

Unitarian Church of Vancouver
February 1, 2009
Community Ministry

Sermon:

Good morning. It's great to look out and see so many familiar faces. As many of you know I'm Laura Friedman a member of this church and a community minister. Today is a day that many Unitarian community ministers in Canada and the US are speaking in the pulpit about community ministry. Community ministry is not a new idea, and it includes a number of unusual ministries. Our numbers are still small, but growing every year. Canada still has few, only four ministers in Canada who are declared community ministers. And yet by comparison, in the lower mainland there are two. Besides me, there is Reverend Arthur Berman, who serves as chaplain at Vancouver General Hospital, and is affiliated with the North Shore Unitarian Church.

Today I want to give you a fuller idea of our tradition as Unitarians of unusual ministries. In the last couple hundred years there have been many Unitarian women and men who have committed their lives to building their communities through a number of different ways—as hospital, hospice and prison chaplains or fierce political advocates. Or like Ralph Waldo Emerson the famous nineteenth century transcendentalist, as public speakers. Many community ministers work bettering their own small communities by doing such varied things as creating peace gardens, running retreat centres, or managing non-profit organizations such as Amnesty International or the Unitarian Service Committee.

I want to open your minds today to what professional Unitarian ministry can look like. As Unitarians, we have a rich history of creative, visionary service by our professional ministers working outside the parish.

In particular today I want to tell you about some remarkable women and men in the American mid-West. The meditation this morning came from one of these ministers, the Reverend Mary Safford. These women ministers served in Iowa before the traditional Unitarian seminaries of the East Coast would even accept women as students. There was reluctance among Harvard-trained ministers to leave their established lives on the East Coast and minister

in the west. This reluctance created a vacuum of liberal religious ministers, and women from the mid-West stepped up and filled this vacuum in innovative and creative ways.

For about fifty years spanning the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, there was a movement of Unitarian women who started churches and became Unitarian ministers. Historian Cynthia Grant Tucker wrote of their work in her book: *Prophetic Sisterhood*. These courageous women challenged the structure and hierarchy of traditional Unitarians. I view these women as examples of the possibilities of community ministry, of how individual ministers have been able to change the direction of our religious tradition.

Many of the women, who came from teaching backgrounds, stepped forward to found churches in the communities where they lived. They brought with them a sense of the value and importance of education. Unlike the academically vibrant Northeast, the opportunities for intellectual pursuits were sparse in nineteenth century Iowa. Consequently, Unitarian churches often became centres of learning, socializing and life in the communities.

From 1882-1905 Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones ministered to a thriving Unitarian congregation in Chicago, called All Souls Church. Jones was an inspiration and mentor to many of the women of the Prophetic Sisterhood. He believed strongly in the need for the church to educate, and for the minister to personally attend to this education. Jones also encouraged mentorship of ministers, learning from each other and sharing knowledge.

Some ministers of the Prophetic Sisterhood were lone women working in small communities. A few were mothers and wives as well as full time ministers. Many banded together as friends and colleagues to share the work of envisioning and re-creating Unitarianism.

What I find really interesting about these women ministers is the actual churches they built and how those churches functioned in the community. Rev. Caroline Bartlett Crane was ordained by the Unitarian church in Kalamazoo, and consequently served them. According to Cynthia Grant Tucker, as they looked at building a church, Crane “asked her church’s building committee to start out by putting themselves in all the various family roles... and then

scrutinizing the blueprints from the assumed perspective of each.”¹ These churches were built with democracy in mind. Women’s, children’s, and men’s roles were taken into consideration as the churches were being constructed. Further, Tucker writes,

“Liberal churchwomen noted that simply because their churches were untaxed properties, not to mention outward expressions of a democratic theology, there was an obligation to see that the buildings enhanced their neighborhoods, not only in terms of aesthetic effect, but through their ethical influence, too.”²

And so the churches were established as part of the community, serving the community, nourishing it, helping support and create it.

The People’s Church of Kalamazoo, where Rev. Caroline Bartlett Crane worked, had workshops built for classes offered to local residents. There was also a kitchen and dining room where any woman could come for free lessons on home economics, and low cost meals were served to as many as three hundred young women (most working nearby).³ The ministry of the People’s Church of Kalamazoo supported and nurtured the community and its specific needs. The church was in no way separate from the needs of the community. It was not a retreat from the busy hustling city around it, but a vibrant necessary part of that hustle. The People’s Church of Kalamazoo was vital to that time and place.

I think Unitarianism needs, and deserves to be a vital living part of community life. I believe that, and I work to try and bring the values, and hope I find here into the larger community. In turn I try to honestly bring the realities and hope I find in working downtown to the care and attention of this congregation.

Ministry isn’t just one thing. Ministry is as unique as each minister and each congregation, or community. Each minister, with our strengths, weaknesses, specific interests and passion has our own ministry. Consequently, each minister has an individual way of explaining the work that we do.

