

Janus Workbook

A project of
the Pacific Central District
the Pacific Northwest District
the Transitions Office of the UUA Ministry and
Professional Development Staff Group

created with a grant from
the Fund for Unitarian Universalism

September 2007
edition

PRINTED IN USA

I once leaned over the pulpit in a church packed with people and pointed to my colleague in the front pew. He had asked me for my advice, so I said this:

“Congratulations, my friend. And welcome to the parish ministry. Allow me as you begin, however, to remind you of just a few things – things which you may know already:

You are not in charge here.
This is not your church.
You are not indispensable.

You are called to be a minister among the people of this church as they conduct its affairs. It is much less their responsibility to minister to you than you to them, and you can and will be replaced.”

*There was a stunned silence.
“Why,” I thought, “aren’t these things obvious?”
I continued:*

“All this is not to say that you won’t be offered power within this religious community. Knowing you I can say, with confidence that you will be. It is just that you will fail badly if you do not give it away as fast as it is turned over to you. For ministry is nothing, if it does not empower people to conduct their own religious lives and growth.”

I went on, of course, trying to make further sense of the opening words. It occurs to me now, though, that what I was really saying — to all who were present—is that ministry is a risky business. For everyone. What if the minister does not give away the power? What if the congregation loses its nerve and wants to write a complete job description that reduces the ministry to certain tasks? These things happen. They kill ministry and its best opportunities.

All I can say is that the benefits are worth all the failures—by a long shot. Yet never think that good ministry is without moments requiring great courage. There is an immense amount at stake, after all: our religious lives. Yours and mine.

— Andrew Backus

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Preface

We'd like to introduce you to Janus, one of the principal gods in the ancient Roman pantheon. (*JAY-nus* is his preferred pronunciation.) Janus was the god of beginnings, of the first hour of the day, of the first day of the month, and the first month of the year, i.e. *Januarius*. Janus was the god who protected the gates and doors of cities and homes. There, over all portals, his strange image appeared.

Now, the strange thing about Janus is this: he has two heads. One to look forward and the other to look backward. In his right hand, he holds a key with which to close the door of the old and to open the door of the new. He holds the key, in fact, to the present, which is that magical interim in which we always live: that sacred place right smack in between the past and the future.

If Janus' bearded visage looks formidable, that may simply reflect how the past and the future appear to those caught between them in uncertain times. Some may imagine us equally lofty and daunting as they anticipate our arrival. Others will be yearning for a savior, and hope we are Roman (roaming) gods, too. Instead, we come to render more secure the passage between yesterday and tomorrow.

Most people think these stories of gods are about gods, about divine doings. They are not, of course. They are about us, and, when it comes to Janus, they are especially about those of us who are part of congregations in transition — for whom looking backward and forward at the same time — both with great care — is absolutely critical.

The *Janus Workbook* was conceptualized at a joint meeting of conflict managers from the west coast districts. Dealing with congregations in conflict, and in particular where former ministers were very long-term or who had negotiated resignations, the conflict workers lifted up concerns about the interim periods following clergy departure and preceding the arrival of the next called minister.

A workbook was imagined that would be highly accessible, containing activities directed toward the Interim Minister and the congregation following long-term or negotiated ministries.

Understanding that “no one person can tell it all or do it all,” a grant was imagined, to bring together a braintrust of interim ministers, conflict workers, district executives, and a representative of the UUA Department of Ministry. This braintrust would be charged with developing the contents for an interim year workbook.

Following the braintrust process originally developed for the creation of *Churchworks: A Well-Body Book for Congregations*, our group of nine met at the Seabeck Conference Center on the Hood Canal, in Washington, USA, in January 2001. What we designed is intended to be a *working* document: loose-leaf, open to

corrections, additions, and ideas. *Janus* is a work in progress — we are all learning how to do it. Like the Bible, we hope it is greater than the sum of the parts creating it. We hope it is easily usable. We hope it is topical to the work that interim ministers and their congregations have to do — which is considerable.

