

## **Inspiration From Ministers**

David Spear, August 13, 2017

This morning we welcome the next minister of the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg into our family and into the lineage of ministers who have brought us to where we are now. I believe this is the beginning of a year of great growth and progress for our congregation, which will take us to the point where we are finally ready to welcome a new settled minister in one year.

I do not say this out of naive optimism. I say it because I have seen how this church has healed and grown over the last couple of years. I have seen the inner workings of this church, and I have witnessed the hard work of many people that has moved us significantly forward, and I have confidence that the same hard work will reap great benefits in the coming year.

But rather than attempt to be a cheerleader for the next 15 minutes, I would rather continue on the theme from our summer series and share with you the inspiration that ministers have given to me over my lifetime.

Like many of you, I grew up in a church. Mine happened to be Methodist, but it was typical of thousands of other large neo-Gothic churches in cities around the country, and similar to our Market Street Building.

My family was the one that was often the last to leave after services. My brother and sister and I would wait seemingly forever each and every week as our parents chatted with other adults. At the time, we thought they really, really enjoyed talking to their friends, which was very frustrating, though somewhat understandable, even to a kid. It wasn't until much later that we realized that much of this social time was spent doing *work* on behalf of the church.

I sang in choirs from a very young age, served as an acolyte, and attended confirmation classes. And I enjoyed it all. I am well aware that not everyone had such a positive experience in a church. But my experience was very positive. The church was full of friendly adults who were nice and encouraging to me.

This is probably because of the tone set from the ministers. There were many of them in those early years, including Kent Kroehler, Jack Wright, and George Bashore, but they all preached a version of Christianity that was kind and inclusive and welcoming to all. They were friendly and accessible and seemed like normal people, not distant, cold, religious leaders. They imbued in me a positive view of church life and of ministers in general. They inspired in me a desire to stay connected to a church, even as my spiritual path wandered away from some of its theological roots.

A couple decades later, I wandered into the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, where I was welcomed by the Rev. Howard Dana. It was not the first time I had met him. A couple years before that, I had attended some book discussions about progressive Christian topics, and they were held at something called the Unitarian Church. When I later attended my first actual Unitarian service, Howard warmly welcome to me and said, "I thought we would see you here someday."

Many of you will remember that Howard is very fleet of foot, and would regularly win 5K races. But did you also know he was a superb dancer? He attended contra dances in Lancaster, and he was quite popular with the ladies as a partner!

On one occasion, he gave me a ride to the dance. At the time, I had little understanding how the church operated, so I considered it quite a privilege to be carpooling with a minister! As he turned on some music, I was surprised to hear *country* music coming from the speakers. "Country music?" This, of course, is where you remind me that Howard grew up on a ranch in Montana, so what did I expect he heard growing up? Silly David.

This was yet another reminder to be careful with my Venn diagrams. I knew Howard to be educated and articulate and urbane, so course he would listen to Mozart, right? No. If I place Howard in one circle of a Venn diagram and country music in another circle, the intersection of the two would certainly be the empty set. Not so. Howard reminded me yet again to not make assumptions about people.

But the greatest inspiration from Howard was how to write and deliver a superb sermon. Not only does he write with clarity and grace, but he is renowned for being a great orator. He delivers a message that is both inspirational and challenging, yet somehow possible and realistic. His pacing is perfect, which makes it easier to understand and process his message. His phrasing and intonation embellish his graceful text.

I'd like to believe that, after listening to hundreds of his sermons, at least a tiny amount of his manner has crept into me. I know for sure that I hear his voice in my head as I write and deliver a message. I will never match his skill, but I know that I am a much better writer and speaker because of him.

Fast forward a few years, and we come to Reverend Mike Walker. He has spoken from this pulpit about his background in administration, and given my background in engineering, these ideas of organization appealed to me. Working things out and improving systems makes my heart happy. It's perhaps like the herding instinct that my border collie had many years ago. Bringing order to systems puts me at peace. Working on an organizational chart gives me tremendous pleasure! Let me develop policies or procedures that the church might need, and I am a happy man. As Reverend Lyn said at our board retreat yesterday, these help "create the container" that enables the church to do the actual work of the church, and I love this part.

But organization and administration as a spiritual gift? I had my doubts. When my mom reviewed a draft of this sermon, however, she answered my question with a resounding YES! To her, administration is indeed a spiritual gift. And she would know, having worked in her church for more than three decades. She worked with many ministers over the years and saw how this can either help or hinder the overall mission and work of a church. See me afterwards if you would like to hear some of her stories of what NOT to do.

I will be a good son, of course, and defer to my mom on this one. But I also think she is right. Mike indeed brought order to office procedures and helped set priorities. Suddenly turnaround time dropped dramatically. And the result? Church members were very happy.

Mike also addressed difficult and seemingly intractable problems head-on. Every month or so I would realize that things were a little better around here. Often I couldn't even tell what it was, but something had improved. It was as if a mysterious force was sprinkling pixie dust here and there. And suddenly something that had been unresolved for years was now resolved. This was a great lesson for me to muster courage when necessary and address difficult issues in my own life.

Mike also created the Worship Team, giving voice to the congregation about Sunday services and providing the opportunity for feedback and legitimate two-way conversation between the minister and the congregation. Now, I personally fell into the same dilemma that Jeff Sigel mentioned a few weeks ago. I had the weakest excuse of why I should NOT head the team, and I ended up as chair.

But it gave me opportunity for another life lesson. Mike put no restrictions on the Worship Team agenda. We were free to suggest anything and to offer any feedback we felt was appropriate. Of course there were priorities that needed to be addressed over other items, but Mike never once objected to discussing anything we suggested, and he did implement a few suggestions that came from the congregation and the team.

I'm still uncertain whether administrative and organizational skills are technically a spiritual gift. Either way, I've learned the benefits they can bring. A well-oiled administration can make happy congregants. Addressing difficult issues will cause a bump in the road, but ultimately it will avoid future troubles. Being open and forthright in communication puts people at ease and ends speculation. Creating committees gives people a way to be involved in the work of the church and gives them ownership and commitment. Lesson learned.... Thanks, Mike!

It's been an interesting adventure with so many ministers in my life over the years. It began by understanding them as adults with some kind of superpower, enabling them to have influence over other adults, even over my parents. Then seeing them as supposedly equal adults, but typically with more life experience, wisdom, and training. And most recently to see them as

people of my own generation, perhaps even younger than me, and finally realizing that they have been regular people all along, though having a specific calling to lead and minister to people of all ages. This last phase has helped me understand the complexities of their chosen field, the tremendous amounts of time and energy involved, and the difficulties of maintaining a work-life balance. I believe that interim ministry is especially complicated.

I have come to like and respect ministers more than ever, and I look forward to working with Reverend Lyn to take our congregation to the next step. I'm pleased for where our congregation is now. I know there are ways to make us even better. And so I commit to working with her, the board, the various teams and committees and ministries, and each one of you as individuals, as we work together in this next step in our congregational life.

Welcome, Lyn!