

# Serving with Grace

## Lay Leadership as a Spiritual Practice

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### Excerpts for pre-workshop readings

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## Introduction

Common wisdom holds that people come to church for a sense of belonging, and that getting involved with a committee or task force is a great way to meet people and feel more connected. You do meet people while serving on a committee, and, yes, working together in common purpose can create these bonds. But perhaps this is not really why people come to church. Though this is often why they say they come, I think there is an even deeper reason—to have their lives transformed. (In fact, Thomas Bandy argues just this in his book *Kicking Habits*.) If so, then no amount of encouragement will get them to sign up for one more thing in their already busy lives. Just *getting involved* is not enough. It doesn't speak to their deepest need—a transformed life.

Imagine if the practical and administrative work of the church—meetings, planning, teaching, etc.—was understood not as a necessary evil but as an integral part of the mission of the church to spiritually nurture us. What if lay leadership were not a means to an end but an end in itself? Could you experience the meeting room as a zendo and the deliberations of a task force as a form of group prayer? Imagine church not as a place led by a few overly taxed people but one where leadership is a broadly shared ministry that members of the community undertake for the deep joy of it.

*Serving with Grace* is intended for current and potential lay leaders, to help you understand your work for the church as an integrated aspect of a fully rounded spiritual life. It is intended both for those in typically recognized “leadership roles”—such as Board members, committee chairs, and the like—as well as for those who lead by doing while serving on a committee, teaching religious education, or helping to pull together the holiday fair. Woven throughout are practical, concrete practices you can do alone or in a group to reinforce the theory. As the old saying goes, it is far easier for us to act ourselves into a new way of thinking than it is to think ourselves into a new way of acting. These practices will give you tools to relate to your leadership roles in new ways. And the new behaviors that result will, in time, help transform the roles themselves. These tips and techniques will help you to bring together what may have felt like two distinct aspects of church life—your work as a leader and your own spiritual development. They do not require any particular theological or philosophical understandings. They are practices anyone can engage with and will only be deepened by the colors and textures of your own religious perspectives.

In his classic *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, Scott Alexander boldly asserts that the purpose of spiritual practice is to “examine, shape, and care for your life—and the life around you—to achieve more wholeness, satisfaction, depth, and meaning.” The goal of this book is not only to help you become a more effective leader who is less likely to burn out; it is also to help you understand lay leadership as its own spiritual practice, which can stretch you in new directions. This practice calls you to live out your

Principles in a community that shares them. It calls you to develop and strengthen spiritual virtues that will carry forward into the rest of your life. Learning to see the holy in the troublesome committee member who objects to everything may lead you to regard your neighbor, your co-worker, or your children in a new light. Learning enough about yourself to decide which church tasks to take on and which to decline may mean truly appreciating all your strengths and weaknesses for the first time.

The question to you is: Will you accept the challenge and invitation? Will you take advantage of the opportunity to use your service in the church to deepen your spiritual life and further your spiritual journey? The monasteries and intentional spiritual communities of all religious traditions understand that each and every moment of each and every day provides opportunities to learn, deepen, and grow. Whether sitting in meditation and prayer in your room or chopping carrots and washing dishes in the kitchen—anything can be used as a tool for deepening our connection with life. The quiet of the prayer bench and the bustle of the business office are not seen as two distinct things—they are two aspects of the same process. The busy work of the monastery provides as much of a pathway as the time of prayer. And when the work is seen that way, that's just what it does.

## The Spirituality of Service

The most superficial and practical reason to become a leader is that your church needs you. Our congregations are voluntary associations and depend on donations—not just of our financial resources but of our time and talents as well. In fact, even if our members pledged sufficient financial support such that every single task could be farmed out to paid employees, the church would still need volunteers because that's the nature of the voluntary association.

We also get involved in leadership because it feels good. We meet people and form friendships, becoming more fully integrated into the community. Some of us stop there, of course, satisfying our own need for a sense of belonging, yet at this point there is also a doorway to service as a spiritual practice. As Rev. Gary Kowalski put it in a sermon,

People who come to Unitarian Universalism seeking spiritual goods are likely to be disappointed so long as they have the outlook of consumers in search of material goods. If their connection to our liberal faith is to grow into something more rewarding, they have to give up the consumer mind set and begin to think of themselves instead as shareholders, investors, co-owners in what happens in church. Just as the parties in a marriage see themselves as partners rather than competitors with a joint share in the success of the enterprise.

There may be more challenges inherent in serving as a leader in your church than, say, in volunteering once a month in a local soup kitchen, which is not also your spiritual community and where you do not also have other kinds of ties and relationships to complicate things. Yet the greater the challenges, perhaps, the greater the rewards. Service within the context of your church means working with a group of people who understand your Unitarian Universalist values and commitments and will hold you accountable to them.

