

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
LAY COMMUNITY MINISTRY:
GUIDELINES FOR COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH
UU CONGREGATIONS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND PARISH
MINISTERS**



Introduction

Again and again, the advocacy of Unitarian Universalist principles – wherever people and the environment are struggling toward full realization of their/its potential – is powerfully, compassionately enabled by lay people responding to a sense of call to their place in the world.

Since 1991 the Unitarian Universalist Association has formally recognized community ministers as eligible for fellowship with the Association and has required those ministers to be in relationship with a local congregation. Over the years congregations and fellowshipped community ministers have greatly benefited from these relationships, enriching both the broader ministry and social commitment of the local congregation, helping ministerial colleagues connect and collaborate, and satisfying the UUA's requirements for maintaining fellowship and right relationship with the Association. During this time, lay people have also been doing Community Ministry without the benefit of these formal relationships with ministerial colleagues and congregations.

This resource has been created to aid parish ministers, congregations, and other organizations in understanding the benefits and practices of developing covenantal relationships with lay persons performing community ministry.

Lay people perform creative and inspirational community ministries beyond the walls of their individual UU congregations. Most of these ministries are in non-congregational settings working with individuals from many different faith traditions, or none at all. Developing a covenantal relationship with a local congregation allows lay members to ground their community ministry work in our faith tradition and provides a supportive UU context for their ministries. In turn, Unitarian Universalism is strengthened by the work of these lay members through careful consideration and articulation of a covenantal relationship.

Recognizing that many people first become aware of Unitarian Universalism through contact with people who are doing community ministry, supporting one of these special

ministries provides an excellent opportunity for a congregation to help share our faith perspective with the wider world in a focused and inspirational way. In addition, congregations experience a deepened sense of commitment and connection to social justice work and a broader sense of what ministry can be within and outside the church community through their relationship with a lay member's community ministry.

Community Ministry

Community ministry, lay and ordained, has been around for centuries, whether it has been called community-based ministry, specialized ministry, public ministry, social ministry, ministers-at-large, the larger ministry or another name. From the first days of Unitarian and Universalist history in America there have been forms of ministry taking place outside congregations. Joseph Tuckerman is often credited as the “father of community ministry” because of his work providing services to the poor in the city of Boston in the early 19th century. He established the Benevolent Fraternity of Unitarian churches in Boston in 1826 which operates today as the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry. It involves approximately fifty congregations in providing service, especially to inner city youth at risk and persons fleeing domestic abuse. Over the years, community ministry performed by lay members, like that of their ordained colleagues, has taken a myriad of forms: directing homeless shelters, teaching at Universities, serving as spiritual directors, or working in prisons, hospitals, or religious service agencies such as the UU Urban Ministry and the UU Legislative Ministry. Military chaplains and fellowshipped ministers employed by the UUA and our Districts serve as community ministers as well.

Lay people who perform community ministry may participate in many of the traditional forms of ministry such as worship, preaching, pastoral counseling, religious education, social witness and advocacy, and institutional leadership. Unlike their parish or religious education colleagues, lay members who perform community ministry experience a call to use these skills in settings that are typically less visible to the congregation. Many community ministries also require specialized skills related to their particular setting. They often study and achieve professional credentials in their particular areas of expertise: clinical pastoral education, academic degrees, or professional licenses as social workers or therapists.

Congregational Polity and Lay Community Ministry

In a religious association organized according to congregational polity, each local congregation has the sole authority to govern itself. Each congregation has the right to hire or call whomever they choose to serve them as minister, to ordain ministers, and to covenant with a person who is performing community ministry.

The UUA is an Association of UU congregations in the United States. The Association's job is to serve and support the member congregations. In that capacity, the UUA has set certain standards for all UU fellowshipped ministers.. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) was established to create and enforce those standards by which ministers may be "in fellowship" (or credentialed) with the UUA and to evaluate fellowshipped ministers to see that they meet and maintain those standards.

A congregation knows that a minister meets certain standards when they are in fellowship with the Association. The UUA cannot require a congregation to covenant with a community minister. However, the UUA can and does require that a community minister in Preliminary Fellowship (the third stage of the credentialing process) must be affiliated with a local congregation.

At the present time, there is no infrastructure, and there are no standards for education or accountability established by the UUA for lay people who perform community ministry. This places a special responsibility with the congregation that chooses to covenant with a lay person who is performing community ministry. The congregation in this case is accepting a responsibility to assess and recognize the ministry that a lay person is performing.

