

## **“HOW MY MINISTRY HAS CHANGED”**

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Thirty-five years ago this Tuesday was a hot steamy Sunday. I knelt in the chancel of First Congregational Church, Branford, Conn. for the laying on of hands. With that ancient, sacred, personal ritual, I was ordained as minister of the UCC. Afterward, at the reception, sexton Bill Knapp rushed breathlessly to me, asking, “Did you see it, Dale? Did you see it?” “See what, Bill?” “A full rainbow appeared over the church at the moment you knelt down.” Well, that took my breath away. Yes, God called me to this work but I never expected him to bring special effects.

Peering across the parish hall, I could see that my guest preacher was faltering. As I said, the heat was stifling that afternoon and this preacher was 85 years old. Anticipating this, I cooled off the senior pastor’s study, to protect Roland Bainton from heat stroke. So I took his arm to spirit him away to blessed, refreshing relief.

A slight and spindly man, Mr. Bainton peeled off his heavy black preaching gown. Underneath, he wore nothing except shiny leather shoes, socks pulled up to his knees and white boxer shorts. Grinning ear to ear, I couldn’t stifle my laughter. He then saw me laughing, and chuckled back, “Haven’t you figured this out yet?” That July 29th was an incredible day, already fraught with symbolism for ministry.

First lesson: my ministry hasn’t been rainbow easy or rainbow smooth, but I am rainbow blessed by God. Second lesson--thank you, Mr. Bainton--don’t take your self too seriously. Maintain self-deprecating humor. It leaves God room to work.

Roland Bainton was a leading scholar of the Reformation. His book *Here I Stand*, a biography of Martin Luther, sold a *million* copies, a lot for any theological book. In his early 80s, he learned Polish, so he could travel to Poland to lecture on women in the Reformation. Polish was the ninth language he spoke. But at Yale he was always *Mr. Bainton* and he invited us first year students to his cottage on the Housatonic River. Roland Bainton made time for us, when it mattered most.

A pastor’s work, to be good at it, is humbling. How does one learn to be teacher, preacher, administrator, priest, fund-raiser, staff supervisor, comforter, counselor, prophet, event planner, mission stager, liturgist, and visionary--at the same time? Effectiveness as a pastor requires us to shed our pride and face into that learning curve. Not only that, the work changes, because the relationship of the church to the world and to individuals constantly changes. That is what I want to discuss today. Not just how my mind has changed, but how my ministry has had to change.

First, allow me a word on our prophetic role of bringing God’s word to bear on the vital issues of the day. It is a truism to say, the church should stay out of politics. I disagree with that. But I know what some mean by it. What people mean is: the church can’t get coopted by the left side of this vs. the right side of that. Bearing

a transcendent message, we can't become captive to worldly ideologies. Frankly, that happens as the conservative/evangelical churches act as the Republican party at prayer and the liberal/mainline churches become the Democratic party at prayer. This isn't a bold and prophetic move. It only increases people's cynicism.

But as we say "the church should stay out of politics" it reveals how little we know about politics. The word politics comes from the Greek *polis*, meaning city, like Minneapolis. So a *polis* is any gathering of people. And, guess what, big surprise, wherever a *polis* gathers, like it or not, we'll find politics. The *polis* called the soccer league has politics, just like the Senior Center, as do the PTA and P and Z. If you ever participate in these groupings, you can expect a heavy dose of politics.

The church is another *polis*. Our unique politic asserts itself as we gather to worship and serve God. It is our heart and soul. We could shed it, but we'd cease to be, never mind remaking the world in Jesus' way as the reign of God. Our politic derives from Jesus' life, story and teachings, with Good Friday and Easter front and center. We work from there. To grasp the church's politic, reread the Sermon on the Mount. Feed the hungry. Protect the vulnerable. Limit retribution. Model forgiveness. Lovingly sacrifice, suffer and die for what you believe in but never kill. Believe me, those take on political power as we translate them into reality. Why do we say the church should stay out of politics? We narrowly define politics as secular ideology. And we fail to develop and act out of theological imagination.