The metaphor of a marriage may seem at first an odd one for lay leadership. Who wants to be “married” to their church? Yet we often describe our congregations as “families,” and few of us were born into them, so perhaps the metaphor is more apt than at first it seemed. Like a marriage, we choose these relationships. And the metaphor points out the spiritual as well as practical dimensions of these relationships. Spiritually healthy couples who enter into a lifelong commitment do so with the understanding that they will share the work necessary to maintain their partnership. They will make decisions together, sometimes fight, speak truth to each other in love, make sacrifices for each other, and go through life with the awareness that they are each responsible for something larger than either alone.

The upside of all this work is the forging of a relationship that is tested and sturdy, one that can support either partner when times are hard. At our best, we don't require congregants to "earn" our care and compassion, but a congregant who has worked with her fellow community members in common cause is more likely to have developed strong relationships and a sense of belonging in the community. More than someone who simply attends worship every Sunday, a lay leader who knows that he has given so much of himself to the church can feel comfortable accepting support and help when he needs it.

Also, active participation in the life of your spiritual community gives you an acknowledged stake in it, empowering you to make that community your true spiritual home by infusing it with your values. Committee meetings and fundraisers may seem far removed from the message of the Sunday morning sermon, but it is here that your congregation literally practices what it preaches, or doesn't. Lay work is a natural complement to worship, the opportunity to act upon and test your Unitarian Universalist values. Rev. Alice Blair Wesley writes, "Show me the patterns of your church organization, and I'll show you what the people of the church find worthiest of their loyalty. Organization and theology are not two different things. Our organization is a function of our actual theology." As a lay leader, you influence that organization, and that makes you a co-creator of the church's communal theology.

Every religious tradition teaches the value of giving service as an end in itself. Even Twelve Step programs and secular psychologies have discovered the profound effect that doing good for others has on oneself. *Albert Schweitzer once said, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know. The only ones among you who will be truly happy will be those who have sought and found how to serve."* Fundamentally, serving your church is simply another form of service. In her book *Blessing the World*, Rebecca Parker quotes a member of her congregation explaining why he tithes. His insight applies equally well to giving time and energy to the church instead of money:

To tithe is to tell the truth about who I am. If I did not tithe, it would say that I was a person who had nothing to give, a person who had received nothing from life. A person who did not matter to the larger society or whose life's meaning was in providing for his own needs alone. But in fact, who I am is the opposite of all of these things. I am a person who has something to give. I am a person who has received abundantly from life. I am a person whose presence matters in the world, and I am a person whose life has meaning because I am connected to and care about many things larger than myself. If I did not tithe, I would lose track of these truths about who I am.

Work devoted to something greater than yourself lifts you out of the narrow sphere of individual concerns, enlarges your perspective, and provides context for the joys and concerns of your own life. It's a reality check, bringing us constantly back to the truth of our seventh Principle, in which we affirm the interconnected web of all existence. No lay leader gets to act alone. It means working for and with a group of people who have intertwining needs, hopes, fears, and expectations, all to help fulfill a common

mission that binds them together. What better opportunity to learn over and over again that we are mutually interdependent? Lay service means claiming your own strand of the interdependent web while honoring the needs of others. It means being a firsthand witness to the power of diversity united in a single mission.

There is yet another level which opens up most fully when you see service to your congregation as a spiritual practice, when you look at leadership through a spiritual lens. As the following chapters will make clear, leadership can provide countless opportunities to learn more about yourself—your strengths and challenges—and how you work with others. You will have the chance to practice patience and learn about listening, really listening, to people with whom you disagree yet who may well have something you need to hear. These are valuable lessons. And they are only the beginning.

Kyoto, Japan, is home to a number of Zen monasteries. One of them has a beautiful zendo, the meditation hall where the monks gather for their meditation. Outside, an icy mountain stream cascades down in a beautiful waterfall, at the base of which lies a large flat rock. The senior monks do their zazen, or meditation practice, here, beneath the icy water, rather than in the zendo. Anyone can meditate in the quiet of the meditation hall; it takes sincere concentration to meditate with a distraction such as this. It might seem easier to separate your prayer time from your productive time, your spirituality from the rest of your life, but it doesn't work like that. All the great spiritual traditions teach that life is ultimately One, that there is no separation possible, and that we must be able to find our calm in the midst of confusion, our peace in the heart of our problems, our spirituality in the center of everything else.

In other words, your lay leadership can't truly be a spiritual practice if you consider its spiritual dimension only as a set of fringe benefits. The challenge is to radically re-conceptualize the very purpose of lay leadership, not from the congregation's perspective but from your own. Selfless giving is undoubtedly a spiritual virtue, but if that comes to dominate your involvement in church life, then that community will become for you a place of work and pressure, no longer your true spiritual home. Imagine how your work for the congregation might be transformed if you approached it primarily as your spiritual practice, and secondarily as helping the church fulfill its mission. If this sounds too selfish, keep reading. You may find that this approach will actually make you a more effective leader. Think of your time and energy as congregational resources, and yourself as a responsible steward of those resources. A key aspect of that stewardship is to avoid burnout, so tailoring your lay leadership so that it truly grows your soul is essential.