Our enduring thanks to the Fund for Unitarian Universalism, and to the districts who donated the time and skills of their staff and volunteers:

from Pacific Central District:

The Rev. Margaret Keip (Accredited Interim Minister)
Mr. Richard Park, ACSW (Chair, Conflict Management Team)
The Rev. Robbie Cranch (District and Congregational Services Consultant)
Ms. Beverly Smrha (District and Congregational Services Consultant)

from Pacific Northwest District:

Ms. Roberta Dianne (CONTACT Team Leader)
The Rev. Dr. William H. Houff (Accredited Interim Minister)
The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Backus (Accredited Interim Minister in Training)
The Rev. Anne Odin Heller (District Executive)

from the UUA Ministry and Professional Development Staff Group:

The Rev. Dr. John Weston (Ministerial Transitions Director)

Our thanks also to Mr. Keith Curtis, graphic artist of Fresno, California, who created and donated our Janus logo.

Introduction

When radical change is forced upon a congregation, often by the departure of a minister, the task is simple to name: it is to accept the change and move on to embrace the opportunities that change allows.

This, naturally, is more easily said than done. In the last decade or two, we have begun to take more seriously the specialized work required to shepherd these transitions in ways that yield the great promise they hold.

The Crystal Metaphor

An analogy from the physical sciences can help us understand the challenges involved. All the patterns, norms, and habits of a congregation are like salt in a sea of water. They are the real stuff of our lives together. It is a very concentrated solution, for our living together is very intense. It is so concentrated, that when a single, solid salt crystal is dropped into the fluid, most of the salt in solution “crystallizes out” all around it forming an interlocking and stable lattice structure of solid salt. John Weston offers the following four-part experiment.

PART ONE: Imagine a beaker containing a supersaturated solution of one of these salts. Then, drop into this solution a crystalline solid of the same compound. And *ching!* The contents of the entire beaker crystallize around this seed crystal. Now, the same chemical compound may crystallize in several different ways. The compound in the beaker takes on the shape of the seed crystal. Such, I would say, is the response of a congregation to a new minister when the match is good. Over time, the crystalline shape of the minister – primarily the shape of the minister’s relational style – has a profound influence on the shape and style either of the whole congregation or of the programs in the congregation for which the minister is responsible.

PART TWO: Once the crystalline structure in the beaker is fully formed, go in with a surgical saw and pliers and remove a seed crystal. What happens to the crystalline structure? Nothing! It has a hole in it, but otherwise, it is what it was. Drop a new seed crystal onto the crystalline structure, a crystal of the same compound but differently configured, what happens? Nothing! *Boink!* It bounces right off. This is what has happened to hundreds of ministers in Unitarian and Universalist and successor Unitarian Universalist congregations in the twentieth century alone.

PART THREE: In the second beaker there is a solvent. Pour this solvent onto the crystallized solid in the beaker. Apply warmth. Agitate gently. And observe as the solid dissolves once again into a supersaturated solution. How do we know that it is a supersaturated solution? Aha! Wait for Part Four.

PART FOUR: Now, take a new but differently configured crystal of the same salt that bounced off the larger solid in Part Two, and add it to the newly dissolved compound in the supersaturated solution. What happens this time?

Aha! A *new* crystalline structure forms, differently configured, having taken its shape from the new seed crystal.

What was that solvent used in Part Three? What is it that enables a fully formed crystalline structure to become fluid once more, yet allows it, as well, to reform around a new seed crystal? In churches, it is interim ministry! The interim minister's mission, purpose, and function in a congregation's life is to assist its lay leadership in becoming fluid once more, no longer crystallized around the departed minister's way of doing things. Not, it is to be emphasized, in order to re-crystallize around the interim minister, but rather to become capable of forming a new, beautiful, and as-yet-unimagined configuration with an as-yet-unknown seed crystal – the next called minister to come into long-term relationship with the congregation.

On a sunny morning in January, as the brain trust team pondered these matters, our working together reminded us that collaboration is the heart of church work. Though the interim minister is a key person in the work of freeing the systems and empowering the agents of healthy change, he or she can always rest easy in the sure knowledge that helping resources abound: the strength and power of the congregational leadership, the district staff and resources, and the UUA Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group, and the many experienced interim ministers in the UUA.

Last, but not least, the *Janus Workbook* is also a resource for interim ministers. It is a kit bag. It is a checklist. It is a fluid document, intended to adapt with use and evolve with experience. We hope that it will add to an understanding of the work that could, and wisely should, be accomplished.

