



minister

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Our Sense of Call

University Ministry
Margaret Marcuson



University ministry is a unique calling, and ministering in an Ivy League setting even more so. Several American Baptist ministers have found themselves in this setting, among them Rev. Peter Gomes at Harvard and Rev. Paul Raushenbush at Princeton. The Ivy League is a group of eight elite Northeast universities with a long tradition of excellence (and exclusivity). The schools are still excellent but less exclusive—in terms of economic and social status, though not achievement—than they used to be.

Peter Gomes is Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in The Memorial Church, Harvard University. He came to Harvard in 1970 as an assistant chaplain after attending Harvard Divinity School and then teaching at Tuskegee Institute. “I sort of fell into it; I can’t say I looked for it.” Yet this became his life ministry.

Paul Raushenbush is Associate Dean of Religious Life at Princeton University. After a varied ministry he started working in chaplaincy at Columbia University. He says, “My father was a law professor, my grandparents were both professors; the university setting was very familiar to me.” He spent a time at Riverside Church in New York as a college and young adult minister and from there came to Princeton.

Both find plenty of opportunities for ministry. Gomes says, “This is a needy community of people. They are smart, but they don’t know anything about the Good News.” Raushenbush says Princeton students tend to be very focused on their work: “Anywhere else my job would be to get people on track; here my job is to get them off track. Students may say, ‘this is the only month I’m going to have fun.’ I try to pull back the lens a bit, help them with interacting with the wider world.” He can help them think through their vocational choices, and think beyond the frame their often “very impressive” families have given them. He also describes the “extraordinary international presence—it increases the opportunity for ministry.”

Raushenbush tries to raise questions with students such as: What kind of person do you want to be in the world? How do you want to be acting? What ideals do you want to have? He finds working with students encouraging: “I think I am a more hopeful person because I am around these students. Young people are amazing.”

In his own ministry, he tries to “take seriously Jesus’ mandate to love our neighbor. What I can do in a university setting as chaplain is to be intentional about being a loving presence to the community.”

In looking back over his years of service at Harvard, Gomes says, “Students are much more hospitable to the idea of belief today than they were 30 years ago. They say, ‘If you’ve got something, we’d like it to sustain us, too.’”

In many ways it's a lot easier being the 'God person.'" He adds, "My sense is that a lot of kids want something that is permanent and worth while."

Gomes says of his ministry, "One of the greatest gifts is being present with people: whether a freshmen who is coming in new, or a person who wants to die, I get everything. The gift of being present in people's stories is something I much enjoy and flourish in." He adds, "One of the greatest challenges is preaching in a university, where no one really belongs, there's a lot of floating around and a fair amount of anonymity." He says it's different from a church community. "To try to create that in a university would be a mistake: you have to take the community as it is. It's exciting and demanding, with people from every possible tradition, people who were devout in the tradition they came from, and people who came from no tradition, but are curious. I look forward to every Sunday."

Gomes was raised at First Baptist Church of Plymouth, Massachusetts, where he is still a member (and still plays the organ every August). He says he values the notion of a free pulpit from the Baptist tradition. "I take that very seriously, my duty to make the most of that freedom." He holds strongly to another Baptist value: "We are meant to be informed believers, to know something."

Rauschenbush grew up Presbyterian, but was drawn to his Baptist roots (he is the great-grandson of Walter Rauschenbusch, the famed Baptist minister) when he became connected with Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City while in seminary. There he became aware of Baptist ideals. He was struck by the notions of "freedom of conscience, priesthood of all believers, adult baptism - I agreed with all the polity." He says, "the Baptist principles all rang true to me."

Calling to ministry takes many forms. Our colleagues in university ministry, like those leading congregations, offer the gift of preaching, teaching and presence.

Margaret J. Marcuson works with clergy who want to be better leaders and churches who want to develop their ministries. She is the author of Leaders Who Last: Sustaining Yourself and Your Ministry (Seabury).

The Ministers Council Provides a Community for its Members:

- To assume responsibility for the faithful practice of the ministerial calling;
- To develop and promote ethical standards that both guide and shape the way in which the vocation of ministry is performed;
- To assume personal responsibility for and to encourage physical and emotional well-being in the practice of ministry;
- To inform, support and encourage one another in the deepening of personal and communal spiritual life;
- To work together to develop the skills necessary to become effective servants of Christ's church
- To encourage growing friendships that inform and correct the leader as she or he seeks to faithfully respond to the call of God in Christ Jesus.



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- Serves as an advocate for its members in times of difficulty and conflict;
- Is solely focused on the well-being of clergy as they engage in the ministerial calling in all of its dimensions.

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- Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice
- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
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