
XIV. TIPS on the MINISTERIAL PSYCHE

and

How to Court It

by the Rev. Dr. Peter J. Luton

Good ministers are scooped up quickly! It is important that a Search Committee work as quickly as possible. It is important to do your homework and to gather your information; I urge you to be deliberate but not slow. Be efficient, fast and intentional. Push forward. Meet often. Delays will cost you come springtime when you try to precandidate people. Get your packet together. Start today gathering material. Have several copies on hand. Be ready to send it to a minister when you receive her or his name from the Transitions Office. I suggest you send your packet to everyone on your list. There is no reason to disqualify potential ministers before you know something about them. If at all possible, in December begin scheduling precandidating visits. Even if it is for a late March date. Good ministers will be offered several precandidating opportunities and you do not want someone in whom you are truly interested to be booked up when you call. Remember, most settled ministers only have one Sunday a month out of the pulpit—that translates into only three or four opportunities to precandidate between January and April.

~~~ Communication ~~~

Stay in constant contact. Quick and helpful communication is essential. I liked knowing that my packet had been received. I appreciated when phone calls were returned promptly and answers to my questions were provided. I also appreciated when the person calling was willing to chat and wasn't only business. I focused most of my pre-visit anxiety on the Sunday service. It was helpful to talk with the minister of the neutral pulpit well in advance of the visit. Newsletter blurbs, orders of service, questions about music—all of these take time and communication. Best not to rush on Thursday to get the order of service to the neutral pulpit for Sunday. Now maybe it's just the Luddite in me, but I much prefer the telephone to e-mail for most of the communication between Search Committees and precandidates. Talk to me, don't talk at me. E-mail is one-sided and impersonal. E-mail can be good when transferring specific pieces of information, though I found I usually had another question that arose from the e-mailed answer to my original question. E-mail is not effective, as far as I am concerned, with deepening understanding and developing relationships—and that is at the core of the dance of ministers and congregations.

~~~ The Packet ~~~

The packet prepared by the congregation is a significant piece of information that a potential precandidate receives about the congregation. He or she will read it very carefully. It should give the minister a great deal of information about how the congregation operates, its finances, its expectations, its history, its environment, issues, warts and skeletons, strengths, plans, dreams and purposes. In order to get a minister to read it, the packet must be attractive and easily used. I recommend a three-ring notebook. Plastic covers on each piece of paper help keep the packet neat and readable. Everything in the packet should be three-hole punched or placed in its own well-labeled plastic pouch or folder. It is frustrating—as you will find reading ministers' packets—if stuff continually falls out of the notebook. Put the name, address, telephone numbers, and e-mail address of the Search Committee contact person prominently in the front of the packet. The packet should give the minister a feel for the area the congregation serves. Include maps, brochures from the Chamber of Commerce, information about the cost of living, the schools, local government, cultural and entertainment opportunities and, of course, housing. Color pictures of the church building/s (inside and out) and of the community make the packet more attractive and informative. Include pictures of congregational activities, groups, classes, suppers, etc. Label each picture. Take advantage of color copiers and digital photography. Include letters from the Search Committee, the Church President, the Minister or Interim Minister, and the Director of Religious Education. These letters should describe the congregation from the perspective of the writer—what are the strengths, challenges and future of the congregation. Why should the minister consider coming to that congregation? The letter from the UUMA Chapter President can discuss the quality of collegiality and strengths of the District. Include in the packet orders of service from typical Sundays. I suggest including orders of service from both the past minister and the interim minister. If there is not a typical

Sunday liturgy, indicate the variety of services that have been held. Include brief biographies of the staff and their job responsibilities. (Pictures of the staff are nice.) Include descriptions of the various groups within the congregation and all pamphlets, flyers and brochures you use. Include the Constitution and Bylaws. Send along some newsletters. Do you have an up-to-date vision and/or strategic plan? Include them. A minister will want to see the last three years' budgets and actuals, as well as the current year-to-date financial report. These should be annotated sufficiently for someone who is unfamiliar with your accounting system and the names you give to everything. What is the Smith Fund, or the Capital Reserve II, or the Emerson Club? The packet should include information about pledging, rate of collection, number of pledging units and canvass history.

Include minutes from the last three or four Annual Meetings and any pertinent reports from the Minister, Religious Education Director, Board of Trustees, Committee Chairs, etc. Include membership numbers and attendance records for children and adults—be honest. Include the budgeted cost of ministry broken down into salary and housing, benefits, and professional expenses. The packet is not confidential. You can use the talents and creativity of the members of the congregation. Make it good. Use it not to brag, but to show you are proud of your congregation and yourselves. It tells the minister how you feel about yourselves and how well you know yourselves. Be honest in your packet, especially about the challenges and issues you think are alive in the congregation.

~~~ **The Survey** ~~~

Often ministers and congregations focus on the survey. I personally did not find the survey particularly helpful. This does not mean that it should be ignored or brushed off, but rather that it should be taken for what it is—a numerical tabulation of a lot of questions. The fact that 85% of the congregation wants sermons that are intellectually stimulating and only 27% likes responsive readings does not tell a minister much. I enjoyed when a packet reported numbers clearly and in different forms, i.e., pie charts, bar graphs, and percentage totals. Computers are wonderful for this kind of stuff. When I read surveys, I read them as the congregation's self-perception and not a factual account of the state of people's spirits and minds. The survey is suggestive—nothing more. I looked for glaring omissions or absences. I looked for contradictions and confirmations. (It says that religious education is important to the congregation, but the budget for R.E. is \$250. The survey says people like adult education and, what'dya know, the packet lists fifteen different adult classes last year!)

One congregation listed all the comments people attached to the end of the survey. I found this list of raw one-liners to be very informative. The challenge for the Search Committee is to distill the tone and tenor of the congregation for the minister. This process of capturing what is going on for people and where the church is headed—or wants to head—is, in my experience, pretty subjective. Trust your intuitions.