Covenanting with a Lay Person who is Performing a Community Ministry

Lay persons who are performing community ministries establish relationships with local congregations in various ways. A congregation may seek a lay person to affiliate with them, broadening their own ministry beyond their congregation and supporting an area community ministry. More often a lay person will initiate contact with a local congregation in hopes of developing a covenantal relationship. In some cases the lay person will have come out of a local congregation as a lay leader, be trained and equipped for a specialized ministry, and then serve in a community setting while continuing a relationship with their long-time local congregation. Similarly, a congregation may initiate a commitment to serve a larger community by entering into relationship with a lay person whose primary work will be outside the congregation, as a member of the congregation's ministerial staff.

The Working Agreement

Covenanting with a lay person who is performing a community ministry generally begins with a series of conversations. The lay person will speak with the parish ministers first. If the parish minister is supportive, they should then talk to key congregational leaders, sounding out the community ministry's potential to serve the congregation's mission. The request for developing a covenantal relationship will then be presented to the board or governing body for further development and approval.

Unless the congregation has been in relationship with a lay community ministry in the past, education of the congregation's leadership will build trust and understanding for community ministry and how a covenantal relationship will benefit the congregation as well as the lay person. Once all parties are comfortable with the relationship, the congregation, parish minister (or ministers), and lay person performing community ministry may negotiate a formal working agreement which should be voted on by the board or governing body of the congregation. This agreement will describe the nuts and bolts parameters and expectations of the lay person performing community ministry and congregation and include a statement recognizing the work the lay person is doing as a ministry.

The Working Agreement includes sections on the following topics:

1. The role of the lay person performing community ministry within the congregation – The agreement should state clearly that the lay person has their primary employment outside of the church, not ministering to the congregation. It should clarify that if sought out for ministerial services like pastoral care for congregants, the lay person will refer individuals to the parish minister. Ministerial services will only be provided with the parish minister's knowledge and agreement.
2. Gratis services provided by the lay person performing community ministry – As part of the agreement, it is not unreasonable to expect that some services will be provided by the lay person performing community ministry without remuneration. The congregation must remember, however, that the lay person's primary employment is elsewhere and sometimes under-compensated and/or consisting of several part-time positions. Uncompensated services should be utilized fairly and based on the expectations clearly articulated in the agreement. Expecting the lay person to preach once annually with no honorarium, provide a newsletter article quarterly, report to the board annually, and/or teach one adult religious education workshop are examples of services readily encompassed in an agreement. Gratis services should be related to your congregation's needs and the skills of the lay person with the goal of connecting the congregation with the community ministry outside the congregation.
3. Fee schedule for other services provided - Services beyond what has been agreed upon should be compensated. For example if the lay person who is performing community ministry preaches more than once a year then the standard honorarium for a guest preacher is in order. If the lay person provides summer or sabbatical coverage for the parish minister, there should be compensation. If the lay person leads a special training related to the community ministry, she or he should be paid. If possible, the agreement should include a list of services for which the lay person performing community ministry will be compensated and the rate of compensation. A sentence stating that compensation for services not

anticipated when the agreement is written will be negotiated prior to those services being provided.

4. Relationships with congregational ministers and staff – The agreement should describe the lay person’s relationship with the ministers and staff of the congregation. For example, the agreement may include a statement that the lay person performing community ministry is not in a supervisory relationship with any of the staff at the church and is or is not eligible for office support. The agreement should also identify the sources for professional standards of conduct. The lay person and the parish minister (or ministers) should maintain a collegial relationship following the guidelines of the lay person’s professional associations: UU Society for Community Ministries, Association of Professional Chaplains, etc. In case of conflict, the congregation’s conflict resolution guidelines should be followed including appropriate consultations with the Committee on Ministry and parish minister. In case of a protracted conflict between the lay person and parish minister, mediation could be sought from a UUMA Good Offices person, a UUSCM Good Offices person, or the UUA’s district staff.
5. Support provided by the congregation – The agreement should list the non-monetary benefits the church will provide the lay person performing community ministry. These may include use of an office in the church, receiving mail at the church, identification on church letterhead, having the opportunity to officiate at rights of passage ceremonies for persons who are not members of the congregation, etc. The congregation also provides members for the lay person’s Committee on Ministry (see “Providing a Committee on Ministry” below).
6. Expectation of church members with the community ministry agency – Having a covenantal relationship with a a community ministry affords the opportunity for church members to engage directly in a ministry beyond the walls of their own congregation. This is more or less feasible, depending upon the specific community ministry. If the lay person is working at a service agency (i.e. a homeless shelter, tutoring program), church members may be invited to volunteer at the agency, to take on special projects related to the ministry, offer an annual fundraiser or sharing of the plate from worship. Some community ministries are in settings not open to such engagement such as a private practice providing pastoral psychotherapy. Where there is the opportunity and expectation of engagement by the congregation in the community ministry, this should be articulated in the agreement.
7. Recognition of the lay person’s work as ministry – Congregations who are covenanting with a community ministry recognize the lay person’s work as a ministry. In most cases it will be easy to determine that the person is performing ministry. Some very clear examples include hospital chaplains, campus ministry organizers,

pastoral therapists, spiritual directors, or directors of a hospice center or other agency providing pastoral support. Other examples are less clear: working as a fundraiser in a non-profit organization, providing expertise to a publishing house, or working as a university recruiter. As the center for religious authority, the covenanting congregation will need to make a final determination about the ministerial nature of the work. The UUSCM encourages congregations to consult with the lay person's ministry site to ascertain the host organization's perceptions of the lay person's work.

