

Sticks

By the Rev. Jay Libby
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I grew up in a blue-collar, Union family. My grandfather was a Teamster. My step-father was an iron worker, who helped build some of Boston's well-known skyscrapers. I remember going to the union hall and jobsites with my step-father Warren when I was young. On the jobsites, there was a lot going on. Workers in hard hats and massive, tool-studded belts bustled to and fro. It was usually clear what was going on- something was being built-though I could never seem to make out who was in charge. Or if anyone was in charge. Yet, things would get done. The building would rise 10 stories, 20 stories, even 50 stories. I appreciate now as an adult how complex and integrated the process is. In addition to iron workers, there were carpenters, pipe fitters, sheet metal workers, engineers and architects, and so on. In an intricate and imperfect dance, the goal was achieved.

Who's in charge here? In my blue collar mind, I've always imagined a congregation being like a job site or shop floor. Coming in from the outside, someone would want to know, "Who's in charge here?" The person walking through the door of a church on Sunday morning might never ask the question outright, but it's there nevertheless somewhere in her mind. As communal animals, humans have an innate need to understand the pecking order, the hierarchy within any community. So, what would happen if somebody were to walk through our door on a Sunday morning and say to an usher or greeter, "Who's in charge here?" Where the greeter point? Perhaps to the minister. Or maybe our visitor would be directed to somebody on the parish committee. Just as likely visitor might be directed to somebody who has been a member of the congregation for quite a long time.

The fact of the matter is that any of these responses would be correct. That sounds like a bit of a cop out. Surely someone must be "in charge." Otherwise, one wonders how things would ever get done around here. Ah, and there as they say is the rub. There is absolutely no definitive answer in a Unitarian Universalist congregation to the question, "Who's in charge?" It's probably fair to say even that attempts to answer this question of who's in charge have taken up more ink, paper and scholarly effort within Unitarian Universalist circles than any other topic. However, since you've been so kind to come here this morning, I guess I'm in charge for the moment of answering the question of who is in charge.

We could dig deep into history for an answer for the beginnings of the answer lie somewhere back in the 1600s at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Among the many consequences of the Reformation was a re-evaluation of what exactly the nature

of church authority was. Up to that point, religious authority was centralized in the Pope, and his subsidiaries: the cardinals, bishops and priests. Not only did this mean that the Pope and his clergy determined what correct belief was, but also that access to God and the path to salvation could only be achieved by and through the clergy. The common, lay person needed the clergy to serve his or her spiritual ends.

Protestant theology began to shift this view of authority. Martin Luther began the shift with his idea of the priesthood of all believers. To Luther, all baptized Christians could wield some of the spiritual authority that had once been reserved exclusively for ordained clergy. As the Reformation proceeded over time, views on church authority and the role of lay people within that authority became more radical. For our purposes as Unitarian Universalists today, it's the Reformation legacy of the Pilgrims and Puritans on the issue of church authority that is most important.

As the historian Bradford Smith points out, "[the] innovating principle behind Puritanism was in the idea that the Bible, rather than any established religious hierarchy, was the final authority. Therefore every man, every individual, had direct access to the word of God. It was the Puritan's aim to reconstruct and purify not only the church, but individual conduct and all the institutions men live by." The Puritans essentially turned church governance on its head, taking power from the hierarchy and giving it to the people in the pews. Since the basic unit of Puritanism was the congregation, their form of church governance is called by the somewhat obtuse name, congregational polity.

In 1648, the representatives of various Puritan congregations held a meeting in Cambridge to attempt to codify the doctrine of congregational polity. They created a document that we know today as the Cambridge Platform. At the heart of the Cambridge Platform is the belief that that "there is no greater Church than a Congregation," which consists of members who come together in voluntary agreement and covenant to "worship, edify and have fellowship." Each congregation, according to the Cambridge Platform, is autonomous, because there is no higher authority than the congregation.

Although we continue to preserve that congregational heritage in our Unitarian Universalist congregations today, by holding up the Cambridge Platform, it's interesting to note that First Parish, along with most of the congregations in Plymouth Colony, never sent delegates to Cambridge and never formally adopted the platform.

For all its thoughtfulness, the Cambridge Platform was a dry document and maybe even created more ambiguities than it solved. It's still not clear sometimes just how we're supposed to do this thing called "church." My vision of "church," my vision of ministry, come right back to that simple illustration-the bundle of sticks. One stick

could stand for the ordained ministry, another for each staff member, and others representing each of you, the people in the pews. Each stick is separate and distinct, strong in many ways, but each also profoundly fragile and vulnerable in its independence, and certainly not up to the task of doing the work of the congregation alone.

