Mentoring Ministers in a Unitarian Universalist Context

by Gretchen Woods

Introduction
In the late 1980's, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, realizing that ministers can “wash out” during the first five years of ministry, determined that an informal mentoring process was needed for ministers during those critical years. The UU Ministers Association agreed to help ministers find mentors through chapter relationships. Reporting consists of signing a paper that indicates who the mentor is and that the pair meets on a regular basis. Training was not required, nor was much given. This is being remedied in a number of ways, one of them being this issue of “Streams.”

Mentoring for Mentors
If a new minister asks you to be a mentor, what does that mean in the best of relationships? First, to be a successful mentor, one needs to feel some reasonable connection to the new minister. If a mentor does not care in an authentic way about the mentee, useful interchange may be difficult. Second, the mentor needs to be self-aware, have good boundaries, and understand her or his own process of ministerial formation. Third, the mentor needs to understand continuing education and ministerial formation as broadly and deeply as possible so that guidance is stage appropriate for the new minister. For example, first year tasks include learning and keeping the history of the agency or congregation served, but not development of a continuing education plan. That can wait for the second or third year of a new ministry.

The mentor and mentee should develop an “arc of the year” which would include at least six topics to be discussed and/or studied formally. At the end of each year, the plan should be reviewed and adjusted for the next year with evaluation of learning and growing edges. The mentor also needs to know resources at the agency (for Community Ministers), District, and UUA level, especially what the Office of Professional Development has to offer.

Try not to mentor more than two new ministers at a time. Mentors need to practice and model self care as well.

Topics for Discussion
These are questions that people have found helpful. If you want to add others, please let us know.

1) Self-care, including spiritual practice, developing support systems, where to find personal relationships (Are friendships within the congregation OK?), and keeping a personal life: “How are you putting energy and creativity into your private life?”

2) Historians of your congregation or agency: With what elements of your congregation’s history are you in sympathy? What parts of the story are not commonly told that you might want to recover or believe need to be recovered for the health of the congregation or agency?

3) What is your sense of call? How can you deepen it while attending to the “every day hum-
4) With first renewal – Power analysis and how to get things done: “Where does the power lie?” and systems thinking: “How is this person filling a role in the system as well as acting on their personal issues? Where am I at risk of getting stuck in a triangled relationship?”

5) With second renewal - Gifts and challenges: “What do you feel you are doing well? What is frustrating you?”

6) Further into ministry – Developing public ministry around justice and community activism.

7) Could ask mentee to read 1992 Commission on Appraisal Report on “Excellence in Ministry.” (The mentor also probably ought to read it!)

8) Practical issues: canvass, newsletter, antagonists, where to put energy next.

9) Be willing gently to raise up areas with which the mentee seems particularly uncomfortable.

10) Collegiality: review UUMA Guidelines thoroughly, including relationships with former ministers.

11) When to ask for help from Good Offices (sooner, rather than later!)

**Mentoring for Mentees**

Make certain that you feel safe and comfortable with your chosen mentor, or you will not open up enough to allow real growth in some of your most vulnerable areas. On the other hand, choose someone you know will challenge you gently and be thinking about you other than at the meetings. It is best to have a mentor that works in your specialty, if at all possible, but it is also wise not to choose the person who supervised your internship. You may want a mentor with a specialty you particularly admire. Remember that geography can provide a real challenge in some districts. Try to get a mentor who is relatively easy to access, as face-to-face meetings seem far more effective than phone calls.

After selecting a mentor, be willing to be authentic. Ask questions about what is happening to you, both professionally and personally. Be honest about the challenges you are encountering and the successes you are having, for both need to be addressed. Be willing to celebrate and to grieve.

**Conclusion:**

Leon Hopper asserts that mentoring is essential to the mentor because, “It will ensure our generativity rather than stagnation. It will contribute to our wisdom, as demonstrating integrity ensures that we not fall into despair or disgust.” (*Leaping from our Spheres*, p. 165.) With regard to the mentee, he adds, “Let there be no mistake, the overarching objective of mentoring is the continuance of our faith, our church.” (Ibid.) Our new ministers need and deserve the best support and care so that our faith continues strong far into the future.

While gender, sexual orientation, cultural differences, etc. may be problematic and must be taken into account, the primary good of mentoring seems to lie in the rapport and authenticity that exists between mentor and mentee. As with relationships within a congregation, transformation can only take place where trust abides.