

Rev. Diane Miller's response to Wayne Arnason's open letter concerning funding for theological education.

I thank Wayne Arnason for his open letter, a most thoughtful analysis and definitely the first comprehensive statement on this important topic.

Many of the issues being addressed in this broader conversation are being put forward as if they represent new data, or change. What I see is repackaging. Two examples.

Concern about the "quality of our ministers" and "excellence in ministry" have been raised perennially since I've been in fellowship. Excellence should be an ongoing concern, of course. However, the repackaged version seems to suggest that serious deficits abound in our ministers. Yet they are not identified. Wayne makes this point. I only want to add that it surprises me that ministers have not insisted that a problem be identified as a prelude to rehearsing the supposed deficits of our professional ministry. Perhaps like Moses, we feel unworthy to have answered the call. We know again and again that we are not able to accomplish all we set out to do in our various ministries. The tone I have heard repeatedly, over my thirty-plus years in ministry, eight of them as Director of Ministry, is an implicit comparison of an ideal of a minister with whatever example of shortfall or failing or human limitation is on someone's mind. Obviously, clergy embodied as human beings, we who are the earthen vessels for the gifts of ministry, compare unfavorably with the ideal someone holds, and then again with a different ideal the next person holds. We joke about the walking on water test in ministerial search, but we are graded against the impossible all the time. What can you say, with Jesus or the Buddha or Diana of Ephesus as the model for our career?

Expectations of ministers and of ministerial education have risen steadily over the decades. These expectations -- from parishioners, the public, from ourselves, from our UU schools, from credentialing bodies such as the Association of Theological Schools, and the MFC -- have risen even as public respect for clergy has suffered an overall decline. It was once enough to have functional knowledge in the fields of theology and scripture and church history; to be a good enough model of a human being; to have pulpit presence and bedside manner. Today we expect far, far more -- areas of knowledge, areas of engagement, skills in human systems and relationships, more hours of work, active engagement in large issues beyond our congregations, and...you can fill in the picture I am sure.

It has long been the case that students preparing for UU ministry have opted for alternatives to the two UU theological schools. We have also long welcomed many people into our fellowship who initially trained in another tradition at a denominational school. A basic academic preparation was accepted as sufficient, with attention to formation around UU norms and tradition. The one third UU schools, two thirds non-UU schools distribution of our aspiring ministers has been true for at least a decade. So this point, too, is a matter of repackaging a natural reality as a problem to be solved.

Since the 1990's we have had a substantial increase in the number of persons preparing for UU ministry. We had "deferred vocations" of ministers who hadn't been able to follow their call

earlier in life. We had the boomer demographics, the second (& third) career trend, and overall, especially in our movement, people who felt they could afford to train for ministry despite the economics of it (or couldn't afford not to). Most importantly, we had more people than ever before in our history who were called to serve and lead in our tradition. I saw the increase in people preparing for our ministry as a bellweather of growth for our movement. However, our congregations and our two small UU schools have not experienced similar expansion. So let's add to Wayne Arnason's reasons *why* ministers attend other schools the obvious one, that our two schools are not prepared to offer enough seats in the class. Institutions such as Crane and St. Lawrence and the pre-merger Meadville and Lombard, which had once offered greater regional distribution and options in pedagogy, no longer exist. Without strong institutions, our mission in theological education cannot be sustained. When the number of aspiring ministers declines, where I expect it is already trending, we will be poorly served to have the academic centers of our tradition further weakened, less independent, or altogether extinct.

I thank Wayne for addressing the power dynamics of this decision process. For all the talk of conversation and openness, there has been a distinct lack of genuine dialogue about the assumptions and facts. It would be good to know what was stated as the intent when the original gift for the Fund for Theological Education was given to the UUA in trust, with the Panel on Theological Education set up as a collaborative group to administer the Fund.

Beyond the particular, and I think they are significant, concerns with this funding issue, I believe this is an example that we are poorly served by centralized power and fewer perspectives and inaccessible decision-making. We must return to the basic question of the purposes of the UUA (it might interest you to look at the rewritten version proposed recently by UUA staff), and the purposes of the Fund.

And finally, let's own the fact that our collegial body of ministers is one richly talented, skilled, hardworking, spirit filled, imperfect, aspiring, group of leaders.

Diane Miller
Interim, Walnut Creek, CA.