Protocol and Manners: Civility Among the Clergy
The Reverend Gordon B. McKeeman

One of our colleagues, Kathy Duhon, recently commented, “In stable, interconnected communities, values like courtesy and hospitality are going to be high.” We Unitarian Universalist clergy are certainly interconnected. A mark of our connection is an embrace of good manners, civility, the nurturing of considerateness, a kindly awareness and regard for the feelings and circumstances of our colleagues’ lives.

It is tempting, and not necessarily wide of the mark, to point to a general rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” or its negative version, “What you would not have done to you, refrain from doing to others.” In going about the manifold tasks of ministry, a discreet and mannerly demeanor bespeaks our shared conviction of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Effective ministry is grounded in mutual trust and respect. Considerateness is not only an expression of trust and respect; it also invites a response in kind.

When the waters are calm, the wind favorable and the sailing smooth, it is not difficult to be mannerly. But inner turmoil and troubled relations often result in intemperate remarks, thoughtless omission of important courtesies, and even words and deeds intended to express frustration, anger, resentment or malice. As our UUMA Code of Professional Practice puts it: “I will sustain a respect for the ministry. Because my private life is woven into my practice of the ministry, I will refrain from private as well as public words or actions (underlining mine) degrading to the ministry or destructive of congregational life.” “Respect for the ministry” is nearly devoid of significance if it does not include respect for those who are the incarnations of ministry, our colleagues. We needn’t agree with them, endorse their procedures or support their projects. We do need to respect their prerogative, refrain from interfering with their ministerial duties, and to treat them with the fairness, equity and compassion that we feel ourselves entitled to receive.

It might be worth the effort to consider ourselves as ministers one to another. One of the continuing needs of ministry is a resource for personal support, sustenance, encouragement and consolation. Colleagues who understand the quandaries and stresses of the calling seem natural candidates for such a supporting role. Civility, respect and mannerliness are at least a promising initiation into a mutually
supportive and sustaining relationship.

**Particular Occasions that Require Careful Attention**

A colleague’s parish is his/her responsibility. If you are invited by your colleague to perform ministerial functions in his/her parish and agree to do so, you are a guest and you should display your most supportive and respectful behavior—punctual, gracious, attentive and a worthy representative of that minister, that congregation and its faith. All other requests must be routed through the resident, called minister.

None of us is immune to personal disappointments, tragedies and confusions. Timely expressions of concern, support and offers of assistance are appropriate, indeed, called for by our commitment to respect.

When a ministry is troubled, whatever might be your perception of the sources thereof, your role is not to “play Good Offices” (unless you are the Good Offices person), but to minister to a colleague with affirmation and support, while maintaining a scrupulous neutrality concerning the trouble. Right, wrong or some of both is not your concern: your colleague’s health and welfare are, and should be the intention of your efforts.

When you hear complaints about a colleague, listen if you can’t avoid doing so, but do nothing more than offer a polite “no comment,” or refer the complainer to appropriate listeners, possibly a Committee on Ministry or a District Executive.

Retired ministers are sometimes less than an unalloyed blessing. Often they think they can do ministry better than you. That might possibly be true. However, that is not the point, and it’s not their role. Perhaps a personal inquiry will help; perhaps a hint of appreciation for their years of service. They, too, need ministry. They worry, are sometimes frightened by their images of the future, and may sometimes be downright cantankerous. A little forbearance, some understanding and a dollop of patience may help. They make better partners than opponents. Your invitation to some partnership might help. Incivility will clearly make matters worse.

The world is often cruel, thoughtless and rude. If we have a better way to offer, we ought to show it—in presence, in word and in deed. How else can we indicate what we intend?