

THE MEANING OF ORDINATION  
WITHIN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

**ONE CHURCH-MANY HEARTS: THE FIRST IN A CANVASS  
SERMON SERIES**

June 17, 1990 was a sweltering hot day in Chicago. Third Unitarian church on the west side was not air-conditioned. It was a Sunday afternoon around 4 pm...the day of my ordination into the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

My family sat in the first couple of rows, my four children, Dave, my parents, my siblings, my nephews. It was the first time either of my parents had attended a UU service.

A couple of life-long friends were there, and recent friends and faculty members from seminary and CPE.

A good portion of the congregation was there...this small socially-active congregation where our family had been active for almost ten years...the congregation in which our three oldest children grew up.

Also present were lots and lots of clergy. And it was hot. The clergy came dressed in their finest robes, and it was very, very hot.

On the walls of this church, Third Unitarian Church of Chicago, were large wood-sculpted murals honoring the “saints” of that congregation. Clear, solid artistic renderings portrayed the values of that congregation. The faces that looked down upon us, were Booker T. Washington, Clara Barton, Sojourner Truth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Edison, Horace Mann, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and more. Every week we were blessed by those saints...but I felt their presence most profoundly on that day.

I had lived through my seminary years with a sense of inward call; now I was about to receive the sacramental laying-on-of-hands of the outward call. Before my ordination I was Lynn Thomas Strauss, afterward, I was a Reverend. One of my childhood friends awed by my transformation still calls me “Rev”.

To be ordained to the ministry is to be set apart. In a sacramental view of ordination there are sacred powers conferred, in the non-sacramental view, it is a recognition of how God has acted in that person's life.

June 17, 1990 I was ordained to be a healing power in the world. I trust that each of you also has a day of awakening and blessing to remember. Perhaps it was the day you first walked into a Unitarian Universalist church and felt in your bones and in your soul, that this is a place where you belong...a place you've been looking and longing for, a place you can call "home."

Or perhaps it was the day you stood with your baby in your arms and offered your child for dedication to this liberal faith...the day the congregation said to you and your family...We will support you in tending to the spiritual growth of your son or daughter...we will teach your child in Sunday School, we will pay attention to their joys and sorrows.

Or maybe it was the day your high school student participated in the senior high service and stood in this pulpit and spoke of what they believed to be true in their lives. The day the young people said just what the older people needed to hear.

When we gather as part of the Beloved Community, we join in a covenant, a promise to bring our soul and spirit, our mind and heart, here to be nourished, here to be challenged, here to be tended and here to be healed. And to help heal others- to help one another, broken in spirit, seeking wholeness.

To ordain means to select or appoint or set apart for an office, in church terms an office is a service, duty or ceremony.

Broadly speaking, within the ecclesial structure of Unitarian Universalism...which is congregational polity...we are all selected for service, duty or ceremony.

Traditionally within protestant theological structures there are three offices or functions: the priestly, the prophetic and the kingly. In a healthy, vibrant UU congregation...these offices are shared by minister and laity. The ministry of the church is, in part, the working out of how the offices will be shared. How healing will be possible.

The priestly function includes the caring for the well-being of the members of our congregation. This is a shared ministry that is done very effectively here at UUCR. You care for one another in times of need, and in times of celebration. You call on me, when needed and keep me in the caring loop. No minister could do this work alone. The priestly function also includes the corporate words of blessing that you speak at child dedications, coming of age ceremonies, new member recognitions and Teacher dedications....in these moments, we share the sacramental office of blessing.

The prophetic office is shared in our social justice work...when you participate in a peace march or an action for the homeless, or when you bring food to Mana or mittens to Beacon house...or when you lobby for marriage equality. Here again, this is a strength of UUCR. And no minister could do this work alone.

The kingly office has to do with how we govern ourselves...how we administer and use our authority and our resources. When the board works on revising the by-laws, when the personnel committee helps manage staff issues, when the board and finance committee balance the budget, when members show up and participate in a congregational meeting...this is the sharing of the kingly function....this office belongs most completely to you.

So, this morning I again extend the invitation to each of you to share in the ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville. And I stand in awe of how well you already uphold these sacred offices of the church.

Our Christian brothers and sisters base their discipleship, their shared ministry, on the Biblical story in Matthew, when Jesus called out to the ordinary fishermen and tax collectors and gave them authority and responsibility for the ministry. The early Christian church was made up of ordinary men and women, who learned on-the-job...who made mistakes, who misunderstood, who doubted and failed.

In Matthew 10 it is written; “and he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And preach as you go, saying, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.”

Jesus set a high bar for these ordinary men and women, and if you read further, you will see that they didn't pull it off all that well. Still the vision of the kingdom of heaven ...the vision of a world made whole... burned bright And is still spoken of...and dreamed of and worked toward.

My point is that ordinary people were called out to share the healing ministry of Jesus. And yes, even in our very liberal church, ordinary people- who are really not ordinary at all ...are called out to serve the offices of the church. It's a big responsibility.

That's why you like to have well-trained, dedicated, sacramentally ordained ministers to work with you- to stand up here, on your behalf, to officiate at marriage rites and death rites, on your behalf. You like to have someone who seems to know what to do, who is led by the spirit...who will work out the shared ministry with you. That's what our ministers are trained for... In our tradition, the preparation expected of ordained ministers is intellectual, spiritual, and moral. Devotion is also expected. Devotion to the tradition, to the congregation and to the divine.

