

This is an Open Letter to Gerry Sanders, exec.dir. of the UCC's Biblical Witness Fellowship and ed. of its THE WITNESS, responsive also to his request in that publication's Oct/86 issue that readers "register your comments with" one's association's church and ministry committee (so, copy to Bob Sisson, 40 Parsons Ln, Box 185, Waquoit, MA 02536), association minister (so, copy to Paul Sinn, 8 Town Sq., Plymouth, MA 02360), conference minister (so, copy to Al Williams, Box 2246, Salem End & Bagder Rds., Framingham, MA 01701), and the exec.dir. of the UCC Office for Church Life & Leadership (so, copy to Reuben Sheares, 105 Mad.Av., NY, NY 10016).

Gerry, being a hyperindividuated human, with the glories & perversities pertaining thereto, I believe (in evidence, herewith my #2104), with you, in THE FREE PULPIT. The reference to your belief here is in your "The End of the Free Pulpit in the UCC?"--the Oct/86 special issue you did in reaction to the UCC/OCLL "MANUAL ON THE MINISTRY." As every prophet feels insufficiently listened to, I'm modestly broadcasting--as indicated in the above intro--my response to your response.

1. A religion is the social structure of a faith and accordingly abides under the critical judgment of the end for which it is the means. As we Christians are all called to faithfulness to Christ, our conciliar & sectarian (communal, denominational) structures are called to faithfulness to our particular forms (rituals, processes, responsibilities, accountabilities) through which we seek both parochial and ecumenical faithfulness. Ergo, I think the effort to produce a faithful MANUAL ON THE MINISTRY a good idea, and I applaud our national UCC office for undertaking it.

2. Of our four traditions flowing together to form the UCC, you come from the Christian Connection, which was radically from-below in its polity: democracy was direct ("congregational" polity) rather than representative-republican ("presbyterial" polity). As the proposed MANUAL ON THE MINISTRY tilts toward presbyterialism, I'm not surprised at your howl. My genes & personal history howl with you. Also, I applaud your attack on the further ground that a national or transnational ecclesial office, without howling from the troops who get a significant hearing for their howls, drifts into "episcopal" polity & from there into the schizophrenia we are now witnessing in the case of Rome vis-a-vis (1) sexual reality and (2) American Catholicism. In our UCC national office there's not much caesaropapistic ultramontaniam, but enough of it to give me minor willies.

3. All God's chillun need negative as well as positive reinforcements, and individuals-groups-professions are in trouble when +/- get out of balance. Eg, when the promise-reward system became excessive in the medical profession, public rage began to sue the hell out of 'em (of course greed being another piece of the motivation for malpractice suits). As with medicalism, so earlier with clericalism: the people, in various ways, "got" the priests--so much so that there's a strain of anticlericalism even in so laid back a sect as the UCC. Now, you want no negative sanctional force on the pastor except from the people of his congregation. Such radical congregationalism never existed in the E & R branches of our church. If we're going to try to be faithful to our four heritages, as I believe we should, any manual on the ministry will have to muddle through our diversity to a unity more of principles than of practices. This negative factor in our freedom parallels how we in the USA got our "separation of church & state," which is more a doctrine rationalizing a situation than a principle formative of political process. Thank God for the pragma that, out of desperation over disagreement, produces better dogma than the academicians

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could manage deductively!

4. Please note, in the title of this Thinksheet, the "...and responsible." I cannot believe in a pulpit (which is a synecdoche for the minister elected by and serving the congregation) free but irresponsible, a situation which nearly exists ironically in an episcopal church, the USA branch of the Anglican communion: once a priest is ensconced in a parish, it's virtually impossible for the congregation to free itself from himr (the one exception being such forms of sin as sell tabloids such as THE NATIONAL ENQUIRER). Your proposal that the sanction of responsibility on parish clergy is adequately provided for by congregational autonomy won't wash: clever clergy (as also clever laity!) can get a stranglehold on a congregation: is the Spirit to have no structural way to deliver such a captive congregation? The checks and balances of the presbyterial way (which became the model for the US government) are the best humanity has come up with for outwitting all the demons (viz, over-control by an overlord bishop, by an elected clergyperson, or by a congregation); and it, in the UCC, is the E & R way. No, I do not come from a church of this medial position; I 1st joined a church of the episcopal polity, then three of the congregational polity (the last one, Congregational & Christian, which merged into the UCC). As I entered enthusiastically into UCC, including as an early national employee of said, I--from congregational polity--hoped for more of the presbyterial; but in the UCC, the congregational polity has overwhelmed the presbyterial--till, perhaps, this MANUAL ON THE MINISTRY. Sorry, Gerry: I agree with you on many things, but I'm not with you on this one.... though, as you'll see below, I'm not entirely against you.

5. I'm enthusiastic about your proposal "that before this new document is adopted, it be subjected to church-wide discussion and debated on the floor of associations. Associations should clarify by explicit statements the correctives that this document needs. We encourage every pastor and congregational council/consistory to study carefully this document and communicate its concerns to their association officers." Three cheers, for one thing, for anything that'll get God's people to study, to take intellectual responsibility for their existence! Adult education languishes partly because it seems, to most of our folk, irrelevant to "where they're at." But every congregation is always "at" pastor/people issues and their wider ramifications, and your proposal thus is something practical and motivational to adult education.

6. With you, I worry about the MANUAL's promo passages that pressure our clergy to "support," and be "a responsible participant in," UCC "ministries" and "actions" beyond the congregation. I used to hate pep rallies in highschool; they embarrassed me, and I tried to do something useful--like, study--so I wouldn't be wasting my time. Issue by issue, mission by mission, clergy and congregations will/won't cheer for what's going on in the wider UCC: our way on that is to persuade, not coerce even by the threat of "standing." You well say that the MANUAL "ought to be written with a precision which will not allow for abuse by any power center in the church."

7. On reading Synod decisions into the MANUAL, I disagree with you. Personally, I don't like to have pastors and congregations told they should disregard "sexual orientation." My personal position is that it should be disregarded, but the MANUAL seems to me not a proper place for educating congregations to the national-office viewpoint on controversial issues. As for nondiscrimination of "faith," I'm puzzled as to what that could mean, given our quite explicit UCC doctrinal documents.

8. For several other denominations I've been an evaluator in the clergy review process, and like the three levels in the MANUAL.