

Standing in the Present

When you arrived at the congregation, you looked around. You listened. You may even have (appropriately) pushed conversations with both congregation and its leadership. You began to know this congregation-in-transition in a variety of ways. You began to experience their congregational identity. You have detected an elephant or two, maybe more, in their living room. You have met and earned the trust of their movers and shakers. You have shared what you have learned with them and invited them to share it with one another. Together, you have lifted up congregational traditions, heroes and heroines, and the events that were central to their honorable past.

Now that you have been informed by the past, it is time to assess the present and catalyze change.

Interim as Midwife

It is time to take a second look at the interim year developmental goals (page 3) and review the original priorities assigned to them by the board. It is time to engage the leadership in shaping and fulfilling the direction of the goals for the year. Just as with life, you cannot go every which way at once. Choices now need now to be made.

You might devote a board meeting to do this in deep time, in day-long retreat, in an interim ministry start-up workshop [*Appendix M*], or in a diagnostic leap day [*Appendix N*].

Consider initiating a series of community conversations focused on foundational questions, grounded in the present, and engendering energy and momentum to carry the congregation forward. (Barbara Child's *Conversations in Community*, found in the Addenda, is a detailed example.)

The congregation sets priorities for the interim year by listening to each other and reflecting together, on the basis of shared experiences. You, as interim, are there as a mid-wife. You are not going to bear and care for the baby; they are. But, you can teach them how to push and how to pant and encourage them every step of the way. The church is *their* child, *their* family, *their* home.

The parents, those who will be nurturing the new life of the congregation, will be its own leaders, and they will be in transition, too. *Appendix L* is a tool for a leadership census, and it will yield solid clues and cues about where leadership may be languishing or in need of renewal.

The more people involved in setting priorities and trailblazing a future, the more likely they all are to accept responsibility and rightful praise for the resulting outcomes. Your job is to help them do that, because you cannot do it for them! You *can* preach on this, teach about it, and celebrate with them every step of the way.

Using Collected Facts and History

After you have looked over all the large amount of information that you have compiled (including the data, the papers, the reports, and the proceedings), trends and goal-directions will begin to emerge.

You may find the following:

- **Everyone basically agrees on the goals.** This makes good sailing weather for a “Diagnostic Leap” workshop [Appendix N], with you as the facilitator. You will be able to jumpstart the chosen goals that same day.
- **There are no goals, but either ennui or chaos.** This situation is ripe for a “Diagnostic Leap” workshop, and you can successfully facilitate it.
- **There are contrasting or conflicting goals.** This is similar to a “no goal” situation, but touchier. Seek an outside facilitator to lead it, with you participating judiciously so that you do not become associated with either “side” or “position”. Call on your district office for recommendations.
- **The congregation’s self-perception of its situation and needs differs from your own.** When this is the case, consult in depth with the president, the Committee on Ministry, the District Executive, other colleagues, and mentors. Review the cues and clues. Then seek viable choices.

Realize that your desired goals for the congregation, no matter how wise or insightful, are not achievable without a congregational buy-in. Aim for task-specific goals [p. 38] and nuts-and-bolts goals [p. 39] that will yield evident, self-revelatory successes that can pave the path to a bright future for the congregation.

Priorities and Buy-in

The next step, after a Diagnostic Leap workshop, is to correlate those high ranking needs with the interim year developmental tasks [p. 3] and the priorities that were chosen by the leadership when you were hired. Now is the time to work together to re-decide the directions in which you and the congregation will focus energy and effort for the balance of the interim period.

Keep it realistic. Do not let joy drain away.

Hold in everyone's awareness that this is a mutual endeavor. Begin now, enlisting program leaders in this good work, delegating chosen goals to likely leaders, task teams, and committees and immediately engage them in developing timelines and action steps. Ask for action plan reports at the next month's board meeting.

Post timelines and action steps, once adopted, in a visible spot. Highlight each accomplishment as it happens and then congratulate and celebrate each completion.