Pacing and timing are critical during the interim year. Neither you the interim minister, nor they the congregation, can do it all. Use this workbook as a resource and a tool kit. The great talent is to use just the right activity, event, or process at just the right time. Use your District Executive as a sounding board. If the problem is in religious education and your district is fortunate enough to have an R.E. program consultant, consult with her or him. Above all, consult with the near fifty Accredited Interim Ministers (AIMs) and the AIMs in Training (AIMITs), most of whom will enthusiastically offer the fruits of their experience through mentoring or less formal relationships

Interim Year Developmental Goals

In the Alban Institute volume *Temporary Shepherds*, editor Roger Nicholson identifies the five developmental task that a congregation in the interim must accomplish if its successor ministry is to be effective.

- Claiming and honoring its past and healing its griefs and conflicts.
- Illuminating the congregation's unique identity, its strengths, its needs, and its challenges.
- Clarifying the multiple dimensions of leadership, both ordained and lay, and navigating the shifts in leadership that accompany times of transition.
- Renewing connections with available resources within and beyond the UUA.
- Enabling the congregation to renew its vision, strengthen its stewardship, prepare for new professional leadership, and engage its future with anticipation and zest.

More tersely, in the earlier Alban publication, *Critical Moment of Ministry*, Loren Mead identified these tasks as:

- Coming to terms with history.
- Discovering a new identity.
- Allowing needed leadership to emerge.
- Renewing denominational linkages.
- Committing to new directions in ministry.

These five tasks address the developmental challenges facing a congregation in transition. It is these congregational challenges that this *Janus Workbook* is designed to help you facilitate.

You will notice that these five have a chronological flavor as they are listed here, and you will find that sequence reflected in the materials here in the *Workbook*. But you will also discover that these goals interweave with each other in an ongoing tapestry of activity. In this tapestry will be woven the story of this uncommon time in each congregation's unique life.

The leadership is encouraged to continue to revisit these goals on occasion during the interim period. [Appendix A offers a tool for assessing progress]

A Word about Self-care

You may find yourself wondering how to find time to facilitate those interim tasks while carrying out the normal responsibilities of congregational ministry.

First, be aware that pursuing them will engage “program time” that a settled minister would be using in other ways. Second, be aware that you will not be developing the depth of pastoral and interpersonal relationships with members that a settled minister would establish (nor should you!). Third, some of your Sunday service preparation will likely be eased by building (no less freshly!) on themes you’ve pursued before, thus demanding less of the from-scratch research and reading that devours so many hours. And fourth, you cannot (and must not) play lone ranger: neither initiate nor rescue programs that would hence depend upon your successor for survival, no matter how worthy the cause. These are the congregation’s tasks, not yours. And finally, it is not your church; do not try to be their ideal minister. Instead, talk (often!) about what you are doing as an interim, what is engaging your attention and time, and why. This will not be ministry as usual, even for you.

Interim ministry offers us the rare opportunity to experience life in microcosm. We arrive as newborn to each new setting; we learn, we live, we give, we leave, and we release our hands and let go. This poses for us a profound discipline of spirit and intensifies the meaning of all the joys, the angst, and the challenges of interim life.

Expect to learn something new. Discern a growing edge for yourself as you diagnose what’s happening and pursue what you need in order to grow with it.

Above all, be who you are, non-anxiously. You are pre-fired, to be gone in a year (two at most). You have nothing to prove beyond showing yourself to be trustworthy, ethical, responsive, and real. These have more to do with *being* than *doing*. You do not need to live up to the beloved former pastor (do not even try), and where he or she was not beloved, you need not live him or her down. Indeed, an inherent gift you bring with you is your own self and style. You cannot be the same as your predecessor, nor a mirror opposite. You are not supposed to be.

Remember to have fun, during time-on as well as time-off. Include those activities that give you joy. When you do something that is difficult for you, reward yourself. Whenever things go awry, hold on to your center, stay open, and ponder why. Most often, it will not be about you.

Remember that interim work cannot be done well in isolation. Connect with local interfaith clergy. Learn of other interims in the area. Seek out a peer partner or support group or connect with a therapist or counselor for reality checking and self-care. Practice non-verbal avenues of renewal, and nurture yourself well.

Our rewards need to be discovered and cherished in the depth and the light of the moment, for we will not harvest the outcomes of all we give and do, nor ever be able to measure them. When we leave, we let them go.

