

HELLFIRE AND DALMATIANS: MINISTRY WITHOUT DOGMA
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, June 2005

Since I first picked out this t-shirt as the one I would preach on today, I've been pondering the various themes it suggests. There's the one about wearing robes in the pulpit. And the fact that fewer than half the UU ministers active today are male like Rev. Dogg here. And then there's always what I think about how Rev. Dogg's message would go over with this crowd.

Or how about the unique challenges of being a UU minister? That might be interesting. What about the unique challenges of being a UU congregation? I'm sure you would all have lots to say about that one! Or how about the fact that we UUs have no dogma?

And then, my brain made a segue from looking at this as just a funny shirt with a lot of laugh potential to the UU civics lesson which is implied. Civics lesson, you say? What? Be patient, my dear fellow t-shirt aficionados, and let me tell you a bit about congregational polity, which is the system of governance used by UU congregations, and how that system affects the relationship of congregation and minister, the relationship between you and me.

From the cartoon on my t-shirt, let's point out a few relevant differences between the congregation pictured and UUCWI. The male Rev. Dogg is wearing a clerical robe, something that indicates a certain formal approach to worship services. You may have noticed that I don't always wear a robe or stole. Many UU ministers don't.

His parishioners are all dressed up in their Sunday best, not casual Friday attire, and it looks like a lot of them are sitting on the front row. The Rev. Dogg is waving a Bible and he is shouting hellfire at his stunned Dalmatian listeners, “Bad Dog, No, No!”, which implies a certain superiority, as if this guy actually thinks he has the right to tell his parishioners that they are in big trouble (or should we say deep doodoo?).

Remembering our thinking this year about The Four Spiritualities and how our personality types influence our choice of spiritual path, we can probably deduce that the Rev. Dogg is one of those “Sensing Thinking” types and might be pretty effective as a whistleblower at Microsoft or the Pentagon-----or the FBI!

With all this and the apparent attention he’s getting from his listeners, we might also draw the conclusion that he is a minister in a more hierarchical tradition, perhaps Episcopalian or Catholic, where clergy are expected to deliver the party bottom line forcefully to keep members of the congregation in line. He’s not too worried about making the congregation angry.

Anyway, I think we can safely assume that he is not Unitarian Universalist! Or, and you might be surprised to hear this, Baptist or United Church of Christ or Jewish or any of the multitude of independent religious institutions in the United States. We---and the Baptists, the Jews, the UCCs, Unity, and even some of the most fundamentalist folks in town---use a system of governance called Congregational Polity, meaning that each congregation is separate and autonomous in its governance, and can fire a minister who tells them things they don’t want to hear!

No hierarchical person or body, such as a bishop or a council of elders, can tell it what to do or foist a bad minister on them; every decision is made by the congregation, or by the congregation's representative, elected board of trustees. The principle of democratic rule is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of these traditions; decisions are made by the people or by elected representatives of the people.

Other faith governances, such as we see in Presbyterian or Methodist or Episcopalian or Catholic congregations, use a council of elders to decide what individual congregations will do. And their word is the final authority. Very different from UU congregations!

In the system of episcopal polity, the individual congregation is free to decide what it will do on the local level, as far as activities and programming go, but all big decisions, such as who will be ordained to the ministry, who may be a member, what rituals and rites may be performed by the minister--all these are decisions made by bishops and other persons in the hierarchy. Lay persons and individual clergy can work to influence the decisions of the hierarchy, but the final decision is in the hands of those others.

Needless to say, this can lead to a certain amount of conflict in the ranks. We have only to look at the scandals of sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests whose behavior was glossed over and excused by bishops and archbishops and even cardinals. If this decision had been in the hands of the local parish, it would have been a different story.

Other issues can also be controversial in faith traditions with an “episcopal” polity: for example, ordination to the ministry of women and openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folk; what one must believe and do to belong to the tradition; customs or sacraments such as baptism, communion, marriage, and rituals for the dead; choosing a minister, and the like.

All of these are all prescribed by higher-ups, not by the individual congregation, though there may be considerable flexibility exercised by individual clergy and churches. Ministers and other clergy are usually assigned, with little choice by the congregation itself.