Task-specific Goals

The following are some authentically *task specific* goals:

- Bylaw revisions which are overdue (for specific sections only; do not tackle total bylaw review during an interim).
- A building audit [*Churchworks*, pp. 213-215], if the property is bedraggled, run-down, or neglected.
- A maintenance manual [*Churchworks*, pp. 18-19] when either no one or only one or two people know and understand the workings of the building.
- A policies and procedures binder [*Churchworks* p. 16].
- Liturgy renewal. (Do this one with the Worship Committee and be sure to get feedback from the congregation, as it may not be truly task specific). You will want to include everyone who is relevant to this process, such as the music director and the religious educator.
- Singing! Do not succumb to any myth that the congregation cannot sing.
- Leadership training.
- Leadership Council gatherings: bi-monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually.
- Stewardship training.
- A congregational web-site, linked to the district and the UUA.
- A lay pastoral care team.
- A personnel policy manual, which is essential in a mid-size church [*Churchworks* p.17].
- Safe Congregation program, process, and/or policies.
- A Covenant of Right Relations [*see Appendix O*].
- Policy and procedures for restraining disruptive persons and, if necessary, discontinuing membership.

Nuts and Bolts Goals

There are the “nuts and bolts” tasks that committees or task forces can readily take upon themselves. Get a (usually small) team together and let them have at it. Get board buy-in for unfunded projects or new initiatives. (However, if committees require board approval for decisions within their charge, ask why.)

The following are some “nuts and bolts” goals:

- A member gifts (*skills and interests*) resource bank [*Appendix P offers a sample*].
- Updated job descriptions.
- Updated committee charges.
- A committee binder, accessible to all, that contains committee meeting minutes for the current year. Archive them at year’s end and begin a new set. [*See Appendix Q for a form to simplify note taking for committees that resist keeping minutes. One congregation calls it a “Minute Magician.” By the time a congregation approaches program-size, it should be adopting as a general principle that “if there’s no record of it, it didn’t happen”*]
- A descriptive brochure introducing the congregation to newcomers.
- A “We give you the *UUWorld*” magazine rack where members can contribute once-read copies for newcomers and guests.
- Handsome name tags – and a rack for them.
- A member photo directory, or a “rogues gallery” photo wall of members.
- An up-to-the-moment congregational calendar listing upcoming events, posted in a spot where people can refer to it when planning ahead. (Have a supply of building use reservation forms handy there.)
- Education of and advocacy for district and UUA involvement. Know district resources and expertise and educate the board and key leaders about what is available.

Using Interim Ministry Evaluation as a Model

Since interim ministers both give and receive evaluations regularly, we are in prime position to model doing it well. Take hold of this opportunity. Any congregation with a conflicted history will be wary of the prospect and will need to see how a healthy, goal-oriented, review process can work and benefit everyone.

Furthermore, interim ministers have an opportunity to educate congregations in the contextual model of ministerial evaluation through the evaluation of the interim ministry of the congregation as well as its clergy. The packet, *Assessing our Leadership*, is available on-line as an appendix to [In the Interim](#) at <http://www.uua.org/ministry/assessing.pdf>. In addition, the comprehensive *Congregational Self Assessment* packet is available at <http://www.uua.org/promise/assessment>.

Invite the congregation to view evaluation as a wellness tool, not as a problem solver.

Personnel

This subject tends to be difficult for most clergy, who typically have little or no training and limited experience in personnel administration. Yet the existence of fair and equitable personnel policies and practices is not only an important element in assuring a smooth transition for the new settled minister, but it is also a necessary component of practicing right relations within the church family.

If a Personnel Manual exists, ask the personnel committee (or a board task team, if such a committee does not exist) to review it to assure that it is up to date. If no personnel policies exist, ask the board to appoint a personnel task force to create them. Policies should reflect a commitment to fair and equitable treatment of all staff; specify employment and dismissal procedures, expected work hours, vacation, sick leave, comp time, and insurance coverage; provide for supervision, annual evaluation, and an appeals process; detail how salary and wages are paid and how work related expenses are reimbursed; and require a periodic policy review. All personnel (paid and volunteer, but at the very least, paid personnel) should have a job description defining the position, its objectives, its requirements [*see Appendix R*], and a letter of contract which specifies terms of employment. A sample Personnel Policy Manual for religious organizations is available on the UUA website, at www.uua.org/programs/ministry/finances/personnel_policy_manual.pdf. The District Executive may also be of assistance. In addition, ask the board to call upon the UUA compensation consultant in your district for assistance in reviewing the church's salary structure.