As our Times for All Ages showed so well today, one stick alone could be snapped pretty easily. A group of sticks together was much harder to bend, almost impossible to break. Like the cranes on a construction site, many strands of wire coil together to create one strong strand to bear the load. When Kym and I first started to talk about doing this story, I imagined I'd use nice clean, straight wooden dowels instead of sticks. But that just didn't seem right.

Before I tell you why, let me read to you something I found in the packet that your search committee so carefully put together and sent to me back in December. I think it got overlooked during final editing and might have been a first draft for the section about the minister the committee felt you are looking for.

After hundreds of years, the ideal model of the perfect pastor has finally created. She preaches exactly 20 minutes and then sits down. She condemns sin, but never hurts anyone's feelings. She works from 8am to 10pm, in every type of work, from preaching to custodial service.

He makes \$200 week, wears good clothes, buys good books regularly, has a nice family, drives a good car, and gives \$100 a week to the church. He also stands ready to contribute to every good work that comes along, both in time and money. She is 26 years old and has been preaching for 30 years. She is tall and short, thin and heavy set, handsome and beautiful. He has one brown eye and one blue; with hair that is parted in the middle, left side dark and straight, the right side brown and wavy.

He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all available time with older folks. She smiles all the time with a straight face because s/he has a sense of humor that keeps one seriously dedicated to the work. She makes 15 calls a day on church members, spends all spare time recruiting new members, and is never out of the office. The ideal model? I don't think so. That's not really what we want, is it? Oh maybe, deep down inside of us we

want someone to take care of us in that way. But, we know it's not healthy.

[Excerpted from a sermon by Rev. Jeanne Lloyd]

OK, alright, I'm fibbing here a bit. This tidbit came out of the sermon of one of my colleagues and some version of it has been passed around by ministers for many years. Admit it-wouldn't a minister fitting that description just be grand? Unfortunately, I have to report that your search committee, despite its best efforts, didn't find the minister I just described. Just me, imperfect as I am. That's why I liked using real sticks in today's story. None of them was perfect. Like the sticks, we all have our bumps, bends and blemishes that keep the bundle from ever binding together too perfectly.

Some of you might know that there's a buzz word lurking behind what I'm talking about here-Shared Ministry. Yes, believe me, as you'll get to find out, I kinda hate buzz words too. Whether we want to use the fancy buzz word or not, a congregation is a partnership between the minister and the congregation, especially between the minister and lay leadership, between the leadership and all of you, a fluid dance, requiring give and take, courage and humility, mutual respect and support. The ideal minister in the fake job description is a myth, but if one did exist she would never be able to do all the work of the congregation alone. The leadership and active participation of the people in the pews is vital. In a part-time ministry the need for this lay leadership and participation is even greater.

Going back to the example of the sticks for the moment. It's not enough to think of congregational strength and vitality coming solely from the unity of the sticks joined together. What else happens when sticks come together? Flame-the powerful outcome of sticks working together. Since ancient times, one means of creating life-giving fire has been to rub one stick against another. Without the heat created by this friction, fire can't happen. If sticks represent shared ministry, the full potential of the ministry isn't realized unless the sticks sometimes rub together, and bump up against each other. Some healthy friction is necessary for the congregation to truly unlock its inner energy. Healthy friction is created when everyone in a congregation, minister, leadership, staff and laity, are honest with each other, give feedback and share expectations. It might burn, but the result can be transformative.

Let me close with this advice offered by UU Minister, Debra Haffner. Haffner urges us to "[r]emember the core principles of Buddhism . . . : Show up. Speak the Truth. Do What You Do With Enthusiasm. Don't Get Attached to the Outcome. The last is often the hardest for many of us. Remember that none of us is as smart as all of us are together, and that sometimes what we most want as individuals, may not be what is

best for the community as a whole. Believe in the democratic process. Work together not for common ground, but . . . for the common good, indeed for the higher ground. . .

Know that ultimately you - each of [us], alone and together -- are responsible for the well being of this church community, and for it being a prophetic voice in the world."

I look forward to sharing this week with you, to hear what hopes and goals you have for First Parish. Where are you in two years, five years, at your 400th Anniversary? What would keep this from happening?

Thank you and peace to all of you this week.