

Sharing Ministry. Sharing Church.
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When I was starting school to become a minister, which, frankly, was its own winding road of “please ask someone else”, up and down, back and forth kind of experience, I started at a Unitarian Universalist School in Berkeley, California. When I was there, I took a class, one that was required of all student in my program, called “Education to Counter Oppressions and Create Just and Sustainable Communities.” That’s a mouthful, isn’t it? “Education to Counter Oppressions and Create Just and Sustainable Communities.” Like, if that isn’t a sentence just full of buzzwords, right?

As a part of this class we were each required to go and to do work as a volunteer in an organization that was lead by a marginalized group, preferably one we did not identify as a part of, a group that we could claim we were allies to.

I somehow ended up volunteering with an organization in San Francisco called POWER, which stood for People Organizing for Worker and Employment Rights. This organization was lead by Latinas, most of whom were domestic workers, and they hosted trainings and organizing meetings to help these folks advocate in the public square and in their places of employment for things like, immigration reform, decent wages, affordable housing, and sick days so that they could take care of their families.

And in my class they had suggested to us that we ask these organizations how we can most help support their work. Not how we can help, necessarily, or even how our skills could be used, but how we can *support* them. In other words, let them tell us how we could be useful.

I would bike by POWER on my way to work and so one day I looked them up and I knew that this group of marginalized people was most certainly not one that included me. So I called them. Despite not speaking Spanish or really have much concept of *what* they were working on. I called them because I was trying to recognize that marginalized people know best what they need, something I had learned in my class.

But, frankly, it scared me. I didn’t know these people, I was certainly an outsider. And I was afraid I would make a fool of myself.

And when they got back to me they said “Our number one need is childcare. We have so many meetings with women who have children who can’t come to these meetings without it. Will you come and provide childcare?”

I was 24 years old, never had any younger siblings or cousins, didn’t have children of my own, and so, honestly I didn’t know what I was getting myself into. But I had do this for class, so I did. I worked with POWER for about a year. I never had much of a relationship with any of the parents, had a marginal relationship with some of the kids, and got to know their volunteer coordinator really well.

And I spend most of the next eight years until I finished seminary (yes, as I said, it was a rather long and winding route since I ultimately transferred to Andover Newton Theological School in the Boston area and picked up another Master's degree on the way), thinking that this experience was about teaching me what it was like to be a white person in an anti-racist anti-oppressive organization. I thought of it as my "good works" to counter oppression. This was, after all, a class on "Educating to counter oppressions" wasn't it?

But as I was reflecting on it this week, I remembered the second section of the Really Long Course Title - "To create just and sustainable communities."

What IS a just and sustainable community?

A community that is just is acting on or behaving in a way that is morally right or fair. And we Unitarian Universalist talk about justice a lot. Two of our seven principles, which you can find in the first few pages of the hymnal, use the word "justice." The second principle, which is to promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations and the sixth principle which promotes the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

And it's in this church's Vision Statement, which ends with "committed to justice and compassion on Sunday and every day."

Something is just if it is morally right and good. Something that is just is not necessarily something that is equal. We all have different needs and different gifts to give. Making something "just" means that we hold each other accountable and we work to raise up those who have been oppressed or marginalized.

But sustainable - that's not something I expected to hear in a class. When I hear sustainable, I tend to think of environmental sustainability, the fact that we humans are destroying our planet and so it won't be sustained, it won't continue, for us if we don't change something now.

But how does one create a sustainable community?

A sustainable community is one that continues, that is ongoing, that can be there for future generations.

We're taught, often, that the rolls we should have are the ones where we are out front, speaking up, the way Moses does. But Moses was speaking for his people. It wasn't an Egyptian who said to Pharaoh "let these people go." It was the voice of the marginalized. But a sustainable community needs people like Aaron, Moses brother, and all those who expressed their displeasure at their experience. And all those we don't read about in the Bible who supported him.

A sustainable community needs people who do childcare, and data entry, and stuff envelopes.

At POWER, the organization I volunteered for, those who would speak up, those prophets who were organizing for their own liberation, what they needed most was not a white guy like me coming in and telling them what to do or advocating for them. What they needed was people to make it possible for them to do that work themselves.

And so I realized, in a funny way, way later than I probably should have, that this course was teaching me about how to create just and sustainable communities because that's essentially what we are trying to do here at church, in ministry, and that's what we are trying to do in our world.

This church has been sustained by people who have committed to the work of the church. The quiet work. The work that's not done to win awards and achieve glory, but the work that's done to sustain a community for future generations.

And, of course, there are the obvious things. Those who have served on the board or as the heads of committees. And then there are those who make the coffee every Sunday, or make sure our insurance bills get paid, or fix the problems on our staff computers. Or those who show up to usher every Sunday, who count the money in the offering plate every Sunday, and teach our children every Sunday. All of that is needed, desperately needed for the sustainability of this church. Without those things, this church is unable to function as well as it does. We are able to do our ministry in the world, because these things happen.

And sometimes - these roles which might seem insignificant do pull us out of our comfort zones. Perhaps you feel pulled to teach religious education to our children, but you feel afraid that you will mess up, or you volunteer to read in worship even though public speaking scares you, or you take on the role of governing even though you know you won't do it perfectly.

And they are not the only ways in which we share the ministry of this church and help keep it just and sustainable. We share it when we greet a newcomer at coffee hour, or ask someone about a joy or sorrow they mentioned during the service. We share it when we connect with each other at a deeper level. We share it when we connect with those who are different than us, different ages than us or have different jobs or schooling or life experience than us. One of the most important things that religious communities like churches offer us is true multigenerational communities. Where else do we have children, and young adults, and elders in one space together that's not our families? You share ministry when you realize that to share that space is a revolutionary act in our culture.

And sustainable also means that the church is here for you when you can't be a leader. It's here for you when you need to take a step back and sit in the pews. Sustainable communities allow people to step back. And even your presence is ministry for us all.

In a world where the news is coming at us every day with more and more destruction. Where we see people coming forward to tell of tales of sexual assault, to tell the truth about how corrupt our government is and the threat of deportation for those who are

protected by Delayed Action for Childhood Arrivals and Temporary Protected Status, where tax cuts that benefit only those at the top of the economic ladder as passed, it is a revolutionary act for us to take this one hour a week and not to do something, but just to sit there. And we need to see that others are doing it.

So I want to encourage you to look at your gifts and acknowledge not just the ministry you bring to this church, but the ministry that others are bringing. Thank each other. Recognize the incredible work that has been done here and continues to be done to create this just and sustainable community.

On my part, I must say that you have shown me the gifts of ministry that you bring to this church and to our world. These are things you do incredibly well. Let us remember that there are many ways to be a leader and many ways to share the ministry of this church. All the different ways we can do it. All the different ways we can lead.

This is a church where we honor what you can bring and where we recognize that no one will do this work perfectly, that sometimes we will all make mistakes, where we will remember that we are doing our best to live together in all our messy imperfect human selves. And that simply existing in that space together speaks of our values and our hopes and dreams in this world.

Let us say together Amen. Amen.