Sean just might have had something to do with that happening as well!!

Over 50% of the time when I meet new patients at Methodist Hospital, and introduce myself as a Protestant chaplain – the patient or family member ask me what denomination I belong to.

Here in Peoria, our congregation can be very proud that I usually receive an understanding look when I respond that I am a Unitarian Universalist – which means at least that our 10 syllable name has been heard of in the larger community. They even oftentimes know where our church is located. (Of course I think it also helps that our meeting house currently is in the center of Methodist Hospital parking facilities – and that our congregation has been here in Peoria for over one hundred and sixty years, in several different locations and buildings.)

But it is when I begin to speak and to act – when each of us begins to show our faith in action in the community and the world – that those in the community get to know what type of religious tradition exists in here – that they get a look inside beyond these walls the other way.

When others in the larger community see us saying and doing in the community – living out our faith – then they come to understand what Unitarian Universalism is all about in a very concrete way.

When an Islamic woman requests to be seen only by female physicians – this is not our practice – but I strongly uphold her right to do so as I passionately support freedom of religion.

When a man grieves with loving intimacy over another man who has suffered a fatal heart attack and mumbles to me that he is his “cousin” – I respond, “I am a Unitarian Universalist; I have officiated at many Services of Holy Union. Did you perhaps mean that you are his life partner?”

This church and its approach to religion and life go with me as I conduct ministry beyond these walls – into family rooms, down to the morgue, into Intensive Care, the Cardiac Cath Lab – into pediatric, oncology and psych units. It is from this church that I receive my authority – I minister in its name.

And it is going in beyond these outer walls fronting Hamilton Blvd. – on into this church – that I return to reconnect, to become centered once more, to become grounded again in the holy beyond the transient.

Everyone in our country has his or her own 9 eleven story - where we were when we heard. I was in an interior conference room at Methodist Hospital taking part in an all day orientation and training.

Staff members from human resources and organizational development and training came in to tell us after the planes crashed but they kept us in the room and on-task – only giving us updates from time to time for they knew that if they let us wander away, we would become transfixed in front of television sets.

To this day, the 50 of us who were in that room together feel a special closeness to one another, although we work on different shifts and in areas as diverse as nursing, nutrition, housekeeping, corporate compliance, lab tech, engineering, and chaplaincy. And this extremely-diverse, randomly-assembled group had looked to me to be their chaplain on that afternoon. After all, that's what my name badge said I was!

Later on though – for myself – when the orientation training session finally was over – one of the first phone calls I made was to Michael Brown – to ask him whether our church would be open that evening. I felt a great need to go inside beyond these outside walls for support, to help me to regain my bearings when the outside world suddenly seemed to be forever changed.

Michael said that our church sanctuary would be open to all – and so I came that evening to re-experience the acceptance and support of this Beloved Community gathered here inside beyond these walls.