



We All Minister

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**The Rev. Stephen Atkinson
North Shore Unitarian Church
West Vancouver, BC**

The Sunday Committee and I look way ahead throughout the year to see what will govern our services, when special events happen and when we can meet this need or that expectation. Long ago they told me that one of these early June services each year recognizes the many volunteers in the congregation who give huge numbers of hours to us all so that we have a building, a program, staff and worship, soup and hymn books and *everything* that lets us live and create the life of the church. Just as I was figuring out back in May what to title this service, I received word that Dr. Laurel Hallman's Ordination-Installation sermon would be called, "Who Ministers?" Well, that immediately gave me the title for *this* sermon: We Allllllll Minister. I felt I'd pulled off a nifty bit of strategic programming!

So imagine for a moment being at your own Ordination, enjoying it all so much, watching your internship supervisor with pride as she steps into the pulpit, knowing she's a hidden gem that virtually none of you have ever encountered. I sit in rapt attention and, within 10 seconds of opening her mouth, Laurel says, "We allllll minister." Without so much as a flicker of distress showing on my glowing and faithful face, I'm thinking, "Oh... outhouse product! She's gonna give *my* sermon!"

By now, you know that there's very slim chance of that because, as those of you who were able to be there saw, the depth to which Laurel goes in her thinking is exceptional. We might preach on the same subject, but the sermons won't at all be the same.

That day, Laurel's message focused on the fact that it is not only the minister who ministers, but that each person and the congregation as a whole takes part in the living and breathing ministry of the church, doing different things, taking roles of different sizes and complexities, but all together performing the mission of the church and bringing about its vision. In church-craft circles, we call this Shared Ministry. Every person in the church, minister, staff, Board, committee

chairs, volunteers, youth and even children have parts to play in how the values and message of the congregation are made real and proclaimed in both word and deed. This is Shared Ministry.

Let me give you a specific example that I heard of recently. The minister of another Unitarian Universalist church told me that, shortly after she arrived to be their new minister, she was asked to meet with their equivalent of our Care and Concerns Committee – the folks who provide or arrange for actual help for members in difficulty and who can lend a listening ear and warm spirit for those among us who are troubled. At that church, the minister entered a room full of very elderly women; they greeted her warmly and exclaimed how glad they were that she was now there. It's no wonder they were glad because they'd asked to meet with her to tell her that they were all resigning now that she was available to take over all their work.

The minister unruffled, at least in how she presented herself in the story, had some prior experience with loving church communities. She set about dividing up all her congregants into groups based on postal codes and asked them all to be ready to help out other members and friends in their neighbourhood if need arose. She found a contact person in each group and then sent out those names and numbers. From then on she has found it rare that she arrives at the home or hospital bed of any congregant before someone has already been there that the person knows from the church *and* from their own neighbourhood. The minister still visits because what she brings to the suffering person is different from what the visiting member brings; together their ministry becomes greater than the simple addition of one task to the other. They create and represent the whole community that surrounds and cares for this congregant in distress. That's a successful example of Shared Ministry.

In the case of that church, the onerous work performed by a small number of understandably tired and put upon volunteers became smaller, direct services offered by a large number of members of the church for people nearby; they were called upon to do them far less often because so many more members shared the responsibility and they had the added benefit of getting to know other church members who lived rather close by.

It's entirely possible, of course, that some members feel put upon or resentful if a request comes in to help someone they don't know quite well enough when there are too many demands on their time already. In that spirit, the task feels like a chore, and, let's be honest, at times anything we do even for those people we love and cherish can sometimes feel burdensome and joyless. Volunteer work can feel that way too. One antidote for the toxic effect of doing church work

without joy, reward or a sense of accomplishment is to keep in mind the larger picture.

Although it seems like half of what we do here is put up and take down tables, and bring out and put back chairs, the truth is that we do that to create moments of community. We set up rooms so that *people* can connect in them. Those connections might be intellectual as we discuss ideas. They may be creative as we make cards to be sent from the church to members on special occasions or at times of difficulty. They may be productive as a project is planned, or spiritual as we sit in a circle to meditate. The tables are just tables, the chairs just chairs until people are using them to create the church through building its community and performing its work. In this way, our chores become service; every little thing that we do breathes life into the church and enables it to do its work. Your volunteer work is actually service to a much larger purpose, and as service it becomes love. Serving soup is serving love.

We can see this in a different way if we look outside our church, even our denomination, to see how this is true in other faiths. Along with several classmates of mine in my Liberal Theology course at seminary in Chicago, I attended a Catholic charismatic mass at St. Sabina's, an African-American church in South Chicago. To give you a sense of the size and success of this church, their *weekly* collection is usually in the \$40,000 plus range – in South Chicago. Now, with these kinds of funds that church has basically saved and developed a whole neighbourhood in that dying and deadly area of urban decay, so let's not imagine that it puts another jewel in the Pope's mitre – nothing of the sort. But that's not my point.