Pre-Arrival (by Barbara Child, AIM)

I ask the President to have the Board appoint a **Transition Team** in the summer before I arrive. This should be a group of 5-7 people, none on the Board, all well known and respected members of the congregation, not representative of any ideological “factions.” Also, there should be no one on the Team who served on any Committee on Ministry that worked with the previous minister. I ask that such a COM disband. Its work is finished. If I discover when I get there that there are remnants of a COM who want to be involved in leadership during the interim period, I meet with them separately from the Transition Team and engage them as a study group to work towards the later creation of a COM along the lines described by Robert Latham in *Moving on from Church Folly Lane* (2006, pp 244-72).

Before I arrive, the Transition Team arranges my calendar for my first couple of weeks on site. I ask them to make individual appointments for me with every Board member, committee chair, staff member, and any other leader they think I should meet at the outset. They are not to schedule appointments during that time with resident complainers or people who just can't wait to meet me because they want to bend my ear about something or other. Genuine requests for pastoral conversation will come to me directly for scheduling once I get on site.

I ask the Transition Team to figure out what is the best way for me to get to know the congregants – picnic, potluck, series of coffees or dessert gatherings, whatever – all to happen and be done by the end of October.

Throughout the year, the Transition Team is my think tank. We meet monthly for me to get their sense of the pulse of the congregation. I want them to have read *Temporary Shepherds*, our “Bible” of interim ministry, before I get there so they can help me educate the congregation about the interim tasks and help make sure the congregation, and especially the leadership, is doing its interim work. It is common for the Transition Team to have a regular column in the newsletter in addition to mine for regularly reinforcing communication of key messages to the congregation. We take special care that no attempts at triangulation among the congregation (or individual congregants), the Team, and me succeed. The Transition Team needs not to function in any respect like the formerly common Ministerial Relations Committee.

Together we figure out what the congregation most needs as interim work and how best to do it. Often this turns into work on present identity, mission, and vision. Often this turns into devising workshops or other gatherings for this thoughtful work to happen among the congregants.

When it nears time for me to leave, I tell the Transition Team explicitly that they are in charge of making sure there is a suitable finale for my ministry there, a reception after Sunday service, or a dinner, etc., so that there is a proper good-bye and a sense that my ministry with the congregation is finished.

Please see the Transition Team start-up letter in Appendix T.

Arrival

The congregation will be gathering to meet you and to worship on the first several Sundays with one overwhelming concern in their hearts: *Are we going to be okay?* Convey *YES* with the quality of your presence. Help them both to feel and to know that they are in good, steady, strong, and safe hands. The shift in energy can be almost palpable during coffee hour as the congregation relaxes and comes to life.

Use the initial Sundays of your interim year to introduce yourself and to explain the interim program. Consider arriving in the pulpit on your first Sunday with a suitcase, unpacking it, and describing the meaning of each item [See *Appendix B*]. Instead of a suitcase, some interims arrive with a walking stick and ceremonially exchange it with the president for a set of church keys.

Remain sensitive as to emphasis. One colleague recounts: “I have had two interim search committees describe the suitcase ritual in scathing tones, implying that if I intended to do anything like that I could just keep heading on down that lonesome road. They were both in serious turmoil when the last interim did it, and they felt it was insensitive to their need to be a little reassured that the interim—while transient—was going to stay around until things settled down.”

The message is not that you’re a vagabond, but that you have arrived, and this is what you bring with you. The footloose character of interim ministry grows pre-eminent later, as your departure approaches. The common thread here is that the congregation wants and deserves someone they can count on. When you arrive, this is you. As they prepare to welcome their new minister, the natural necessity of your leaving must come to the fore (though they will not like it then, either).

Covenanting with the congregation that first Sunday may confirm your connection. This is one example, structured as a “litany of partnership.”

President: **May all who are members rise in body or spirit and enter into this covenant together with our interim minister:**

We welcome you as our partner in ministry this interim year, at the threshold of our brief journey together.

IM echoes this line in response.

We will use our hands and hearts, our vision and voices, to heal and not to harm this beloved community through this time of transition.

IM echoes this line in response.

We will dare to disagree agreeably with you, to dream what we may become, and to freely venture the untried; for next year we shall part.

IM echoes this line in response.

We will share our portions of truth with you, and listen deeply and learn, that we may grow in wisdom and vision and understanding.

IM echoes this line in response.

President: ***In this brief and precious time —***

***ALL: May we be a blessing to each other;
and together, be a blessing to the world.***