One of our earliest Unitarian prophets; William Ellery Channing, listed traits necessary to ordained ministry this way: intellectual, moral and religious worth, faithfulness and zeal, honest, upright and pure virtue, nobleness, spiritual energy, a willing mind, a firm purpose, a martyr's spirit, a readiness to toil and suffer for the truth, a devotion of your best powers to the interests of piety and virtue.

No man is to preach who is not ready to be a martyr to truth.

No wonder it was so hot the day of my ordination, I was entering the fire of ministry!

There has not been enough scholarship, study or conversation about the meaning and practice of ordination and so the ministerial study group to which I belong, chose it as our topic this year. My remarks this morning rely heavily on a paper by my colleague, the Reverend Susan LaMar, minister at Channing Memorial Congregation in Columbia, MD.

It is odd that we have kept the sacrament of ordination as a liturgical act, in a tradition that resists liturgy. But that's how important it is.

Congregations are often confused or uninformed about the meaning and practice of ordination. Rev. LaMar suggests that perhaps it's not just ministers' who need preparation, perhaps congregations also need preparation for *their* role in the ordination process.

What exactly happens in an ordination and what is the role of the congregation? The Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville has ordained several ministers over the years of its history. The title of Reverend has been conferred on Bob Doss, Linda Hart, Ellen Fay Nelson, Paul Brittner, Beth Cox Miller, and perhaps a few others...if my sources are correct.

This congregation has played a part in blessing an invisible and ineffable change...and if it "took"- had integrity, grounding and meaningful intention- then the congregation should be changed-healed in spirit, inspired to divine work- as well.

Both congregational polity, as well as ministerial authority are enhanced by the sharing of the sacrament of ordination.

For in our tradition, only congregations can ordain ministers. It is a moment of significant ministry by the congregation.

There are no popes or bishops to decide who is worthy, who is ready for ordained ministry, only the congregation has the power. This is where our faith differs with Catholicism and much of Protestantism- it would have been as if, the disciples called out to Jesus, and offered to ordain and bless his ministry...rather than the other way around. (for Jesus, that ordaining and blessing came in his Baptism by John the Baptist.)

(In Judaism, rabbis are ordained by the seminaries- for their main charge is to protect and pass on the tradition, the teachings.)

All of our ministers in the UUA today were ordained by a congregation. So how are they chosen? How does a congregation decide that a person is worthy and ready?

In 1913 a committee studying ordination of Unitarian ministers sent a questionnaire to 500 ministers and laymen and discovered that “judgment through investigation of the candidates character, ability, training and other qualities was regarded as essential. Character came first among characteristics to be judged.

What is character and how can it be judged?

UU congregations have left this assessment almost fully up to the UU Fellowship Committee. All candidates for ministry must receive a passing grade from the Fellowship Committee before they are approved for the official search process and set out to ‘find’ a congregation to serve.

A congregation can ordain a minister, even if they haven’t received the blessing of the Fellowship Committee, but it is rarely done...and I suspect when it happens, there is a less than thorough investigation into character.

But shouldn’t congregations take this important question of character under consideration. It happens during the search process, but it rarely happens as part of the decision to ordain. This whole question of character, and assessment and what we look for in a minister has taken a turn away from sacramental and toward the corporate.

There has been, within the UUA, in recent years, a move toward applying corporate models and language and legalistic standards to our polity and structures. In the reading from the Ministerial Fellowship Requirements for ministry...training is stressed over character. And support to the purposes of the UUA is required rather than devotion to a higher purpose. The mention of a Master of Divinity degree doesn’t come until the very end of the list.

I am clear that my ordination vows have as much to do with the altar-the site of the holy, as with the pulpit-the site of the intellect. Without a sacred grounding for my words and deeds as minister, I am nothing. That is why the chalice lighting ritual is so central in our congregations, that is why I cannot preach without first engaging in the life of the church, first attending meetings, engaging in pastoral care, praying for you and for this church.

To be set apart...is necessary to ordained ministry, but it is not enough. I need to be connected...to sit with you and be present with you... and you with me. To share the ministry, you need to hear your calling too... and take up your service to the church we love.

In traditional ordinations, the laying on of hands is done by clergy only...but I knew I wanted fuller participation, fuller blessing, fuller empowerment and shared power.

So on that very hot June afternoon...when the moment came...for me to be blessed, to be ordained, to be prayed over...I asked for the Methodist minister of my youth to lay his hand on my head...and I asked for the Catholic priest of my CPE class and the hand of my Lutheran colleague, and the hands of all my UU professors and clergy friends...and then the hands of my family, and then the hands of the whole congregation...and soon all present were connected and the sacramental power was shared by all present.

And I, in the middle, was humbled and lifted up simultaneously and I knew without a doubt that I was taking on a mantle...a mantle of care and praise, of death and life, of past and future...a mantle that I carry still... a covenant that is holy and sustaining.

And it was given in trust, with faith, by a congregation.

It is a great power that Unitarian Universalist congregations hold and exercise.

And each one of you is called out to share the ministry ...not to “do” anything more or different in your life...but to see that who you are, and what is do is not ordinary...but is connected to your faith, to the vision of this church, to the holy offices we share. For it is only in mutual dedication and shared ministry that healing will be done.

So May It Be/Amen

So May It Be/ Amen