Enough on that theme. Secondly, let me discuss the relationship between church and world. The biggest shift in that relationship since the Protestant Reformation has occurred within our lifetime and we seldom talk about it. We're hardly aware of it. And for a church as deeply vested in our town as we are—we were the first and founding church of Darien—the implications of this for ministry are immense.

Abraham Lincoln wisely called America an almost chosen nation. What he meant by that is the religious persecution that drove us to these shores gave passion to our faith and calling from God. But our founding documents are basically secular. So historically, Christianity had a semi-official sanction. People called America a Christian nation. But that has changed big time in our lifetime. Does democratic-capitalism, say, still block out Sundays so we can keep the sabbath holy? No, our consumer society exalts Sunday is the second busiest shopping day of the week.

On every front, within our lifetime, the world around us is done doing us favors. We no longer own the franchise on religion. America no longer invites us to call the spiritual and moral shots like when little Darien was founded. We are just one more interest group of opinions and choice lobbying out there to leverage our agenda. We can't expect a heralded place of preference and favors in America.

We act like the old arrangements hold. We shouldn't have to invite anyone here, older instincts tell us. They'll naturally find us as they make their way. But the 100 years when we were the only church in Darien are over. Many are oblivious to

church, instead preferring to “be good without God.” We act as though if they do come, we might put them on CE Board or Stewards, after some seasoning. But newcomers seek immersion in faith and community, not minutes, motions, and votes. They will leave if we take that approach and some have. That’s why we try to make life within small groups the norm for newcomers and for all of us. If we can’t see the future more than the past, if we can’t alter our methods, we’re toast.

If we can adapt in a new day, it’ll feel like that REM pop song, “It’s the end of the world as we know it, it’s the end of the world as we know it, but I feel fine.” Or as Walter Brueggeman says, the world for which we’ve been carefully prepared is gone. Praise be to God! Can we see change as opportunity instead of problem? That is the core challenge of our day. But I want to end on a softer note than that.

My last point returns to Mr. Bainton, how we 22 year olds revered this octogenarian, how we clamored around him hoping who he was might rub off on us. He embodied the lesson: *no one cares what you know until they know how much you care*. No one cares for high-flown theology till they see Jesus’ love within us.

We emerge from seminary freshly-minted having tirelessly scoured the Bible and mastered the nuances of genius theologians across the centuries. Guess what? People don’t care about that. People come to church asking Philip’s question in Jn 12.21, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” The relationship between our message on Sunday and others personally experiencing it is the heart of the matter. It is no longer enough to serve up the Gospel’s intellectual power and its moral beauty.

This isn’t just about the empathic gentleness of the pastor as shepherd, standing with the sheep, praying with them, even weeping with them in their deep sorrows. It’s also about the ministry of the entire church. Visitors ask if they can see God’s love in our hearts and our passion for his redeeming, forgiving way over our own. Somebody said, sincerity is the thing and if you can fake that, you’ve got it made.

God calls us to show forth the care implied within our message not only by standing in solidarity with individuals or families through seasons of joys and sorrows. God calls us to enact the love of the gospel we proclaim by embracing the needs of those utterly unlike us and the brokenness of people who will never benefit us. Care can also show up in our courage to stand up to the lies that everyone else is saluting, speaking truth to power; new lies like that live in each new generation.

A missionary to China said, “if I had 1,000 lives, I’d live them all in that mission.” I say, if I had 1,000 lives to live, I might live one playing centerfield for the Tigers, and another playing center for the Red Wings but I’d live the other 998 as pastor. Why? Amazing people like you allow me stand with you on holy ground to share the gospel, like the Bigelows yesterday in the face of loss, or the Saagers today, welcoming Jack here. Despite the real annoyances of my calling, it is a life of incredible richness and depth. I get to do for a living the things that matter most. Amen.