As we arrived at church, a 25-30 year old handsome man in a shirt with a church logo on it greeted us immediately at the door, asked if we'd been there before and showed us from the door all the way through a long entry way and then a very long aisle up to our choice of seats in the front few pews. He asked us where we were visiting from; later in the service – which was, by the way, 3 hours and 45 minutes long – the priest mentioned the visitors they had there today from our seminary. The same man greeted us as we left and welcomed us to visit again. There were at least a dozen other men in the same shirts going up and down other aisles, escorting slow-walking elders, pointing out where there were still seats.

Likewise, at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, the "Purpose Driven Church" where Rick Warren is the senior minister, dozens of church members help newcomers find parking spaces. First they have a designated newcomer parking section; second, church valets speak to drivers coming into that section

to tell them where spaces are left and then help visitors find their way into the church. I must admit that it gives me a vision of someone standing at the end of our driveway, telling drivers that there are spaces left in our lot, or giving them directions around to Hugo Ray. The two reserved spots that Lynn and I use would be designated on Sunday mornings for "First Time Visitors." Someone make that sign to go over the Reserved sign we'll keep for the rest of the week, and we'll do at least that part. Anyone have a safety vest? Talk to me after the service.

At these churches, volunteers perform their tasks as their way of showing their love for God as expressed in the worship life and community of St. Sabina's and Saddleback. We are not lacking love here. We love each other; this church; fellow human beings and in fact all of life. We love that which beckons us to come and keep coming, to contribute and serve and build and reach out. In our spirit of love, you also can turn your volunteer work into service, and in all your particular ways, you can perform your ministries within our large Shared Ministry.

When I attended the first Eastern Regional Gathering in Ottawa in the Fall of 2002, I remember one member of that church asking Brian Kopke, their minister at that time, and asking in a way that told us that she or others at Ottawa First had asked the same question over and over: "And just why, Brian, do we call it *ministry*?" It was clear that this word smacked of too much churchy-ness or Christianity in the ears of some. So why do we call it ministry?

There are many ways to answer this question. I'll refer back to the reading that we used to focus our Time for Centering this morning. First of all, this piece, called "Anyone's Ministry," was written by The Rev. Gordon McKeeman, a Universalist minister who was a charter member of an informal group of his colleagues who were determined to revitalize Universalist theology and worship beginning in 1945. This was before the separate denominations of Unitarians and Universalists consolidated into what it is now in North America. This group called themselves the Humiliati and were something like the Michael Duralls of their day – professional ministers who were dissatisfied with the state of their denomination, who feared for its survival, who wanted to make their church more deeply meaningful for its members and distinctive amongst the other liberal Protestant churches. Some of you remember that we've studied Durall's work here earlier this year and are still considering how his critique of the current state of Unitarian churches might inform our future plans. I tell you this to give you a sense of from what roots McKeeman is being nourished and nourishing us in his writing. Let's look at parts of it again.

McKeeman starts with “Ministry is” and then an ellipsis, three periods in a row. You might be familiar with the song from *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, the musical, in which the most famous song is “Happiness is... two kinds of ice cream, knowing a secret, climbing a tree....” In other words, happiness, or in our case ministry, is a number of small, widely varied things that are alike in the mood or spirit in which they are done or received. Service is done in the spirit of love and ministry is service performed with the larger picture in mind of the deepest and highest purpose that we share. But it can look like dishing out two kinds of ice cream, knowing and *keeping* a confidentiality, or, well yesterday at least, climbing the *roof*.

Then he goes on to a number of situations in which people encounter each other: “beckon[ing] forth hidden possibilities; Inviting... deeper, more constant, more reverent relationship with the world and with one another; Being present... for others... in their grief, misery and pain; Knowing that those feelings are our feelings too; Celebrating the... miracles of birth and life... ; Witnessing to life-enhancing values; speaking truth to power;... Whenever there is a meeting that summons us to our better selves, wherever Our lostness is found, our fragments are united, or our wounds are healing, our spines stiffen and our muscles grow strong for the task... there is ministry.”

This is what you do for each other. I see you doing it. In one or more of these and the other ways that McKeeman describes *anyone’s* ministry, I believe that each of you has somehow this year touched or been touched, served or been served, offered company or was kept company.

You are the church. You are the service that this congregation offers. You are our ministry.

I thank you for being that.

I speak for the staff and Board members in thanking you for doing all that.

I believe I even speak for most everyone here as I thank you all on behalf of those sitting around you for being there and for being here.

I particularly thank those who have served long and well and now deserve time off from that. In this way, be ministers also to yourselves.

May your service in whatever form it takes be joyous; may your awareness of your ministry become ever clearer; and may you deepen and expand it as you feel the world’s call to you.