

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONALS IN LOCAL UU MEN'S PROGRAMMING

By Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

Men should not have to look outside the church to find support and direction for living the manhood for which they were created. This conversion—from a worldly definition to a self-definition open to the abundant riches of the Creation—this is the church's business. (*James Dittes*)

There are two primary questions:

(1) Why do we need men's programming in our congregations? and

(2) How can ministers and religious educators (and other professionals) assist in the implementation of such efforts?

It has been my measured judgment since starting a Unitarian Universalist men's group in 1973 that when the deeper hungers of liberal religious men are truly addressed, our local congregations are the direct beneficiaries of their enhanced participation and leadership. Men need trustworthy brother-based (not biased) circles to disclose their personal stories of hurt and hope, just as women do. The sentiment that "changing men leads to changing their worlds" is not merely a noble aspiration but a proven accomplishment.

Anecdotal analysis shows that the percentage of UU congregations sponsoring some sort of men's group is meager, perhaps 10%. If children's and/or women's programs were non-existent or as sporadic in our congregations, there would be an understandable outcry. When a man comes onto our church campus, he too should be able to find some religious growth and learning alternatives specifically for his masculine evolution. In becoming full-service faith communities, we can provide our men with robust opportunities to become brothers.

If you as a religious professional basically concur with this ecclesiastical vision, then it's up to you to assume a leadership role in ensuring its result. Surely, the ultimate viability of men's programming, as with everything else we shepherd, doesn't bank on us, per se, but it does need our original blessing and continued cultivation.

Here are some guidelines to consider.

Summons

To initiate movement in this direction, religious professionals (female and male alike) might convene a half-dozen men (demographically responsive to age, orientation, race, church history, etc.) who are personally stable and institutionally savvy. With this core of committed churchmen you can proceed to plan a men's-focused worship service (Father's Day is a natural), evening discussion series, or, if energetic, a weekend retreat for the men of your parish.

Continuity

A one-time event or annual service is a good start, but an ongoing program presence for all adult men (18 and over) is essential. A series of monthly gatherings seems to furnish a desirable rhythm. Lest men's groups grow enervated or smug, it's prudent, as program life evolves, to bridge

intergenerationally and intergender-wise, coordinating collaborative events and projects with other constituencies in the overall congregation.

Balance

Optimal programming will appeal to diverse men as well as to the multiple dimensions of the whole man. Hence, a mature brothering path might interweave times of worship and support, films and projects, drumming and discussion, spirituality and politics. The "Community of Men" booklet (along with other materials published by our continental UU Men's Network) is filled with resource options. Remember that men need to nurture both their inner and outer lives, therewith fostering "mature liberal religious masculinity" within our congregations.

Visibility

Once programs get underway, the religious professional's role is to tend the fire with timely phone calls, reinforcing announcements, appropriate attendance, periodic review, compassionate goading, and ample recognition.

Male clergy may choose to be a regular, occasional, or non-participant in the men's program life. Clearly, there are plenty of parish activities that we launch and monitor from a creative distance. Use ministerial discretion. I personally have been active in the steering process of our San Diego men's program since 1978 and involved in one of its support groups for 14 years. The key for me is to share personal but not private matters, never compromising my partnership, family, or overall ministry. I try to keep firm rather than leaky boundaries, as with any other area of church life.

Prophetic Outreach

Men's programming is ultimately revolutionary work—challenging men to unroll biases and roll forth justice, turning men outside-in, then inside-out...to alter the worlds in which we live and move and hold power.

The way of authentic brotherhood pursues joyfulness as well. Playing games, dancing, singing, drumming, massaging one another's hands—all these endeavors make it far less likely that men will choose to harm each another, women and children, or the earth.

Sustainability

A perennial concern is keeping men's activities viable and healthy. (See also "Visibility" above.) Religious professionals can be very helpful by periodically planning to preach about any of the many men's issues that animate our time (or invite a guest to), but also: be ready to channel the surge of energy that often follows such high profile treatment.

For ongoing maintenance-and-repair assistance I encourage you to read UUMeN literature or contact a member of the Steering Council. Be assured we stand ready to assist our Unitarian Universalist brothers in strengthening this important dimension of congregational life!>>

*The **Unitarian Universalist Men's Network** supports a mature, liberal religious masculinity with resources and leadership, and can be contacted via e-mail: info@uumen.org.*