~~~ **Precandidating** ~~~

Precandidating is nerve wracking. The whole process feels like one is being judged—not just on his or her performance and skills, but on one's very person and being. It felt as if a Search Committee was evaluating my very soul. From the minister's perspective, the church holds all the cards. This is not true, but that is how it often feels. I wanted to know what risks and benefits would come to me if I were to accept an invitation to be their minister. When I precandidated, I wanted to find out if I could love these people. Are these people who respect and value the ministry? Are they selfconscious or

caught up in a false self-image? I wanted to know if stylistically and temperamentally we fit. Do I like these people? Do they seem to like me, to welcome me, to be open to me and what I might bring to them, or are they looking for someone or something else? I wanted to know about past ministries. And I had to ask myself, “How willing and able am I to change and adapt in order to meet and honor this congregation’s personality?” The thing that impressed me most during precandidating weekends was how sensitive the Search Committee was to me and my desires, concerns, feelings. Did the Search Committee court me or quiz me? It is a very stressful exercise and everything the committee can do to help the precandidate feel welcome, safe and cared for speaks well for the congregation. Do not cut corners in order to save a few dollars. A minister will not be impressed by unrelenting frugality. An advance itinerary of the weekend is important both for the Search Committee and the precandidate. The temptation is to cram everything possible into a very short time. The minister expects the precandidating visit to be tiring and, like the Search Committee, she or he will want to accomplish a lot. This speaks to using the time well rather than filling every possible moment. Something that made a big difference for me—an introvert by nature—was to be greeted at the airport by one or two people who were knowledgeable about the congregation and the wider community and who were good conversationalists. My hosts were excited about their community and eager to share their thoughts and experiences with me. (I did not feel the necessity of keeping the conversation going.)

Relaxed meals with the Search Committee or individuals from the committee, breaks during the interviews, some time to myself, some time with a realtor, and a comfortable quiet place to sleep helped me enjoy my precandidating visits. I was pleased with the little, gracious things the Search Committee members did. One placed a basket of local goods and goodies and a vase of flowers in my room. Another arranged breakfast with a friend and colleague in the area. I was heartened when committee members asked me what I wanted to see, do, know; and when they checked in with me during the course of the weekend, asked as to whether or not I was comfortable with the process or the content of the visit to date. It may have been petty of me, but it left a bad taste in my mouth when one afternoon I was toured around in a car that was beat up, noisy and rough. The difficulty was that the car created an atmosphere in which it was harder for me to both enjoy the ride and to pay full attention to the conversation with the driver and other passenger. I was not impressed with Search Committees in which some members seemed not to have read my packet thoroughly. Nor was I impressed with Search Committees that seemed to make up the logistics as we went. (Where should we eat dinner? Who is going to take Peter to the church tomorrow?) I noted when a committee was unable to produce promised materials (e.g., past budgets, Mission Statements) or to explain various elements of congregational governance and finances. I trusted a Search Committee that was able to express differences of opinion, interpretation or emphasis in the course of the interview. I appreciated that the

committee members were willing to disagree and be honest with one another and with me, that they were not putting forward an agreed-upon “party line” to create the appearance of unanimity. I was not looking to create fights, but to see how the congregation might deal with diversity and controversy. When a new minister arrives, there will be some disagreement, some rough edges, some tensions and frustrations, and I felt better going to a congregation in which those feelings and thoughts could be expressed openly and with love. Some precandidates may wish to include their partner in the precandidating weekend. A Search Committee needs to be aware of the difficult position in which ministers’ partners find themselves. They are going to be asked to move their lives, families, careers to a new place that they may have never visited, and to become members of a community they know not from atom. Attentiveness to the needs, concerns and interests of the partner goes a long way in presenting the congregation in the best possible light. Ministers want to know that the congregation values ministers and ministers’ families. At the same time, it is important to remember that you are searching for a minister, not a minister’s partner or children. I appreciated the Search Committee’s recognition that accepting a new call is an act of faith.

~~~ **Conclusions** ~~~

I spent a great deal of time studying packets, looking for clues about what it might be like to serve a particular congregation. I read everything and pored over the financial sheets. I ran up a large phone bill talking to former ministers, interim ministers, district executives, and colleagues and friends in the area. I wanted to know as much as possible about the congregation and the place. But for me, when you get right down to it, I relied upon intuitive knowing and my feel for the place and the people. The places that did not appeal to me were just right for someone else, and the congregations that did not care for me were enamored of someone else. The search process works if congregations and ministers use it properly, being open and honest, staying true to themselves, remaining as non-defensive as possible and as clear as possible about what they need, want, and have to offer one another. I have offered some of my experience of the search process from the minister’s point of view. I have not gotten into questions of what Search Committees can properly expect from ministers or the dynamics of a church that is looking for a minister. A discussion of such things would be most enlightening for ministers, but needs to come from the laity. I am convinced, however, that the better Search Committees and ministers understand what each other is experiencing, the more successful and enjoyable the process of finding one another will be.

Good luck, and enjoy the journey!