

Whom Do We Serve?

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for discussion at the UUA
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Dan's paper is helpful to MSR's as they consider their moral compass in this work

No one can serve two masters: either you will hate the one, and love the other, or you will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. -- Matthew 6:24

Soon after I began working at the UUA, Peter Fleck asked me, "Whom do you serve, ultimately: ministers or congregations?" As he often does, Peter in a few words pointed to a tension close to the heart of the Association's work. The tension may be more apparent to observers of the UUA than to us as staff members. Our work is so much to reconcile, to harmonize and to find common ground among conflicting interests that we take it for granted this is possible. To the conflicted parties themselves however our rationales sometimes sound glib, our motives self-serving. Especially in conflict situations, each player wants assurance that someone in the system speaks for him or her. The more intense the conflict, the less likely the parties will welcome even a neutral mediator, much less an agent of some greater good defined outside the local conflict. It is important, then, that we understand and express clearly what responsibilities we have toward each of the persons and constituencies we serve.

This paper is an effort to define those responsibilities. While I will criticize some things I have heard or seen, most of what I have to say will simply clarify the way we operate already. I write in the belief that clearer conversation about roles and motivations will help us to communicate with one another and with our constituents what we are trying to accomplish, and for whom.

The issue of the UUA staffs obligations toward various parties comes up continually. Here are a few recent examples:

- Some District Executives define themselves as advocates for congregations, in contrast to UUMA Good Offices Persons, who defend ministers. While the Department of Ministry has never accepted such a partisan role, lay leaders sometimes complain that we defend ministers, while ministers sometimes complain that we don't. Should we embrace an adversary system or resist it?
- A congregation in conflict with its minister received advice from its District Executive and the Department of Ministry that seemed biased toward the minister. An angry member wrote to the UUA Board of Trustees to ask, "Who represents the congregation?"
- The new Career Development Director position in the Department of Ministry revives an old question: Can the Department offer "counseling" to ministers when it exercises such strong influence on their careers? With so much of the Department's energy now going into disciplinary matters, with whom can a minister be candid about doubts, mistakes, and temptations?

In answer to these and similar questions, I believe it is important to be clear: the UUA's concern is for the health and effectiveness of the UU movement as a whole. This interest is not subordinate to the needs of any minister or congregation.. We should ground our work in a broader vision of the whole, and never hire ourselves out as "advocates" for ministers or congregations. The movement prospers only when it has effective congregations and happy, productive ministers. The Department of Ministry's mission statement commits us to promote "a ministry of excellence," and ministry is something ministers and congregations do together. Especially in conflict, when parties see their interests as opposed, the UUA's role should be to represent our common interest in a fruitful partnership.

One easy answer to Peter Fleck's question, "Whom do you serve?" is that UUA ultimately serves congregations--but then so should ministers. A congregation ultimately should serve not itself but the faith. A congregation's final goal is neither its own corporate well-being nor the private interests of its members, but the fulfillment of its purposes through means selected in adherence to its principles. To supplant that goal with something smaller or more partisan sells the founding genius of our institutions short.

Of course no one can quite define "our" purposes. Even the official, stated purposes we adopt from time to time are at best faulty approximations. Still, to paraphrase Paul Carnes, while we may never know completely what our purposes are, we can sometimes recognize what they are not. Accordingly, I have come up with the following three suggestions to guide us in balancing the UUA staff's responsibilities toward various pans of our clientele.

Principle #1: We should resist defining ourselves as adversaries

We should resist any movement toward an adversary system where UUA staff become "hired guns" for churches or for ministers, for RE or music, or for any other interest smaller than the good of the whole movement. To do so undermines our power to be a third, uniting element in conflict situations. Even when we choose to press a minister to resign or a congregation to provide a generous severance package, we should be explicit that we do so for the health of the movement as a whole.

It is easy to set ourselves up as adversaries, not only because the "adversary system" is part of our common culture, but because it simplifies each player's loyalties. A District Executive who vows always to be "for the congregation" never has to worry about the congregation's duty to help make our ministry livable. A UUMA Good Offices Person who becomes simply an advocate defaults on the collegial obligation to admonish and correct as well as to support and succor. Should the Department of Ministry become merely an agency for ministers, we offend the trust of congregations, without which we could do little.

An adversary system simplifies hard choices, but the complex balancing of interdependent interests is important. The purpose of the UUA is to serve the whole UU community. In place of any adversary understanding, our watchword should be Jack Mendelsohn's familiar dictum that "great congregations and strong, effective ministers . . . create each other."

Principle #2: We should avoid compartmentalizing care from power

I am distressed by the suggestion, made repeatedly, that we should assign the exercise of power separately from the responsibility of care--with some UUA staff members assigned to be the "heavies" while others get to be Mr. or Ms. Nice-Guy. At best, this idea embodies a

fastidious dualism of sweet versus strong. At worst, it leads us into an unthinking game of Good Cop-Bad Cop, with the carer pretending not to have power and the power person free of the duty to be caring.

A better starting point is the first principle as stated in our by-laws. Each person's "supreme worth and dignity" dictates that we should treat every party with respect and on terms of social equality. When we use power, respect for each person should temper the arrogance and presumption that so often go with power. It should also mean that we do not allow official roles and obligations to eclipse us as autonomous moral agents or as human beings. As we use power or balance power interests we should all offer support and empathy to those with whom we deal. I believe this is habitual with most of us, but it's worth stating because sometimes we are urged to separate the two.

Principle #3: We should avoid making promises that conflict with our basic responsibilities

I am thinking here mostly of the promise implied by the word "counseling." In ministry, this word normally implies a confidential relationship where the client's interests are paramount. We would condemn a psychotherapist who sold securities to clients or reported to their employers: the counseling relationship should be free of conflicts of interest. No UUA staff member can be a counselor, in this narrow sense, to a UU minister. While we wish all our ministers well, we cannot honestly claim exclusive dedication to their interest. We balance the private interest of ministers against other legitimate claims. We serve ministers best when we are frank about this. Our basic commitment as UUA staff is to the health and effectiveness of the whole movement, not to any one person.

Virtually all UUA staff provide "counsel" in the broad sense of information and advice. The new Ministerial Development Director will go further, discussing ministers' career plans in order to help them fulfill themselves as persons. But as a member of the Department, he will influence decisions and represent a larger set of interests as well. In our eagerness to court favor politically, we need to be careful not to promise that anyone on the LTUA staff is all grace and no judgment.

Our basic loyalty as UUA staff is to the good of the whole movement. It would be disingenuous to pretend we were creatures of pure heart, immune from influence by worldly powers or the lure of mammon. Like other men and women, we have "laughed or wept, [been] married or in love, or commended, or cheated, or chagrined." These and other facts of our biographies make us partial in all sorts of ways. But in most situations, we are favorably placed to represent the larger view. Our private and institutional self-interest aligns well with the long-run health of our ministers and congregations. We see the achievements of healthy, effective ministers and congregations, and how at best they reinforce each other. Over time we see the consequences when any one legitimate priority prevails at the expense of others. We can, in this association of free hearts, speak for the common good. At least we ought to try.