Many spiritual traditions emphasize that the accomplishment of a task is secondary to the experience of doing the task. This is one way of understanding the concept of nonattachment to outcomes—whether or not a thing gets done is far less important than how one attempts to do it. Is your mind focused or distracted? Is your intention clear or dissipated? Do you experience joy or resentment while doing it? We've all heard the saying, "What matters is not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." Many people today understand this as a cynical cliché used to calm pre-game jitters or soothe the wounded psyches of those who lost. Few people really believe it. We know—because we are reminded in countless ways both subtle and overt—that winning really does matter. Some people go so far as to say

it's the *only* thing that matters and, in fact, how you play is of no real consequence at all. (As long as you win, that is.)

Accomplishment and productivity matter greatly in our capitalist culture. Setting goals and accomplishing them is tremendously important. As congregations have adopted the language of business, and boards are striving to be better managers, we've been told again and again about the necessity of setting goals that are "SMART"—specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely.

Yet every spiritual tradition humanity has ever devised teaches the same lesson—that how we do what we do matters far more than what we do. The secret of life, we're told, is that it is the journey itself that matters and not the arrival at the destination. The person who gives little with a pure heart does "more good" than the one who gives much in order to show off. If you do the "right thing" for the "wrong reason" you receive no merit. Again and again, in different ways, humanity's spiritual traditions encourage us to focus on the experience of the doing and not the product of our actions.

Two different ways of looking at the world—the way of the world and the way of the world's religions. What if the world's religions are right? What if it really *doesn't* matter whether you win or lose? What if the most important thing is how you play the game? Then it is possible that it doesn't really matter whether you get through the agenda in record time if, to do so, you must ignore your congregation's commitment to inclusiveness and shut people down so you can be more efficient. It is possible that it doesn't really matter whether you decide that thorny issue tonight, that what really matters is the quality of your discussion. It is possible that it doesn't even matter if you make your stewardship goal and fully fund your budget, that what really matters is the heart and faith and generosity that went into the effort.

For some, this is a new—and possibly even heretical—way of looking at things. If the church were a business, of course, efficiency, productivity, and the bottom line really would matter. Perhaps the most important thing to a small business, even a non-profit, is to accomplish the goals of the organization as effectively and efficiently as possible. Completion of tasks matters. Balanced budgets matter. Success, however that's defined, most definitely matters.

But churches are not small businesses, even though they often act that way. They are not even typical non-profits because they are, first and foremost, communities. They strive to embody the ideals represented by the familiar term *beloved community*. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said that the church should be "an audiovisual aid for the sake of the world," showing how the world should be. And so here, despite the many similarities with traditional businesses, different rules apply. There is, so to speak, a new bottom line and the measure of success is entirely different.

## Bringing It All Together

By now you may have noticed that there are no special practices described in this book. Rather, there have just been examples of ways to put the key ideas into action. Each of these, though, could be taken up as an intentional practice.

None of these suggested actions depends on any particular understanding of the nature of reality—the atheist and the Zoroastrian could equally apply any of them. Certainly, though, if your own religiosity provides you with practices that are meaningful, these could be added to this list. **Keep in mind that if the only place you're attending to the spiritual dimensions of your life is in your work as a church leader you will probably still burn out. For there is no such thing as a "spiritual dimension" to your life. Spirituality is not one thing among many that make up who we are. It is a way of looking at the world, a point of view through which everything we encounter passes.** Time on a meditation cushion, in a crowded sanctuary, playing with your kids, and discussing the church's budget are all spiritual activities if the spiritual mindset is active. If not, you could live your life in a monastery located on a ley line with no benefit.

The challenges and invitations suggested in this book can be adopted by just one person or by a group of church leaders. Certainly, on your own, you can go a long way toward making your leadership role spiritually fulfilling by engaging with the kinds of personal practices described here. You might even find that as you transform your relationship with the work of the church that others will do so as well.

People may begin to notice that you're not getting as frustrated or confused as they are, or that you're the one who always seems to know just how to sum things up, or that when you're at the table the meeting always seems to be informed by the spirit of the congregation. They may begin to ask you what your "secret" is. And they will almost certainly begin to ask you to take on ever greater leadership. And you, holding your "no" as sacred as your "yes," will make wise choices and continue to model engaging leadership as a spiritual practice.

Yet, you will be able to go much further in this direction if the rest of your Board or committee are looking at things this way as well—if everyone takes the time to reflect mindfully on meetings past and the meetings to come as preparation; if all of you agree that you will discern when to hold your tongue and when to speak up; if you come to an agreement about taking time out to breathe when the situation demands it; and if you all approach your work with a spirit of curiosity and openness.