¹ Tucker, Cynthia Grant. *Prophetic Sisterhood Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*. San Jose: Author’s Choice Press, p.109.

² Tucker. 112.

³ Tucker. 114.

My ministry is about presence. My work is to serve Inner City Women's Initiative Society as an Outreach Worker. Specifically, I work with the Drug Alcohol Meeting and Support Programme (also called DAMS). DAMS serves marginalized women, treating them with respect and dignity.

I am a Unitarian community minister serving primarily with DAMS. But as a Unitarian minister I also have ties to our religious tradition. I was ordained by you, the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, about a year and a half ago. And now (as David mentioned), two weeks ago, our Board voted to formally endorse my ministry. Currently there are a number of ways that I am connected to this congregation, but I am not paid or employed by this church.

Last Thanksgiving we worked together to serve food (made by you) to the women I work with Downtown. There were turkeys, and dressing, and gravy and so many pies! The women I saw walking away were rubbing their bellies and had smiles on their faces. And I heard from many how grateful they were. Let's do that again some time!

Today I want to tell you more about what my work actually looks like. Specifically, I want to tell you about a recent project we just completed at DAMS. In November, Judy Villett called me with an idea. Judy, a talented artist and member of this congregation, helped me with my ordination. She made this beautiful stole, and sat on the ordination coordination committee. So Judy is familiar with my work, and she has been very supportive of me. Judy works at Curves Gym. Curves is a women's gym with a few locations in the city. Every Christmas the women at Curves hold a gift drive. This year, Judy suggested the drive benefit DAMS. It was so cool! Judy's boss Tessa gave me a call and we got the ball rolling. First we decided we could use about 60 hats and scarves, gloves and umbrellas. Hats, gloves, and umbrellas can easily be given out from the van at night on outreach. We drive a van on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights looking for women on the street. Tessa thought Curves could do more, so we at DAMS decided to choose 4 women, and let them make a Christmas wish list. The women we chose were all ones we see fairly regularly, and all have children or grandchildren.

Each of the four women was asked to make a wish list. A few weeks went by and I kept in touch with Tessa. Unfortunately, things weren't looking too good on her end. Tessa was a little reluctant to tell me that some of the things on the wish lists had been really expensive: a brand name purse, a pair of designer jeans, a fancy new cell phones, etc. As this was the first time either Curves or DAMS had done something like this, we didn't set definite parameters on the wish lists, which unfortunately turned out like a list of prizes on the Price is Right. Plus, we had started the process late and fewer people attend the gym in December because of the holidays. And then the snow started and the numbers at the gym fell off even more. Tessa sounded apologetic that they hadn't been able to fill all the lists. The Christmas drive was finished on Monday, December 22 and my co-worker, Florence went to pick everything up on Tuesday morning. When I came into work later in the day, there were heaps of presents and three large bags full of fuzzy, warm scarves, hand-knitted toques and bright, colourful gloves. I spent several hours Tuesday sorting out the wish lists, and wrapping the presents in bright paper.

Our main working office is in the LifeSkills Centre, at 412 East Cordova, across from Oppenheimer Park. LifeSkills closed the week of Christmas, but DAMS was still open, so we worked those few days in the empty, quiet, drop-in centre. I wrapped and wrapped and wrapped: a huge Tonka truck, a Cabbage Patch Kid, a couple DVDs, a sweater, a jacket, an umbrella, gloves, Christmas decorations, toys for a newborn. I spent hours wrapping presents, and when it was all done I had to deliver the presents in the slippery, cold evening.

As I tell you more about these individual women, I want you to know that the truth is in there, but these stories are collages of experiences I've had. For the sake of confidentiality, I have woven several women's stories together. I share them with you as I want to show you some of what inspires me about this work.

One of the women lived a few blocks away. I took an arm-load of gifts to Kim's single room in a run-down hotel. Kim shares a kitchen and bathroom with her neighbours on the floor. I knocked on the door to her room, and Kim opened the door just a crack. The tight lines around her eyes relaxed when she recognized me. She opened the door another foot. I filled her arms with gifts and her face lit up. She said this was going to be a good Christmas. She was

going to see her kids and grandkids tomorrow, and this year she had all these things to give them!

The next day I went to give out more presents. I went and visited Mary, a frail-looking, rail-thin 58 year old woman. Mary was visiting another resident in the building where she lived. But she was expecting me, and as soon as she saw me, she stopped talking to her friend and asked me to follow her back to her room. Once we got to her room, I opened a large bag full of parcels onto her bed. She invited me to sit for a minute. It wasn't Christmas quite yet, but she was so excited she wanted to open just one present. She chose a small cylinder, and ripped open the cheery paper to reveal a lime green umbrella (not one of the items she'd asked for). She got so excited! "What a pretty colour! A brand new umbrella, just for me!"