Be sure that all staff have had an evaluation sometime during your interim period and that the results of those evaluations are kept where the incoming minister will be able to easily access them. Make your own assessment of what staff loyalties are in regard to the former minister and leave a summary of your findings in a confidential file for the next minister.

If your assessment leads you to believe that a staff member's employment should be terminated for the health of the congregation, then bring that matter to the board and do it or see that it is done (whichever is more appropriate). The interim minister must be willing to take the heat for initiating the termination of an employee who should be let go before the settled minister arrives. At the same time, you must take care not to create the impression that the governing board may abdicate sticky situations to the ordained minister.

If an employee termination occurs, care must be taken to reassure remaining staff members that their work is an important and valued contribution to the ongoing life of the congregation.

Collegial Connections

We do not practice ministry alone. All of us depend on the creative energy, emotional support, and fellowship of our colleagues. Reach out for it.

Your support is not the task of the congregation, alone. It is vital that the congregation be supportive, but your mainstay will consist of your life partner, family, friends, and, often most useful, your colleagues. It is well if church members understand this, so that they may be both forgiving and unburdened.

Mark Morrison-Reed's Berry Street Essay, "After Running Through the Thistles the Hard Part Begins," is useful to reread and to share with the leadership in order to help them further understand the unique dynamics of parish ministry. (You can access it, along with the responses by Leon Hopper and Margaret Keip, on the settlement website at <http://www.uua.org/ministry/settlement/berry180.html>)

Uplift ministry. Speak of colleagues often. Quote their work. Publicize the fact that you attend local clergy gatherings and UUMA chapter events.

If you are in a multi-staff situation, seek opportunities to publicly support your colleagues on-site. Collaborate with them on joint services and endeavors. Model cooperative leadership. Support their transition into relationship with the new minister soon to arrive.

Speak of the support you receive from the UUA Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group, the district leadership, the UUMA, and interim ministry colleagues. Tell stories of connections. Make evident that, although their former minister no longer serves them, they too are surrounded and held up by a host of colleagues and denominational resources.

Where there has been conflict and a negotiated resignation these issues are more complicated, since many may see collegial support as a threat to congregational autonomy or even good ministry. Be sensitive to these dynamics but do not fall prey to the temptation to side with the winners of the conflict by tacit condemnation of the departed colleague. It is a tightrope walk to convey the message that we support one another, yet demand excellence from one another, too.

It may be wise, depending on circumstances, to reach out to the resigned colleague, making clear to the church that you have done so, not because you side with the colleague in the morass of the conflict, but because he or she is a hurting human being and needs to be ministered to. Urge the UUMA chapter to reach out, as well, and let congregants know that this is happening, both as a way of evidencing collegial compassion and to relieve the congregation of some of the burden of hurting a person so important to them for the sake of the institutional health of their church.

Ask the hard questions about the part the church family system has played in the failure of a ministry, but also make clear that we do not claim perfection for our

colleagues or for ourselves. Remind them that the search committee is doing all it can to understand what went wrong and to find a new minister with characteristics likely to form a better fit with the congregation as it is now.

Speak both honestly and carefully to colleagues about the way your congregation "treats its ministers," but be on guard and fight against malicious gossip among colleagues against either the congregation or the former minister. Reassure the congregational leadership that you attend to these things faithfully.

Take conscientious care of your support systems. Remember, especially, to care for your life partner. Spouse and family share some of the adventure of this vagabond life, but bear far more than a fair share of its stresses. Supportive connections for them are vital, also, along with joy and time with you.

Supporting the Search

In immortal words from the *Settlement Handbook*:

The essence of the interim year is transition, and with transition comes change. It is crucial to the success of the next called ministry that the ministerial search committee represent the congregation as it is becoming rather than the congregation as it was. Thus the importance to the search committee of the interim minister's insight into the congregation, and of full and ongoing communication between the committee and the interim minister. **Interim ministers do not, however, participate directly in the life of the search committee**, the reading of Ministerial Records and ministers' packets, or the review of pre-candidates, nor will they respond to committee questions about potential candidates.

