

SPECIAL CARE CONGREGATIONS

(The Necessities of Two Year Interims)

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SPECIAL CARE CONGREGATIONS

Following is a reflection on the needs of what I will refer to as Special Care Congregations. Such congregations have gone through experiences that warrant not only a special kind of attention during the Interim Period but also a longer span of time for applying this attention.

In brief, these congregations need to be approached with an eye toward their peculiar needs and the time necessary to address these needs. My assumption is that anything less than a two year interim will leave the new impending professional relationship vulnerable to unresolved issues of consequence. Further, that having to deal with these issues will eventuate in serious harm to this new relationship. Thus, a recognition that a congregation is of the special care type should, ipso facto, be approached as a two-year interim.

I perceive there to be four types of Special Care Congregations. Please note that the word minister is used in the singular as a convenience. Read it as plural if applicable.

The Betrayed

One type is a congregation essentially characterized by a sense of being Betrayed. Whatever the length of the professional relationship, something has happened between the minister and the congregation so that one or both feel betrayed by the other and the congregation has been left in a state of dramatic trauma.

This sense of betrayal could have been induced by unethical behavior on the part of the minister. It could have been initiated by issues rising from an inner psychosis in congregational life. It could have been generated by a small conflict that was allowed to escalate beyond the capacity to manage. Whatever the source, an

irresolvable sense of betrayal ensued that led to an unpleasant, and possibly recriminating, relationship ending. An accurate metaphor is a battlefield where issues of perceived importance are seeking resolution through the strategies of combat. Such a mentality produced a no-win situation. Thus, both congregation and minister lost.

The normal means by which leadership seeks a maximum amicable parting under such circumstance is called a Negotiated Settlement. However, whatever the style of ending, the drama of it all has endowed the congregation with a variety of possible feelings: anger, distrust, victory, failure, disgust, revenge, depression and woundedness. And these feelings will relate to both themselves and the minister. They are the feelings generated by warfare.

It is obvious that all of these feelings must be worked through, forgiveness must happen, wounds healed, trust restored, and unity instilled. In addition, the professional ministerial relationship with the congregation must again be made inviting and the congregation's energies must be redirected toward nobility. To achieve this goal will require both gentleness and wisdom. It will also require the ability to help the congregation lift its vision beyond its wounds.

It is common wisdom that this cannot be done in less than a two-year period. The formula is: a year for healing and a year for turning.

The Bereft

Another type is a congregation essentially characterized by bereftness. The congregation has had a long-term relationship of loving admiration with a professional minister and the relationship has ended. This loss could have been initiated by the minister's choice, by death or by some other circumstance of life. Whatever

the reason, the beloved has been snatched from the congregation's bosom and it is experiencing great trauma.

An apt metaphor is The Promised Land. Together, the congregation and minister had entered the Promised Land and experienced its glories. But when the minister left the Promised Land vanished because the Promised Land was not the place but the relationship.

It is the loss of the relationship and not the reason for the loss which is of consequence because the end result will be the same: denial, anger, guilt, bereftness, depression, defensiveness and anxiety. What is required in this circumstance is to deal in straightforward fashion with all of these feelings. Beyond helping the congregation restore itself to a state of spiritual health, the whole issue of identity apart from the lost minister and the experience of the lost Promised Land must be confronted and an identity that incorporates the minister, yet, which is paradoxically apart from the minister, must be constructed. An anticipation of a new Promised Land must be envisioned.

Without doubt, this requires a two-year interim period. The formula is: a year for grieving and a year for turning.

The Benumbed

A third type of congregation can be called the Benumbed. Again, the congregation has had a long-term relationship with a professional minister but it was characterized by benignity. This benignity eventuated in a form of numbing brought about by sitting on the status quo too long without movement. This numbing is the spiritual apathy produced by lack of vision and the spiritual slumber that lies beneath layers of boredom. There may have been temporary moments of restored feeling brought about by flirtation with conflict but these were usually smothered by a fomentation of civility. This congregation is experiencing great trauma, although

it is likely to go unrecognized because of the placidity of its surface life. Numbness makes for placidity and placidity is often confused for peace and satisfaction.