To disobey church law in one of these traditions means to risk one’s existence as an individual congregation or one’s ordination as a minister. When the Right Rev. John Shelby Spong, controversial Episcopal priest, dared to marry a gay couple some years ago, he was hauled in front of the high court of the church and was nearly defrocked. Fortunately, this case tipped the balance of opinion on the matter of GLBT ordination and marriage in the Episcopal church, and he was acquitted and this oppressive church law was overturned, though the question of leadership in the church is still unclear, as evidenced by the furor over the appointment of a gay bishop.

So does this all mean that Congregational Polity, the governance system we share with a few other faith traditions, is the best, the fairest, the most intelligent system possible? We’d love to think so, wouldn’t we? And it is a pretty good one, in that it allows us to make decisions as a body, not just carry out decisions made by other, more important folks than we.

But Congregational Polity has its own challenges. Did you know that there are over 200 Baptist denominations in the world? Yep, there are the American Baptists, the Conservative Baptists, the Evergreen Baptists, the General Association of Regular Baptists, the Primitive Baptists, the Baptist Bible Fellowship, the Cooperative Baptists, the National Baptists, the Free Will Baptists, the Southern Baptists, and the Seventh Day Baptists, just to name a few. And within many of these groups are subgroups which are even more particular about their theology than the parent group.

That's because Baptists, like UUs, insist on having freedom of conscience within their congregations. Consequently, whenever there is a dispute about theology or other issues, the dissenters are free to go and form their own church, call their own minister, make their own decisions about the customs of their faith.

Getting back to the t-shirt, which displays the Rev. Dogg lambasting his flock or maybe we should say "pack", what we see here is a clergy-dog who isn't too worried about offending the faithful. He's pretty sure he'll keep his job and that he has a responsibility to tell his folks that they're all in danger of hellfire and that they'd better listen to him or suffer the consequences. He may have been sent to this church to whip it into shape, get it back on the right track, a la the Apostle Paul to the cities of Asia Minor, 2000 years ago.

Imagine how that would play in Peoria at the Unitarian Universalist Church! First of all, just by using the word "dog", he is excluding all the nondogs in the house and emphasizing the misdeeds of one cultural group over another.

At the Peoria UU Congregation, there are cats, fish, birds, cattle, sheep, and all sorts of living creatures, all of whom have a place in the choir. (You may have heard the song “All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir”!)

And in scolding them with his “No, No!”, he is overlooking the fact that different creatures have different faith needs depending on their culture and personality typology; dogs, for example, consider humans God, while cats consider humans staff. For a dog to deposit bodily waste in the house is quite a faux pas, while for a cat, it is standard operating procedure.

A dog may roll over on his back and play dead to the cheers of its fans, while a fish will probably be flushed down the toilet or used as compost if it tries such a thing. Different strokes for different folks is the way it plays in Peoria and in UU congregations generally.

Some of you have remarked on how difficult it must be to offer worship services to a group which includes such diversity. My approach and that of the worship committee is to try to create an interfaith service, to offer readings and songs and hymns which have broader religious horizons, not just Christian.

It’s worthy of note that some UUs have a strong distaste for traditional Christianity and its trappings. This may be because they have grown beyond a monolithic faith, a faith that has strict doctrines and guidelines resulting in uniformity and lack of diversity.

For others, it may be related to a sense of having been abused or rejected by a childhood faith tradition, where their behaviors were interpreted as evil or deserving of hellfire.

Others may have experienced stigmatization or even attempted extermination by the hierarchy of the Christian tradition, especially in cases of divorce, remarriage, and sexual orientation. These acts of destruction are hard to forgive and forget. The good deeds done in the name of Christianity sometimes are overlooked because of misdeeds.

But how does Rev. Dogg's situation contrast with the relationship of a UU minister to his or her parish? As a person with special training, experience, interests and abilities that qualify her or him to serve a congregation, there is a special obligation as well in this role, for the relationship between a minister and the congregation is privileged and very different from most relationships.

