

**First Parish in Sherborn UUAC Church**  
**Reverend Maddie Sifantus**  
**January 17, 2010 at 10:30 AM**

**READING FROM MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

Excerpt from “Drum Major Instinct Sermon,” February 1968

If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant... That's a new definition of greatness.

And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, (Everybody) because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.

**READINGS FROM CHARLES VICKERY**

I believe in the human being and his (or her) powers to create change. It follows from this belief that if you work *with* people instead of *for* them, you enlarge the person with whom you are working, but also yourself.<sup>1</sup>

While serving our church in Columbus, Ohio Vickery defined the liberal church as “a community of people who together are seeking a growing answer to life. It is a process which never ceases.”<sup>2</sup>

**SERMON: CALLED TO COMMUNITY**

It is my great pleasure to be with you this morning, to stand in this room amongst you on this Martin Luther King Jr. weekend. The last time I was here was 1999. I was still in seminary and talked with you on that occasion about my work with the Golden Tones, an elder chorus I founded in 1988 and directed for twenty years. My call was to minister in the community, even as I was interested in what we do in our congregations. So it is that I look through the lens of community ministry—or public ministry, if you will, on this Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend.

With the events of this week in Haiti and the continuing tragedy there, I think also of all the people who will be called to minister there in the coming months—from lay people to ordained—and how we can all help by giving through our UUSC/UUA fund for Haiti or whatever charity you trust and believe it that will do good work there. As the numbers come in

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<sup>1</sup> Seaburg, Carl (1992). *Inventing a Ministry*. Boston: The Minns Lectureship Committee, 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

and we hear of so many personal tragedies, not to mention the total devastation of a country, we are staggered and feel helpless. At times such as these, I go back to the wise and inspiring words of Unitarian minister, Edward Everett Hale, who served churches in Boston and was chaplain of the United States Senate. You may remember he said:

I am only one  
But still I am one.  
I cannot do everything,  
But still I can do something.  
And because I cannot do everything  
I will not refuse to do the something I can do.

This morning for some moments together we are thinking about two ministers who did not refuse to do the something they could do. We are thinking about our modern day prophet, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as Unitarian Universalist minister Charles Vickery—two men whose ministries took place, for a large part, outside of the walls of faith communities. They were called to community, the title I have chosen for my words today. Their ministries took place largely outside of the church sanctuary. For me, one of the most important things we must remember about King is that he was first and foremost a man of faith, a minister and a pastor. All that he did came out of that place.

Friday would have been King's 81<sup>st</sup> birthday. Tomorrow will be the national celebration of the King Holiday, which was first celebrated in 1986. More recently people have come together to honor King more proactively with the King Day of Service. The hope is for "A day on- not a day off." On January, 18, 2010, people across the country will come together to improve lives and bridge social barriers on a national day of service. This ranges from revitalizing schools, bringing meals to shut-ins, removing graffiti from buildings and much more. Perhaps some of you are involved in one of these projects.

MLK was a man who brought hope and healing to America. We commemorate as well the timeless values he taught through his example—the values of truth, justice, compassion, dignity, humility and service. If we could claim him as a Unitarian Universalist, we would. On this holiday, we do lift up the universal, unconditional love, forgiveness and nonviolence that empowered his revolutionary spirit. He certainly didn't let nobody turn him around. And it is my

belief that his ministry, Charles Vickery's, and so many others have expanded the vision of what the church can be in the modern world.

But yet the church is also about this place. We come here on a Sunday morning, and for this time together, this is where we choose to be. This is where we covenant with each other to be in right relations, to listen and act with love, to serve each other, our community and our world. And we choose to come here in community as part of our search for truth and meaning. We choose this beloved community, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. might have called it. We choose to be here together, I maintain, because, deep in our hearts we believe it can make a difference- in our own lives, in that of our community, even in our troubled world. Since we are "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality", as King said, since "we are tied in a single garment of destiny", we may as well come into this place, this gathered company, this community of "sacred conscience" to think on what has meaning in our lives, to make meaning together with our families, our neighbors and our friends, to be a voice of liberal religion and diversity, to be a place of caring and service. And even to cry out together, as we did in the moving song written by Thomas A. Dorsey we sang moments ago. The cry of the deepest pain, Dorsey wrote on the death of his wife and infant son. The very song sung at Martin Luther King's Memorial Service:

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand,  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;  
Thru the storm, thru the night, Lead me on to the light,  
Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me home.

And it can be the knowing of pain and the darkest nights, being tired and worn, that leads us home to be in community with each other within in the walls of a faith community and the urge to reach out to what is larger than us, by whatever name we may call it. Because sometimes we can feel so small, so ineffectual against the weight of all that is wrong in our world. How could I, as just one person, make any kind of difference?

We can each do *something*, each of us bringing our gifts to meet the needs of our community. Just as you are part of the Interfaith Hospitality Network, have a social action committee, with all its activities, including folks who bring gifts during the holidays to children who would receive none, who support homeless shelters, soup kitchens and so many other

causes, we have those individuals, lay an ordained, called to a more public ministry. Because, indeed, there is the larger world and some of us choose to focus our work there—to have a social or public church consciousness. To be a servant to that which is good and true.