A descriptive metaphor for the benumbed congregation is Rip Van Winkle. Having drunk too deeply of that elixir blended of benignity and comfort, the institution has fallen into a slumber that has permitted time and all its progress to pass it by. Whatever energy has been expended was toward keeping the community's pulse beating. Its visible expression is outmoded and in a state of minimal maintenance. This congregation cannot be awakened by a gentle nudging. Only the trumpet blare will stir its slumber.

While helping the more dramatic Betrayed and Beloved type congregations toward spiritual health might appear to require more time and energy, this is not the case. The benumbed congregation's sense of mission is at low ebb and perceptions of possibility must come from without. Resurrecting motivation out of numbness and introducing the currency of history to the bypassed demands a high output of energy and a long period of time. In actuality, it may require a year of interim ministry to simply arouse the sleeper. When this is the case then all of the negative reactions to change will occur the second year rather than the first year when it would normally happen. The reason is that negative reactions can only be made by an awake membership.

But this delayed reaction may create a special problem. Normally, the changes that need to be made during the interim period are initiated the first year and people have the following year to absorb and see their benefit. However, if, as experience seems to dictate, it requires a year to awaken the Rip Van Winkle congregation, then a vital year for processing change is lost to this arousing activity. Thus, it is possible that, even though the interim period is two years in duration, people will still be processing change issues the first year of the newly settled minister. Therefore, this year could be fraught with danger to the settlement. Congregants with

unresolved issues around these changes may pressure the new minister to reverse the changes and, through this pressuring, sabotage the relationship before it has a chance to become grounded.

Other consequential problems confront the Interim Period. One is that as a result of its lack of spiritual growth over an extended period, the level of institutional wisdom is as low as the congregation's slumbering blood pressure. This means that, upon awakening, the tendency will be to make decisions commensurate with pre-slumber time wisdoms.

Although it may seem impractical at first thought, such congregations may actually need three years of interim in order to become healthy enough for a new settlement to have a good chance of succeeding. And perchance such a lengthy interim period were to actually become a part of the game plan, it would be inadvisable for one of these to be longer than two years. Indeed, it would be beneficial to have a second Interim Minister who could, as a new ministerial leader, affirm the changes made by her/his predecessor.

Another problem attendant to the Benumbed Congregation stems from the synonymy of its hibernation with that of a minimized maintenance mode. A maintenance mode is characterized by low vision, low energy, low commitment and low giving. Consequently, anyone willing to step into key positions of leadership over long periods is not only appreciated but normally applauded. The longer the congregation is in slumber the longer the possibility that the same member will inhabit the same position. And the longer the person resides in a position the greater the tendency to accrue unwarranted powers. Members in service positions may even assume policy making powers that are in conflict with the normal functions of their role.

The deep emotional attachment of individual members to the power they have accrued and a consequent identification of this power with self-worth may well create the possibilities of serious conflicts and dramas that drain vital energy away from transition needs. Moreover, the congregation may have elevated the status of such persons to a form of maintenance sainthood and be very reluctant to address the issues inherent in this power aberration scenario. Those involved in the Interim Period should take care that this scenario is fraught with explosive and damaging possibility.

Given all of the issues of loss and power inherent in helping the Benumbed Congregation to awaken and begin dealing with necessary changes, if it can be done successfully at all, it will require a minimum of two years. The formula is: a year for awakening and a year for turning.

The Bequeathed

The fourth type of Special Care Congregation can be called the Bequeathed. Some quip has suggested that after a minister has been in a congregation for seven years, she/he owns it. What this rather arrogant sounding notion really means is that people who join a congregation during a minister's tenure do so because of that minister's appeal or, at the least, because the minister does not turn them off. Given time, enough members join who like the minister and enough leave who do not as to convert the congregation into a pro-minister community. This transforms into a kind of ownership, which announces that the majority of the congregation can be persuaded by the minister's vision.

It might be possible to argue with the quip's notion that it only takes seven years for all this to happen. However, if the ministry relationship is a normal one, then that transformation will take place sometime on a time-line between seven and ten years. Thus, when the minister leaves a legacy is bequeathed....that of a

congregation that basically reflects the minister's theology and institutional perspectives. And sufficient time has passed for this legacy to become subtly sanctified in numerous ways. It is this sanctification that is the key issue.