8. Regular review and renewal of the covenantal agreement – Covenantal agreements are living documents, and should be revisited at least annually to make sure the terms are still beneficial for all involved. This can be done with the Committee on Ministry as part of an annual evaluation, or with a different body, such as the Board. The agreement should state when it will be reviewed and by whom.

Remember that a working agreement is not the same as a Letter of Agreement or contract with the parish minister. The most important aspect of the covenantal agreement is that the lay person who is performing community ministry and the congregation feel it is just and mutually beneficial for all concerned. (See the Appendix for sample Agreements.)

Providing a Committee on Community Ministry

For all community ministries, dedicated Committee on Community Ministry (COCM) is an important resource in assessing the effectiveness of the relationship between the ministry and the congregation.

The best composition for a community-based COCM includes members of the affiliating congregation and individuals connected to the community ministry agency or other place of service. For example, a hospital chaplain's COCM will include staff from the hospital who are familiar with the lay person's work (although generally not the supervisor), along with members of the affiliating congregation.

In cases where the community minister is self employed and there is no agency to provide members for the COCM, the lay person may consult with the UUSCM about how to form an appropriate COCM for the particular situation.

The COCM meets regularly with the lay person to offer feedback and support, help the lay person reflect on what it means to minister as a UU in the wider community, and consider professional development needs and opportunities. The COCM also helps the congregation to be aware of and, where appropriate, participate in the ministry. The COCM journeys with the lay person performing community ministry, participating in the lay person's vision, and providing a crucial link between the ministry and the congregation.

The Committee on Community Ministry should:

- Be composed of about 5 people with representation from the congregation and the community ministry agency or other place of service;
- Meet regularly with the lay person performing community ministry;
- Consult with the lay person on ways to:
 - Articulate what it means to perform a UU ministry in a community setting,
 - Balance work responsibilities, congregational involvement, family/personal life, and spiritual renewal,
 - Create an appropriate, non-exploitative, and collegial role in the congregation,
 - Raise awareness within the congregation about the relevant social concerns implicated in the work of the community ministry,
 - Connect the congregation to the community served by the lay person (where appropriate),
 - Identify continuing education and professional development needs of the lay person, and,
 - Collectively complete one annual evaluation.

Many congregations find that the work of the COCM provides a viable way to maintain close connection with the community ministry and to extend the congregation's own ministry. It is hoped that congregational relationship and an active COCM will be continued for all community ministries.

Covenant

The lay person performing community ministry, senior minister(s) and other ministers in the congregation are urged to develop a covenant articulating the spiritual and religious values guiding the various relationships. The covenant should be a written document demonstrating the ways in which the relationships are grounded in the congregation's theological vision and its social mission. It should include statements reflecting the complex dynamics between parish ministers and congregants who serve in specialized ministries: clarifying the lay person's primary identity within the congregation (parishioner, staff member, or colleague), promising mutual support and shared accountability to the congregation, and establishing standards for its renewal. A sample covenant is included in the appendix.

Ministerial Transitions and Lay Community Ministries

Times of ministerial transition can be stressful for all concerned. Because the community ministry's relationship with the congregation is not as primary as that of the parish minister(s), the departure of a parish minister can be a particularly vulnerable time for a lay person who is performing community ministry. The congregation should educate poten-

tial candidates for the parish ministry about their commitment to the lay ministry served in the community early in the search process, noting it in the congregational record. Include a section on the community ministry and its role within the congregation in the search packet, and have the lay person performing the community ministry write a personal introduction. When a candidate is selected and candidating week is underway, the lay person performing community ministry and the candidate need time together to discuss their future relationship. Once a new parish minister is in place (whether interim or settled), a new covenant needs to be created. The new parish minister should attempt to maintain the covenant. If it is impossible to maintain the covenant, ample notice should be given to the lay person performing community ministry.

If the lay person's employment is terminated or the lay person relocates, it may be appropriate for the congregation and lay person to terminate their covenants and working agreement. The congregation and parish minister(s) can be helpful by offering letters of recommendation and assistance in securing future professional work and covenanting with another congregation.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who decides what is ministry?