---I suddenly flashed back to about a year ago, I was visiting women in the hospital and this same woman stole my umbrella! These people, all people are complex, and my feelings for them are not simple.---

Mary reached for the next present, and got more and more excited with each she opened. After about five presents she looked up at me for a moment. And she was teary. "This is so great! Who are these women who gave me these presents? No one has ever given me Christmas presents." I felt very warm, very rich in that moment. The presents weren't from me, they had come from generous unknown hands, but I got to share in their benefits too.

Sometimes my job is pretty special. The moments I get to spend with these women are precious. They don't happen every day, or even once a week. But when they happen they are so inspiring and rewarding. One of the great privileges of ministry is being invited into people's lives at these very precious moments. For example, professional ministry gives us the opportunity to help people create a sacred marriage ceremony, or to visit people in the hospital when they may be reflecting deeply on their lives and what really matters to them.

So what is my relationship to you all here, this morning? I am often here on Sunday mornings to worship, and I am involved in the life of this congregation. I am in the process of drafting a covenant and contract with this church's Board of Trustees, and as David mentioned, our board recently agreed to endorse me by formally, recognizing my work as professional

ministry. One other way formal involvement with the church will be the Committee on Community Ministry. For a new minister, this committee can play a really important role in visioning and giving direction to the ministry. The Committee on Community Ministry will serve to ground me in the life of this church and remind me of the values we hold dear. Also, these people will help me figure out how else we (the Unitarian Church of Vancouver and I) can all work together.

The work that I do with DAMS is directly related to the values and teachings of this church. I work daily to treat people with inherent worth and dignity. Treating our women no matter how they come to us, perhaps looking like crows (from Earle's song), perhaps looking like Flip Flop the frog, unsure of what he had to offer the world, treating our women with respect and dignity is the most important service we provide.

But there is another very specific way that I am acting on who we are as a movement, when I work at DAMS. Six years ago, at the Annual Conference and Meeting for the Canadian Unitarian Council, people representing Unitarian churches across Canada voted to endorse a policy on drug reform. Specifically, the policy speaks of harm reduction as a necessary way to treat the societal problems caused by drug addiction and drug prohibition.

Here is a summary of the section from the policy statement: We affirm the use of "harm reduction" as a means of helping drug users minimize the risks to themselves and others, including disease transfer (ex. HIV/AIDs and Hepatitis). We support needle exchanges, heroin maintenance programmes and safe consumption sites to promote safer drug use. Opportunities to reduce or eliminate drug use, and support services (housing, and healthcare) must also to be made available to drug users. The full policy is on the CUC website.⁴

As an outreach worker at DAMS, I am the person responsible for our harm reduction programmes. I order our supplies of condoms, clean needles, and alcohol swabs and all of the supplies we distribute to the women. The city of Vancouver pays for the supplies and many sites like us distribute them free of charge.

⁴ http://www.cuc.ca/social_responsibility/alt_drug_prohibit.htm

When I was interviewed for the position of outreach worker at DAMS, I was asked if I was okay with harm reduction, and of handing out supplies to women, mainly safer crack use kits, and sterile needles. I remember sitting in that interview and feeling good that I have the support of others who stand with me and believe in the great value of the work DAMS is doing. The women we work with sometimes come to us angry and rude, but more often than that, they are polite and grateful and tell us that our work really is saving lives. Saving lives.

Salvation. As Unitarians we have a long tradition of realized eschatology, or salvation realized in the lives we lead on earth, in this life. As Unitarians we greatly value human life, and we agree that what we do with our lives, the decisions we make in each moment matter. The decision about whether or not to use a mouthpiece on a crack pipe (and possibly spread Hep-C on a shared pipe), that decision matters, not just for the one woman but also for whomever she might share that crack pipe with. My role in that decision is to reaffirm that she is human and deserves dignity and respect (even though I know she is not likely to find it very often). I affirm her worth and dignity and her ability to make decisions about her life that matter.

The vocation I have accepted, calls me to put the values I learn here in this community to work. But I think most of you that make a commitment to being a part of the life of this church also feel called to live according to the values we learn and deepen here. I think there is a way that all of us are a part of the ministry. We are all here strengthening and reinforcing those values in little and big ways in all the decisions we make in our lives. I think The People's Church of Kalamazoo covenanting that the decisions we make matter when they carefully laid the plans for their new building, bringing democracy alive in their community.

On September 16, 2007, at my ordination, in this sanctuary, Rev. Kay Jorgenson lead the part of the ceremony called the "Laying on of hands". Those of you who were here for the ordination may remember that Kay invited us all to be a part of my ministry, to touch it and let it touch you. As you do with Steven Epperson's ministry, touch it, let it touch you. In the tradition of the Prophetic Sisterhood, help me compassionately bring the values of this church alive. I invite you to be a part of bringing what you learn and love about the Unitarian Church of Vancouver out with an open heart to the world. We do make a difference.

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