An adequate metaphor for this bequeathment is ghosts. Ghosts are dangerous because they appear at unexpected times and, often, critical moments in life inducing fear and diverting attention from the main business of living. Moreover, ghosts claim to have ownership of what they appear to represent and threaten harm to anyone seeking to contend this ownership. Any new minister immediately following this bequeathment will spend a great deal of time during the first several years of ministry discovering and dealing with this ghostly legacy. And it is likely that this minister's relationship with the congregation will be victimized in some serious way by any attempts at exorcising these ghosts. Ghosts resent being made homeless and will seek to rid their haunts of the intruder.

The negative possibilities of the bequeathed circumstance argue for a two-year interim period. The mistake, I believe, is assuming that two years is not needed because there are no visible symptoms of trauma present in congregational life. The reason such is not apparent is because another minister has not challenged the ghosts of the legacy. Once challenged, the trauma will emerge. Thus, harm lays waiting beneath the placid surface of congregational life.

This kind of bequeathed ministry warrants, in my judgment, an application of the historical wisdom embodied in the notion that it is better to be safe than sorry. The formula is: a year for exorcising and a year for turning.

Turning

As I envision it, the goal of the interim process is to empower the congregation to arrive at a maximum state of spiritual health. If

this happens, then, the new ministerial relationship that follows will also have a maximum possibility of success.

For Special Care Congregations this means dealing with the peculiar issues of their kind in as adequate a fashion as possible for the first year of the interim process. The second year is then available to empower the congregation to turn its attention to the other issues of ministry that have to do with preparing for a new future. While it might be possible to deal with the visible symptoms of the Special Care Congregation in a year's time, that is not the end of their need. Equally important is a re-visioning of identity, mission and ministry that takes the congregation's focus away from their self pre-occupation and permits the healing process to conclude.

So another way of stating the formula is that the first year is spent dealing with the congregation's special care needs and the second year is spent moving their focus outward toward mission nobility. These two foci cannot be done simultaneously with an expectation of success. They, each, need their own measure of time and attention. And they, each, require a different model of professional ministry for the provocation required to pull it all off in just two years.

Category Symptoms

It should be kept in mind that these four categories of special need are not exclusive to each other. It is possible that a congregation might exhibit the symptoms of more than a single category.

One Interim Minister exposed the basic leadership of a congregation to this schematic and all four categories found strong affirmation. However, this was a congregation that had been deeply traumatized by a long history of bad choices and dysfunctional relationships.

It is most likely that one category will dominate any given congregation's symptoms with a possible secondary set of symptoms that indicate additional institutional needs.

While the symptoms of the dominating category are useful in determining the needs of the interim period, the base-line conclusion to keep in mind is that a congregation exhibiting such symptoms needs a full two year interim period to address these needs.

Interim Minister Stint

A question that may arise for the Special Care Congregation is: "If a congregation needs a two year interim period, should the same Interim Minister serve the entire period?" The answer to this question is grounded in a number of considerations:

- What abilities and leadership skills needs are called for by the congregation's peculiar circumstance and dominating category of special care? Congregations will exhibit distinctive interim period needs.
- To what extent do the available Interim Minister's individual professional capacities correspond to this needs assessment? While all Interim Ministers go through certification training they still have varied and distinctive sets of professional capacities.
- What are the preferences of individual Interim Ministers as to the scope of time they wish to commit to an interim process? Interim Ministers, assessing their own needs and capacities, express different preferences as to the length of their interim period service.

Just as acquiring the right settled minister is a matter of matching needs and availability, so is acquiring the right Interim Minister.

This is particularly true of congregations that fall under two year special care needs. In brief, whether an Interim Minister is engaged for only one or both years of the interim period is dictated by the peculiarities and choices of the existing circumstance.

In making such determinations, the lay leadership of Special Care Congregations may wish to consult with the UUA Settlement Director under whose auspices the training and placement of Interim Ministers falls.