A congregation is asked to recognize the work of the community minister as a ministry.

Are we required to covenant with a lay community minister?

No, the UUA cannot require a congregation to covenant with a lay person who is performing community ministry. Lay people who are members of the UUSCM, are strongly encouraged by the Code of Professional Practice to covenant with a congregation. While not required, most congregations find developing a covenantal relationship with a community ministry to be an enriching experience.

Does the congregation or governing board vote to covenant with a lay community minister?

For most congregations, a vote of the governing board is sufficient to establish the working agreement. The lay person may covenant with the governing board or with the congregation reflecting the depth of the congregation's commitment to the community ministry.

Are we hiring a staff member?

In most cases, no. Covenanting with a community ministry means that you are developing a special relationship with a ministry outside the congregation. As part of the covenantal agreement, the congregation may agree to compensate the lay person for some work performed within the congregation such as guest preaching, pastoral summer coverage, consulting with a committee, etc. The lay person may also agree to do some work within the congregation without remuneration such as an annual training of pastoral associates, an annual sermon, and/or teaching a religious education class. In rare situations an affiliated person performing community ministry may be hired part time within the congregation for a specific position, such as ¼ time membership coordinator, while also engaged in a community ministry outside the congregation. The UUSCM encourages congregations to include financial support for the community ministry's sponsoring organization in their budgeting processes.

Can a congregation have covenants with more than one ministry?

Yes, as long as it is of benefit to all concerned and there is a covenant between all involved, there is no reason why a congregation cannot covenant with more than one ministry.

A Brief History of Unitarian Universalist Community Ministry

Community ministry has been around for centuries, and called by many names: community-based ministry, specialized ministry, public ministry, social ministry, ministers-at-large, the larger ministry. From the first days of Unitarian and Universalist history in America, our congregations have been involved in care for the wider community. Joseph Tuckerman is often credited as the “father of community ministry” with his work providing services to the poor in the city of Boston in the early 19th century and his establishment of the Benevolent Fraternity of Unitarian churches. We can be certain that there were other ministers doing “invisible” ministry with the marginalized and oppressed from the earliest years that have been lost to our history. Our historians must continue to research the roles that our early community ministers played in the anti-slavery movement, women's rights, and more. For an in-depth study of the history of community ministry read Kathleen Parker's 2007 book *Sacred Service in Civic Space: Three Hundred Years of Community Ministry in Unitarian Universalism*.

In more recent years, the recognition and credentialing of community ministers within the UUA can be traced to the Proclamation of the Society for the Larger Ministry (SLM) - now the UU Society for Community Ministries (UUSCM) - following a meeting at Meadville Lombard Theological School in 1988. This document (see Resources) expressed the passion, scope, and over-arching vision of those called to ministry outside the walls of our churches. The tireless work of those involved in SLM and their allies resulted in the Unitarian Universalist 1991 General Assembly approving community min-

istry as a path of ministerial fellowship, joining the other paths of parish ministry and the ministry of religious education. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee continues to oversee the formation and professionalism of fellowshipped community ministers.

It is clear that the relationship between community ministries and congregations continues to evolve. These relationships are a work in progress as we evolve a greater understanding of community ministry as a viable and vital form of UU ministry. Lay members performing community ministries provide important service in the community. Both the UUA and our covenanting congregations will benefit from the conscientious support given to lay members doing community ministry beyond the walls of the parish as together we discover new and exciting ways to be active in the world.

Appendix *not included in printed version

- Unitarian Universalist Society for Community Ministry Code of Professional Practice
- Sample Covenants and Agreements
- 1988 Community Ministry Covenant and Proclamation Sample Agreements and Covenants

Further resources

Bos, David A. (2005). *Bound Together: A Theology for Ecumenical Community Ministry*. Pilgrim Press.

Bickers, Dennis W. *The Work of a Bivocational Minister*. Judson Press.

Braestrup, Kate. *Here If You Need Me: A True Story, Memoir of a Unitarian Universalist community minister*.

Delloff, Linda-Marie (2002). *Public Offerings: Stories for the Front Lines of Community Ministry*. The Alban Institute.

Dudley, Carl S. (1991). *Basic Steps Toward Community Ministry*. The Alban Institute.

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Hale, Edward Everett and Joseph Tuckerman (2009). *Joseph Tuckerman on the Elevation of the Poor*. Bibliobazaar.

Parker, Kathleen R. (2007). *Sacred Service in Civic Space: Three Hundred Years of Community Ministry in Unitarian Universalism*. Chicago: Meadville-Lombard Press.

UUA Commission on Appraisal, (1992). Our Professional Ministry: Structure, Support and Renewal.

UU Society of Community Ministries (UUSCM) Website: www.uusecm.org