Interim ministers will be eager to assist the search committee by:

- assisting the MSR in arranging an effective forum for presentation.
- bringing congregational concerns to the notice of the search committee.
- coaching the search committee on communications with the congregation.
- offering response to the committee's Congregational Record and ministerial and congregational profiles.
- writing a "Letter from the Interim Minister" for the search packet.
- participating in a mock interview with the search committee or acting as process observer in such an interview with a neighboring minister.
- witnessing for a realistic ministerial agreement and fair compensation.

It is of the essence of an interim minister's work that a congregation's vision of the possibilities of ministry be expanded, and its understanding of the minister-congregation relationship deepened. Even if the interim minister were never to bring up these topics explicitly—a most unlikely occurrence!—the interim's presence alone would bring them to the surface. Thus the interim minister will keep the ministerial pot stirring, more with the congregation as a whole than with the committee in particular.

The *Settlement Handbook* goes on to note that we may wish to preach on the nature and role of ministry as candidating week approaches. It states that we will withdraw when that week arrives, available for pastoral emergencies but otherwise out of sight. If you plan to be too far away, then arrange for coverage by pastoral care team members, for example, and/or a colleague on call. Confer with the candidate first. Let them know what is available and what is possible and determine what role they prefer to play in such an event.

Congregational Nurturance

- Use every opportunity to build trust. Be intentionally responsive. Return calls and e-mails promptly.
- Set your agenda aside and "actively listen" when members come in to talk. If you can really hear what is going on in their lives, but not get embroiled in their controversy, you will be creating room for their hurt, grief, and loss while building trust at the same time.
- Be sure that pastoral care of members is in place, such as phone calls to the housebound, cards and flowers, hospital visits, home visits, etc. This is a fertile field for growing lay ministry.
- Workshops on listening skills, team building, and conflict prevention may be helpful. Contact your District Office and/or conflict management team to see what they may offer.
- Congregational Covenants of Right Relations and the process of creating them are invaluable trust-building tools.
- If the climate is trust-resistant, if there are pockets of secrecy, look for misconduct in the congregation's history. Seek expert guidance in dealing with it now, lest it haunt the future.
- Social interactions help people relax and knit relationships that sustain them through transitions in ministry. [Check out *Churchworks*, pp. 169 and following]
- Shared work also builds community. Congregants who take on significant work and successfully accomplish it become bonded. With your leadership, look around. What begs to be done? Have a painting party, gardening party, or give the building a Zen cleaning day, and then celebrate the accomplishment.
- Covenant groups (also called small-group ministry, chalice circles, or the meta-church model) have a track record of success in knitting relationships, deepening members' lives, and sustaining growth. (*Covenant Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time* by Rev. Robert L. Hill is available at the UUA Bookstore, or by mail from the UU Southwest District. In addition, the Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network publishes a periodic newsletter by e-mail. To subscribe, go to <http://smallgroupministry.net/cgnews/>.) Do not, however, think you can start a covenant group single-handedly, or in the space of ten months! Detailed planning and tenacious implementation are required!
- Is there distance felt between the congregation and the board (typically expressed in "them" language)? (This commonly happens when the congregation and the board are under stress.) Does the board have communication channels in place? Are they working? Is the board micro-managing the decisions of staff members, program teams, and committee

chairs? Is this causing the need for decisions be made twice? Does congregational history reveal why?

- Pay caring attention to the board, its energy level, its issues, its hurts, and its need for self care. Notice where its time goes. Is the board using itself optimally and well? What would that mean to them?
- Members need to be encouraged in self-care, too. Remember, if folks are tired, it is not about you. Especially, if they have been through conflict, chances are they have wrung themselves out. A shift in activity may feed and renew them. Offer “volunteer career” counsel and guidance.
- Hold up the gifts of newer members to the lay leaders and to the nominating committee. Remind the congregation of each other’s gifts and the potential that is to be found in its midst.
- When leaders are entrenched in positions that have become obligations, draining their creativity, humor, and zest, they may fear quitting because they feel indispensable. Talk about leadership sabbaticals, soul care, and rest and renewal time. Everyone needs it. [*Appendix L will reveal much.*]
- Allow committees and programs to take sabbaticals, too. If a task is languishing because no one wants to do it, dare to let it go undone. This is always a better option than breaking someone’s arm, forcing them into it. Allow it to wait for the right person or to become too important for people to let it go begging. Many congregations are “over-committed”. A church exists for its *people*, not its programs.
- Acknowledge an empty post, a languishing program as a fact, but not a failure. It may be that the task, as designed, was so unrewarding or unmanageable that no alert person would want it, and that is worth a second look. The larger fact remains that leadership is always in stretch and prone to turnover during times of transition, and some of a congregation’s most committed members are being diverted into the search process. Energize what *is* happening.

