

Looking Forward

A congregation in transition – indeed, every congregation – needs solid grounding in order to move confidently and purposefully into the future. Having let go or said good-bye to anger and grief, having reviewed and understood their history, and having assessed their needs and priorities, they are ready to look forward.

Perhaps “conversations in community” are already leading the way [*see Adenda*].

What about the congregation’s covenant, vision, and mission? Are these in place? Do folks know the value and function of each of these in congregational life?

The following is an interesting exercise for you and the board which you may want to try, perhaps at a board retreat. First, pass out three pieces of paper to each person. Second, ask them, without referring to any resources or each other to do the following:

- Write their congregational mission statement.
- Draw an organizational chart of the congregation.
- Diagram the congregation’s decision-making process.

Have them do one task at a time and talk about each one when they have finished. What are they discovering about systemic dynamics that are in need of awareness or attention?

Covenant, Vision, and Mission

Covenant: A congregational covenant describes a common understanding (explicit or implicit) of how the congregation will be together. According to *Churchworks*, “A covenant is about values, what the congregation values most highly and the promises it makes together about how its members will act with one another and with the world.”

One kind of covenant may be found in the liturgy of a congregation, as part of the order of service. The familiar and loved unison reading, “*Love is the spirit of this church...*” (with all its many renditions) is such a covenant.

A Congregational Covenant of Right Relations is an explicit behavioral covenant in which the members of the congregation agree on how they will interact with one another, their minister, staff, board, and the community. [See Appendix O]

Vision: A congregational vision answers several questions:

- What are our dreams?
- What do we want to become?
- How do we see ourselves and our future?

Ask yourself, and the leadership:

- Does this congregation have a joyful and exuberant sense of the possibilities for its future?
- Are they full of anticipation and zest to engage that future?

If they are not, or if they are unfocused in their vision for the future, address this need with the board. Suggest the “Vision Workshop” model [*Churchworks* p.69] or contact your District Executive about identifying a facilitator to come and do this with the congregation.

Either way, you should *not* be a participant. It is their congregation and their future. Trust them to develop it. Do not lead them in this!

Mission: According to the governance expert John Carver, the “ends” or mission of an organization is the particulars the organization wants to accomplish in the world and those who it wants to serve. If your board and church leadership cannot state the congregation’s mission without reading it, chances are it is unfocused, too long, unclear, or all three. A living mission statement is specific and *short!* Look over mission statements from other churches and non-profit organizations. For example, All Souls, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a congregation with over 1400 certified members, wrote an easy to learn, hard to forget, mission statement called *To civilize Tulsa*. It leaves little doubt about what they want to do and with whom they want to do it!

If a congregation has stalled on a mission statement, an interim may be a fine time to do one. You can facilitate it yourself. (There is a process described in *Churchworks*, p.72.) Or you contact your District Executive to locate a facilitator.

When clearly developed, the **covenant**, **vision**, and **mission** of a congregation provide firm ground for moving confidently forward into the future.

Strategic and Long-range Plans

Planning during an interim period is appropriately short-range, for this time of transition has its own challenges to meet. If the congregation has a current strategic plan in place, follow it as it fits the present situation.

If the gleam has returned to their eyes by the conclusion of the interim period, they will be ready to co-create their new future.

Long-term planning is most faithfully done with a long-term partner.

Stewardship as Spiritual Practice

If scarcity is their work mode, help your congregation develop a “theology of abundance.” Fine resources are available for this task, and more are being created as churches challenge America’s consumer culture. [See *bibliography*]

The scarcity mode resorts to the use of congregational needs, member obligation, and personal guilt as motivations for giving. This does not nurture health in a congregation. Teach canvass planners that people give to *vision*.

Initiate the next giant step with the congregation: preach and practice generosity as a spiritual value.

Use “give until it feels *good*” as a byword. Ask new members to pledge an amount that helps them feel that this congregation is theirs.

This paradigm shift will not come to harvest in your brief tenure, but there is no better time than now to sow the seeds.

Attend to these tasks of basic stewardship work in the meanwhile:

- Propose program budgeting to better educate the congregation about the value of its resources and how they are employed. [ref: Jerry King’s *Budgets With a Mission*]
- Get folks started early on canvass planning. When one pledge drive concludes, planning for the next one should begin. Urge support of fundraising leadership training. Join with other congregations in the area to do training jointly. Ask the district to sponsor a stewardship conference and bring in an expert from the UUA Office of Congregational Fundraising to lead it.
- Dare to undress taboos around money, such as the idea that money or finances are not spoken of. Money is “green time,” to be received with gratitude, as one receives other gifts of love and dedication, and then used to grow good things.

Shared Ministry Teamwork

Writing ministry “large,” as the mission of the whole congregation, is transforming clergy work in the ecumenical world. As clergy are called to serve, we assist and motivate those to respond to their call by means of gift-centered invitations to involvement and with leadership recruiting. To whatever extent shared ministry is already in place, you will likely find the congregation stronger and more capable and, thus, your work more buoyant during your interim tenure.

