

“Who Owns the Church?”

May 23, 2010

The Reading

The reading is titled “Who Owns a Congregation” and is by the Unitarian Universalist minister, the Reverend Dan Hotchkiss. After ordination and fellowship in 1980, Hotchkiss served our churches in Florida and Connecticut, followed by eight years on the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston. For the past eleven years, Hotchkiss is a senior consultant with the Alban Institute.

Here begins the reading.

I often ask members of a congregation’s governing board to describe their job.

Almost always, when I ask about the board’s job, someone says, “The board is a fiduciary.” And what might that be? A fiduciary (in Latin, *fiduciarius*, “trust,” from *fides*, “faith”) is anyone with a duty to act in faithfulness to the interest of another, even at cost or peril to himself or herself. A parent, for example, has a fiduciary duty to care for his or her children no matter how much sacrifice that might require. The board of a business holds the corporate assets as fiduciary for the stockholders. Since the stockholders’ main interest, ordinarily, is in making money, corporate boards generally try to maximize stockholder value. If they pursue other goals – pumping up executive compensation, making sweetheart deals with other companies owned by board members, or sometimes even trying to be responsible corporate citizens – they can expect to be accused of failing as fiduciaries.

By this analogy, a congregation’s board exists to represent the owner. But who is the owner? Often board members answer this question too quickly: “The owner is the congregation!” And the owner’s interest? Satisfactory worship, education, social action, and so on. The fiduciary duty of a congregation’s board, then, is to know what the congregation wants and to provide it.

This way of thinking sometimes produces good results, but in my opinion it is based on a false analogy. A congregation does exist to serve its owner – but the members are not owners in the same way stockholders own business corporations. Who, then, is the owner?

Here ends the reading.

“Who Owns the Church?”
by
The Reverend William Haney
May 23, 2010

The Unitarian Universalist Church
Columbia, Missouri

With the formal church year winding down in readiness for summer, I believe there is much for which to be thankful. We end a journey not only for a church year but also for my ministry with you. The journey we shared is a treasure for me. So much was accomplished, not only over the past 21 years, but this past year as well. The success of the annual pledge drive was remarkable. Also remarkable was the way in which the leadership staged the transition process for my leaving and a new minister to arrive. Much credit goes to the Interim Minister Task Force, made up of Leslie Luchene, Mary Beth Schillinger, Rosie Anderson-Harper, Kakie Love, Janet Groat, Todd Iveson and Steve Mudrick. They worked deliberately and diligently so well as a team, producing probably the best packet of any congregation seeking an interim minister. Such teamwork was needed during the stressful short timeframe for selecting an interim minister. As to my leaving, with the untiring work of the Worship Associates, you will have a full summer service schedule. I know standing on healthy grounding you will welcome the interim minister the Reverend Sue Spencer with open arms and warm hearts.

The health and firm grounding of this church – your church – is a legacy left by the many lay-leaders who preceded this day of recognition. With the contributions of my strengths and the regrets of my weaknesses, I hope I have served you well from this pulpit – this Free Pulpit from which the truth is to be spoken. I know you accepted what truths that truly spoke to you in your Free Pew. These two – the Free Pulpit and the Free Pew – are absolutely fundamental to our Free Church tradition. I as minister am not told what to preach by either doctrine or hierarchy. You, as congregant are free to receive that which speaks to your conscience and spirit, for you also are not told what to hear by either doctrine or hierarchy. Ministers come and go, parishioners also come and go: yet, the freedom to seek and discover remains. In that freedom is the responsibility to the institution, to the organization, to the church, to live the life of the church deliberately.

Being responsible to the church can be not only overwhelming, but also bewildering. In some regards, “the church” can be something of an amorphous thing. Just what is the church? Is it the property and building, the contents within it, the people or the programs? What role does “religion” or “spirituality” or “community” plays in defining the church? Just how important is the organization of the church? In his book titled *Governance and Ministry*, Unitarian Universalist minister Dan Hotchkiss makes the point of the tension between religion and organization. Hotchkiss begins the book with these words:

Religion transforms people; no one touches holy ground and stays the same. Religious leaders stir the pot by pointing to the contrast between life as it is and life as it should be, and urging us to close the gap Religion at its best is no friend to the status quo.

Organization, on the other hand, conserves. Institutions capture, schematize, and codify persistent patterns of activity. People sometimes say, “Institutions are conservative,” and smile as if they said something clever. But conservation is what institutions do

No wonder “organized religion” is so difficult! Congregations create sanctuaries where people can nurture and inspire each other – with results no one can predict. The stability of a religious institution is a necessary precondition to the instability religious transformation brings . . . (pg. 1).

That stability in order to promote instability is exactly the goal for your leadership that we began ten years ago. It remains a work in progress. There is still work to be done. We set out to establish an organization that would allow the church to say, “Yes” to spiritual, ethical and religious ideas and aspirations. That saying “Yes” would come under the fiduciary responsibility of each member and the leaders.

As Hotchkiss noted in the reading, “A fiduciary . . . is anyone with a duty to act in faithfulness to the interest of another, even at cost or peril to himself or herself.” This is the responsibility of being a part of the community. The “cost or peril to himself or herself” may be a matter of testing one’s conscience for the good of the whole community. The fiduciary responsibility of the leadership and members extends beyond the budget and fund raising. That responsibility extends to the very owner of the church. The argument Hotchkiss presents in the reading begins with a comparison with the for-profit corporate model of fiduciary responsibility. Rightly he discounts this model for religious organizations. As he pointed out in his book’s opening paragraphs, we are in the business of transformation, not the bottom line on a balance sheet. He even discounts the statement frequently offered by members of a church’s leadership: “The fiduciary duty of a congregation’s board, then, is to know what the congregation wants and to provide it.” If the proposition that the congregation owns the church, then is it enough to only provide what is wanted? Hotchkiss feels that is not enough, and I agree with him. He has said;

A congregation does exist to serve its owner – but the members are not owners in the same way stockholders own business corporations. Who, then, is the owner?

Who, then, is the owner of a congregation? Who plays the role of stockholders in a business? Not the members. Not the board. Not the clergy or the bishop or the staff. These all are fiduciaries whose duty is to serve the owner.

If all of these – members, Board, minister or staff – are fiduciaries serving the owner, then the ownership of the church must rest somewhere else outside our usual mind-set. Hotchkiss makes for me an astounding assertion. For him, the owner of the church is the mission. This concept makes sense to me.

Hotchkiss supports his concept of the mission being the owner of the church by referring to the management consultant Peter Drucker, who wrote

. . . that the core mission of all social-sector organizations is “changed lives.” [Hotchkiss goes on to say] The specific mission of a congregation is its answer to the question, “Whose lives do we intend to change and in what way?” A congregation that limits its vision to pleasing its members falls short of its true purpose . . . [If] the only mission is to current members, the congregation

will soon die. And so the mission must be not only to change the lives of members but of others yet to join.”

The mission of the church is why it exists. It is the seeking of the holy ground from which once touched, no one stays the same. I leave you with these thoughts because the interim minister will be challenging you in the time to come. You will be challenged to claim your mission, to assert your owner. As fiduciaries your ministry will be to find the mission to which you belong, to seek out the real owner for whose benefit you will hold and deploy the church’s resources. I know I will leave you in good hands. I know you will be able to rise to the challenges that face you. The treasured journey we traveled together gives me the faith that you have the faith to become more than you ever thought you could. May the blessings of a brilliant future be upon you.

Amen.