At church, if nowhere else in a person’s life, commitments should nurture the person undertaking them. Develop congregational leadership based on *gifts*, that which the person enjoys and is fed by, not by what task you may or may not want them to do.

Offer opportunities. Extend invitations. Model how to hear and honor people when they say “No”.

From a systems view, reflect on the balance between stability and change whenever opportunity arises. Help diminish the fear. William Bridges’ book, *Transitions*, is a fine resource.

The Committee on Ministry

Examine its current potential. You have an opportunity to educate and build relationships between the COM and the congregation.

Consider the following:

- What has been the traditional role of a COM at this congregation?
- How much is the COM a Ministerial Relations Committee warmed over?
- How much of it consists of “care of the minister”?
- How much of it was a “triangulation committee”?
- What is the congregation’s charge to the COM?
- Is the COM educating the congregation about ministry?
- Is the COM doing deep listening and passing truth and insight on to you?
- Should there be some change in membership on the COM?
- Can you help the COM serve you well by supporting and reflecting on developmental tasks?

If there is no Committee on Ministry, or if it is in hiatus between settlements, gather together an Interim Transition Team. Acquaint them with the dimensions of interim ministry and its developmental goals. Consult with them about any puzzlements or difficulties you are encountering. Glean their wisdom and knowledge of the congregation. Let them advise you. View them as a lifeline and invite their honesty, but do not let them protect you from tough issues under the guise of support. Candid feedback *is* support. We need every insight that persons of perception and courage can offer us.

Some congregations are now investing their Committees on Ministry with responsibility (and training) to address and mediate the interpersonal conflicts and distresses that arise in the course of congregational life. Some kind of an ombuds structure, such as this, is vital to sustaining a behavioral covenant [*such as the Covenant of Right Relations in Appendix O*].

Conflict Culture Resistance

If members are not "nice" to one another or if they are sniping or putting others down, consider a Congregational Covenant of Right Relations or a Beloved Community [refer to Appendix O and Gil Rendle's work in the Bibliography]. Call your district office if you think it would be better to use a facilitator than for you to facilitate.

- Challenge the gossip culture. Develop a "non-triangulation" covenant with lay leaders. Agree that the congregational leadership will talk *to* people and not *about* them. Create a role play opportunity to give them practice. Tell complainants that you do not keep secrets. Encourage them to always speak with each other and offer to accompany them if they are uneasy about talking directly to the person distressing them. [See Appendix S]
- Interpersonal anger and anguish will do perpetual damage if systemic norms (unspoken rules) deny the presence of conflict altogether or disallow healthy responses. The congregation and leadership can be invited to identify the norms in the system, to consider which ones are healthy and good to keep, and to replace unhealthy ones with new norms. [Ref: Gil Rendle, Behavioral Covenants in Congregations, ch.4]
- If there is no feedback or ombuds structure in place for the resolution of interpersonal stress and conflict in the congregation, encourage a process to create one. (Some congregations charge a Committee on Ministry with this role, as noted on page 47.)
- If there are people in your congregation who keep conflict alive, i.e. toxic people, talk with them directly about the effect they have on others. Encourage them to find outside resources to help themselves and support them in reviewing and discharging their concerns.
- Help the leadership understand the "tyranny of the minority" and how toxic people can rule an agenda. Talk with them about seeking support and contact the District Executive.

Conflict management skills are invaluable. Educate the board about district conflict management resources. Use them, for training as well as for intervention. A congregation should not try to manage conflict that is escalating without help, nor should you.