The In-House Interim Minister

One of the more spurious assumptions a congregation can make is that an in-house minister could effectively lead it through an interim period. This is the case irrespective of how qualified such a minister might be. There are critical reasons as to why this is an unwise assumption. These reasons traffic on the in-house minister being overly familiar with and too heavily invested in the congregation's history and circumstance. Some of these reasons are that:

- it is nearly impossible for an in-house minister to bring any real objectivity to bear on assessing congregational need and to asserting a corresponding professional leadership.
- the power of new out-of-house professional leadership cannot be exerted as leverage toward needed change and direction movement.
- creative visions of the future, so vitally needed during this decisive historical moment, are unlikely to be generated.
- in-house ministerial leadership cannot extract itself from the burden of old alliances and the negativities of old conflicts

and provide the sharp-edged inspiration required to unify congregational commitments.

- the special training and insights of Interim Ministers will not be available to the congregation at a moment when it is most needed to help attain that spiritual health that will be required to assure the maximum success of a new settled ministerial relationship.
- The in-house minister could actually become an impediment to the ministerial settlement process by covertly or overtly aspiring for this settled position.

What is needed in the Special Care Congregation is that kind of skilled outside leadership that can empower the congregation, in its present, to break the patterns that bind it to the past and develop the visions that will bond it to the future. Any in-house minister who can make this happen would be an extraordinary exception to the leadership needs that govern interim period dynamics. The congregation's destiny is too important to gamble on this slim margin of possibility.

Diagram

Following is a diagram of some of the basic differences between the Special Care Congregations I have mentioned. The attempt is to be informative rather than exhaustive. In resorting to the chart for insight it should be kept in mind that no relationship or institution is as simple or clear as a diagram. Every congregation is a living organism with symptomatic peculiarities. In addition, professional ministers have their own individual stylistic ways of perceiving the realities of congregational life. Thus, the value of diagramming is precisely its distortion of reality. Caricature provokes clarity.

ISSUE	BETRAYED	BEREFT	BENUMBED	BEQUEATHED
Metaphor	Battlefield	Promised Land	Rip Van Winkle	Ghosts
Description	Conflict between Minister / Congregation: all feel betrayed	The beloved Minister has left: congregation feels bereft	Congregation has been numbed by sitting too long on the status quo	Long term minister has left: her / his ghosts have yet to be challenged
Tone	Failure, victory, hostility, relief, anger, guilt, blame, confusion, woundedness	Abandonment, anger, depression, anxiety, fear, defensiveness, loss, pride	Grogginess, boredom, blah, relief, jadedness, comfortableness, openness, anticipation	A sense of loss commensurate with the nature of the relationship
Change	Stability, please!	No Changes!	If it brings vitality and direction or "We have always done it this way."	Things are just fine
Landmine	Taking sides	Anything sanctified by a past two-year existence	Whatever the Old-Timers enacted	Be careful or you will find out
Trust	General distrust of ministers and each other	Trust of all who uphold that which has been sanctified	Trust in caution, conservatism and maintenance	To be earned
Power	Polarized: struggle for dominance	Protectiveness of all empowerment conferred by the Beloved	Fractionalized and disconnected units vie for resources and attention	Present structures empowered as sufficient
Value	Stability, unity, peace, restoration of community	All things past	Approved processes	Solidity
Attitude Toward Past Minister	Ambivalent: love or hate, loss or relief	Irreplaceable loss	Ambivalent: perceived as ineffective but a good person	Respected, Appreciated
Attitude Toward Interim Minister	Peace-Maker	Usurper	Ambivalence	Interloper
What Needs Addressing?	Forgiveness, healing, trust, causes, unity, identity, mission, integrity of the professional ministry	Grief, loss, anxiety, change, the past, identity, mission, new model of professional ministry, new Promised Land	Awakening, potential, structures, lost years, power issues, staffing, leadership, identity, mission	Identifying ghosts, exorcisms, excitement, different tomorrow, new ministerial model, identity, mission
Leadership	Divided	United	Sleepwalking	Blasé
A Basic Institutional Need	A unifying new vision	Successful alternative professional model	Whatever promotes resurrection	New vision of possibility
A Basic Need	Gentle and unifying coaxing	Firm, directing non-anxious	Great excitement and a hint of	Inspiring push from a solid

From The Interim Minister		presence	glory	presence
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