**Finally, these three observations about the spirituality of church work may help encourage you along the way:**



*It makes sense to see church leadership as a spiritual practice because church leadership is hard.* An old quip goes that leading a group of Unitarian Universalists is like herding cats; another one says that trying to get a decision made in one of our meetings is like trying to nail gelatin to the wall. And then there's the joke, "Where three or four Unitarian Universalists have gathered you'll find four or five opinions."

It's not that difficult to get people talking about the grueling labors undertaken by this Stewardship Committee or that Search Committee or by your church's Board during one particularly difficult period in the church's history. Simply put, coming to understand and experience church leadership as a spiritual practice can be an antidote to this unhealthy dynamic. It makes it possible for lay leadership to become not simply a means to an end but an end in itself, not just a way to keep things going but a way to do what you came to church for in the first place—to deepen your spiritual life, make deeper connections with others, and make a difference in the world. Rather than being a path to burnout, it can be a road to enlightenment! Traditionally, world religions describe their spiritual practices as bearing such fruit as patience, joy, love, generosity of spirit, wisdom, insight, compassion, courage. What if this is how people felt when they came off their term on the Board?

*Church leadership is a spiritual practice because the church is a spiritual institution.* Churches are not small businesses, no matter how much they resemble them in some respects. And while it may be useful to think about them in these ways at times, it is vitally important to remember that they are also not social service agencies, schools, or theaters. Our congregations are spiritual communities. Therefore, they should maximize their opportunities to see with spiritual eyes. At their best, churches can be—perhaps should be—a kind of spiritual total immersion environment. And just as total immersion language programs make no distinction between classroom time and non-classroom time, so too, congregations can avoid distinguishing between spiritual and non-spiritual things. From the pastoral prayer to the passage of a policy it's all a school of the soul.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that church work is sometimes difficult in the first place. When we attend a dry-as-dust meeting at work we usually don't suffer too much angst because we don't expect anything else. It is work, after all, and we expect it to feel like work. Yet when it's our *church*, our spiritual home, there's often a nagging voice saying "it shouldn't be like this." It shouldn't feel like work there; it should feel spiritual, yet it doesn't. And so a feeling of dissonance builds up, making us feel anxious and irritable and a host of other negative emotions.

Learning to see our church work as part of our spiritual work, actually *making* it so, is one way to resolve this dissonance and create more harmony within our church community. That voice that says "it shouldn't feel like this here" is actually on to something, and recognizing the spiritual nature of church work is not just a new catch phrase, it's a

reorienting of our understandings. After all, that's what religions have always done, what spirituality always does—reorient our vision to new ways of seeing things. This is why it's so important that this is not just lip service or a new set of things to do in the meeting. This is about a new way to do the things we're doing—the practices are merely tools to help reinforce this perspective.

*Using the spiritual lens deepens and enriches our lives.* Henry David Thoreau famously said that he did not want, when it came to be time for him to die, to discover that he had not truly lived. He said that he did not want to waste his time living what is “not life,” but rather to devote himself to being as fully and as wholly (one might say holy) alive as possible. Different religions have different ways of describing what this “life that is life” is all about and why most of us don't live that way most of the time. Some talk about our being asleep. Others talk about our being deluded. Others talk about our being dead, not truly alive. Others talk about our not being aware.

Yet all agree that the way to wake up, or become aware, is to pick up and use the spiritual lens as often as possible, to see that all is sacred and that we are part and parcel of it. This, it seems, is at the core of all religions, when their idiosyncratic particularities are stripped away. Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims would all agree—once they got past their differing languages for it—that the universe in which we live, and of which we are a part, is truly awesome and wonder-filled and that we come fully and truly alive when we recognize that and live out of that recognition. As Jesus is remembered as saying, “the Kingdom is here, among you.” Or, as the Buddha said, “Everything is perfect, just as it is.” Even humanists have found their ways to say it. Engaging church leadership as a spiritual practice provides us one more opportunity to use this spiritual lens and learn the lessons it has to teach.

Through the spiritual lens, we see for ourselves that there is no place where God is not, just as Jacob discovered in the Jewish story of Jacob's ladder. Through his dream Jacob both literally and figuratively awoke to the realization, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.”

The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, “If I could spend an hour with the lowliest of God's creatures—say, a caterpillar—I would have no need of sermons.” Anything can be a Bible, a Qur'an; anywhere can be a Temple, a Zendo. If you can find the sacred at a church Finance Committee meeting around budget time, you can do it anywhere! Seeing church leadership as a spiritual practice gives us one more tool to open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to the depths of life so that we might more deeply live and love and be in tune with life's depths—and in this way find our lives and our living transformed.