It takes awhile to learn all the nuances of this special relationship, both for me and for you. We have been together one weekend a month for two years plus an occasional extra Sunday or social event. During that time, we have each learned a lot and have grown because of our relationship.

When I first considered applying to UUCWI to become your consulting minister, about two years ago, I was dubious. I knew you had been through a difficult time and so had I, in the past year or so, and I wasn't sure I was up to the task.

But my friend and colleague the Rev. David Maynard, who works with consulting ministries in our district, said to me, "You'll really like these folks. They are smart and savvy about UUism and they are a going concern. Give them a chance. I think you're a match."

Well, I don't know how much faith you have in matchmakers, but I wasn't too sure. Even after the pre-candidating interview with the search committee, I wasn't completely sure. But who could resist people like Peggy Bardarson and Francie Wood and Don Wollett and John Adams, Dave and Mavis Cauffman, when they said to me, "We really want you to come be our minister."

How could I say no? And I haven't regretted it for a moment.

Though our relationship is formally known as "consulting ministry" and I am technically a consultant, just here to give you advice about doing church right, I have felt from the first that our work together has been creative and positive and goes beyond that formal relationship.

I'm not the best UU minister in the world. But your encouragement and support have made me a better one. I'm not the best preacher. But your enthusiasm and responsiveness have helped me learn more about preaching well. I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. But your curiosity and interest in learning have stimulated me to improve my skills.

My job as your minister is to discern and hold up the vision of the congregation, to urge us to find ways of making that vision reality, to offer my support and guidance as we work toward that vision, and to invest my energy in helping the dream come true.

Last fall, we as a congregation worked together to create a sense of what our vision and mission are, here on Whidbey Island. We spent a day with the Rev. Nan Geer, thinking about our vision, where we want to be in five years, in ten years. And then we shaped that into a description of our mission, much of which is stated in the affirmation we use on Sundays.

When we talked about our vision and mission, I heard you say things like “we want to be in our own building; we want to have more than a quartertime minister; we want to have morning services.” Those were the quickies, the immediate things in the forefront of most folks’ minds.

But then you started to go deeper, and we heard each other say, “we want to make a difference here; we want to offer radical hospitality to our community; we want to grow in spiritual depth and understanding; we want our children to know what it means to be Unitarian Universalist; we want to offer our message to a hurting world.”

And if I were to distill what I heard from you that day, and what I have learned from you in the two years I’ve been serving you, if I were to deliver a sound byte of the vision and mission of this congregation, I would say that the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island envisions itself as a community of love and justice, and that its mission is to offer care and inspiration to its members and friends and children, reaching out into the larger community of Whidbey Island and beyond to work for just treatment for all beings.

I think the vision I see in your eyes is that of a “real church”, a full-service congregation, doing everything it possibly can to offer love and work for justice. But what does it mean to be “a real church”?

It has been said that a so-called “real church”, a full-service congregation, does five things, as well as it possibly can, regardless of how big or small it may be:

It offers public worship every week and sometimes in between;

it offers many opportunities for fellowship;

it teaches its members and friends and children what it means to be a part of the faith community;

it offers loving care to the members and friends and children of the community;

and it reaches out to draw others into its circle of love and justice, transforming lives and thereby transforming the world.

UUCWI is already a “real church”, by this definition. But I sense that there is more to it than that. I sense that in many, if not most, of you, there is a belief that “real church” is just the beginning, that an adventure in living our faith beckons us on, that the structures are in place which allow our passion for our faith to shine out into the larger community.

Already, despite the slight handicaps of rented space, afternoon services, and farflung membership, we have grown in numbers, in spirit, in organizational strength, and in outreach to the community. This speaks volumes about the “realness” of this congregation’s vision and mission.

Imagine, in the coming years, as our green building is completed and we begin to stretch our wings wider than ever, what we can offer to Whidbey Island and beyond. Our vision for our faith community in the years to come shines as bright as a lighthouse, inspiring us to keep dreaming and leading others into a safe harbor, together creating this beloved community of love and justice.

Let’s pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our vision and mission are the wind beneath our wings, lifting and directing our efforts to reach out into the larger community. May we joyfully go forth from this place to offer our community of love and justice to a hurting world. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.