Let me tell you about one of our community ministers who seem to have been lost in the mists of time and who labored out of the limelight, off of the world's stage. Charles Vickery was born in the small rural town of Pittsfield, Maine in February 1920 to a family of dedicated Universalists. He entered theological school with what was described as a “persistent curiosity to find out what human beings could do for one another in this mixed-up world.”<sup>3</sup> According to Carl Seaburg's book about him, *Inventing a Ministry*, it was that curiosity which would be central to his ministry and life—a life that was cut much too short by a car accident when he was only in his fifties. Vickery served at the end of World War II in Germany with displaced children in an early version of what became the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee: the UUSC. He realized early on “that the most important thing about the ministry,” as he said, “was that you have to be there with your whole self. You have to put your body on the line. No pretense. No make believe. No humbug. No play-acting.”<sup>4</sup>

Although he served for some periods in parishes, it was to the larger world he kept being called. It was there he felt of service, of use. For Vickery, the religious or spiritual experience could not be words alone. There had to be deeds to support the words, otherwise it was a useless, time-wasting endeavor.<sup>5</sup> And sometimes those deeds would push the envelope, just as would Dr. King's. Vickery said that “For me there are certain universal moral values by which I judge my world, and if these do not confirm the present government position, I feel perfectly legitimate in defying the law.”<sup>6</sup> He believed strongly in individual responsibility and had the conviction that “we can remake our world. (That) we are the unknown factors that can change things.”<sup>7</sup> He invented a ministry that moved into the world and was a model for those of us called to community today.

In 1988, a group of ministers who were interested in serving or promoting what we have been calling community ministry made a Proclamation which reads in part:

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<sup>3</sup> Seaburg, Carl (1992). *Inventing a Ministry*, The Minns Lectureship Committee, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

We as people living in a world that is both dying and seeking to be reborn, who are shaken to our very roots by the massiveness and depth of planetary and human suffering, are empowered by a driving passion to bear witness to that suffering, participate in its transformation, and affirm the inherent glory of life. Therefore, we . . . do covenant together: TO RESPOND to these cries of pain, to our own brokenness, and to awaken the healing spirit of hope.

TO ENGAGE in a broad spectrum of ministries through and with Unitarian Universalist congregations, with the larger community, and, increasingly, in a global context.

TO CELEBRATE the diversity of life within our elemental interconnectedness.

TO CHALLENGE one another as individuals and as members of institutions to identify, analyze, and act upon the basic causes of human hurt and separation.

The Society for Community Ministries, or SCM, is our Unitarian Universalist membership organization which focuses on what it names as compassionate, liberating and prophetic community ministries. It includes lay people, seminarians, interested friends, and ordained clergy like me. In fact, I am their former co-president and currently chair of their nominating committee. There is much I could tell you about community ministry in our association. Please call me or grab me at coffee hour if you want to know more. I will tell you now that it is an exciting time for community ministry in our association—that there are diverse ministries addressing the darkness, hearing the cry and the call of the *Precious Lord* hymn. So many possibilities.

As I reflect on my years with the Golden Tones and my current role as Acting Director of MUSE (Music Serving Elders), the most profound challenge and, at the same time, most exciting opportunity is its location in the secular arena. I am always aware of the balance between the sacred and the secular, as I operate in this milieu, not to mention the occasional rearing of the profane. This gives rise to a tension between my faith perspective and the challenges of working in an arena where the holy or what might be named as religious is not recognized or encouraged, or is outright prohibited.

But I believe that that is one of the ways that community ministry has its most profound reach. I have uncommon access to people across faith traditions, as do most community

ministers. Questions of meaning can be explored without explicit theological content scaring off someone who is in need of asking the big questions. I resonate with Leonardo Boff's statement that "faith is the great doorway into social problems...Social commitment comes from the vision of faith."<sup>8</sup> I would add that a vision based in faith and an accompanying hope for a better day with the realization of the beloved community are necessary to do justice work, for keeping the hand on the plough.

And that brings me back finally to Dr. King and Charles Vickery and their example for those of us still laboring to make a difference in our mixed-up world. They were both change agents. May we be inspired by their examples, but may we also know that we can only do what we can do. We can not do it all. But if we are in beloved community, working together, supporting each other, then we can work for freedom, we can address great tragedies, we can tackle injustices, we can discuss, and question and keep our hand on the plough. As Vickery said, "it's a process that never ceases." We can and must still point towards that day when there might be freedom for all.

## **BENEDICTION**

We avow our faith in the growing awareness of humanity, whose wisdom is that of all, whose prophets are the spiritual giants of every race, whose prime concern is his fellow beings, whose belief is in the understanding of love, whose authority is that of developing truth, whose confidence is in the slowly evolving human commonwealth, which is made or destroyed by our own efforts. We assert our faith in life's goodness and the human dream. So may it be. Amen.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Boff, Leonardo, *Church: Charism and Power*. NY: Crossroad, 127.

<sup>9</sup> Seaburg, 78.