Shared ministry is taking focused shape in many UU congregations in the form of lay ministry teams engaging with their clergy in several realms of church life. This has occurred in the following ways:

Worship Associates: These teams have caught fire in UU congregations. Many clergy now select and train teams of lay leaders to share in the presentation and, often, creation of the worship services. If there is such a program in place, you will have a cadre of liturgical partners awaiting. They can cue you about worship norms, provide guidance, and support you in undertaking alternatives; both of which you will need! You can hardly escape introducing changes to the order of service; nor should you try, for two key reasons. First, you must settle into a worship that is compatible to you; this is essential, as people will intuit your discomfort if you find the style uncomfortable. Second, changes give people practice in a realm where it will very soon occur again. If no worship partner program is in place, look for good oral readers, confident public speakers, and lively storytellers to involve in services with you.

Pastoral Care Teams: These are a widely spreading phenomenon and incredibly valuable. Even if relatively untrained, lay pastoral caregivers offer basic ministry that members who know and love each other can uniquely provide. Initiating some form of pastoral care partnership if none exists is a great gift to members, the incoming minister, and to yourself, as well. This is especially true, given the inescapable limitations that transience imposes on pastoral relationships. In introducing this idea, it is useful to acquaint lay leadership with models that are in place in nearby congregations. Colleagues and the District Office are only an email or phone call away and can be valuable resources in this endeavor.

Social Justice Advocates: These are still relatively uncommon. Such a program serves to strengthen the prophetic advocacy and community mission work of the church, integrate it within congregational life, enhance congregational integrity, and increase congregational accountability. Empowerment, linked with accountability and involvement, is a key theme which will strengthen social action endeavors with or without a formal team structure.

If the congregation is eager to establish any of these as formally structured and trained teams, you should connect the key leaders with those thriving programs already in place in your district and lend your active aid and guidance. But be wary, very wary, of imposing a design that would be your own ideal; seek to keep it basic and simple, with lots of flex for the new minister to tailor into a good fit.

Saying Good-bye

Congregations often get truly attached to their interim ministers. Think about closure: in what ways can you help them let go and say goodbye to you? A good internal preparation for the interim minister can be found by reviewing Edwin Friedman's chapter on leaving in *Generation to Generation*.

Plan a longer time for closure than you think you will need. All the things you thought you had plenty of time to do or say are now suddenly due.

Empower them throw a proper farewell party for you. This could take the form of a fancy tea or maybe a "Friars club"-style roast, if your relationship with the congregation has been especially warm and candid. One interim, serving a congregation too sobered by death to envision a party, staged one so she could say goodbye to *them*, and it lifted everyone's spirits. (She intended to underwrite the costs herself, but they were covered by grateful contributors.)

One colleague asked the COM to schedule and/or sponsor a potluck or catered dinner billed as a *completion conversation*. This was an opportunity for anyone in the congregation to ask him questions or offer a farewell sentiment. According to him, this event is sometimes like a testimonial dinner and other times a bit like a Berkeley City Council meeting. It becomes whatever the congregation needs it to be.

Connect with people, especially those with whom you have had problems. Apologize for your mistakes (from the pulpit) to the congregation, and privately to individuals. Consider exit interviews with key leaders and the "wise ones" of the congregation.

You might schedule some drop-in times at the church or at a restaurant. This would provide a time when congregants can come by to share thoughts they have not previously had the opportunity to express. Another idea is to put up a graffiti wall. This is a big, long piece of butcher paper headlined with the title, "Things I've Wanted to Say to the Interim Minister, But Haven't." Provide colorful markers with which the congregants can express themselves.

Your closing sermons offer unparalleled opportunities which include:

- **Reflecting on lessons learned together:** How they have grown in confidence and health as a congregation. How you have grown as an interim minister. Own the mistakes you have made. Humanize ministry. Let them know that if they welcome their new minister half as warmly as they have you, they are in for a joyful time.
- **Reflecting the unique identity of the congregation:** Tell how all organizations, groups, or families (*a la* family systems theory) struggle with issues of one kind or another. That does not make them good or bad, right or wrong, just human. Recap what you have discovered, about them and with them, during your time together. You might recap highlights of the history they earlier shared, celebrate the positives, and acknowledge what still awaits their attention. Encourage them to

look at negatives as opportunities at their growing edge. The goal is to encourage them to accept their shadow side, celebrate their gifts, and recognize you can not have one without the other, as both are inalienable parts of the human package.

- **Focusing on shared ministry:** If this is the chosen style of the congregation, invite members to identify their gifts, envision their active participation in the congregation's future, and anticipate their own partnership with the new minister.

You will be saying goodbye, too. This is the time of letting go. You began to prepare for it, even as you arrived. If you unpacked a suitcase in your first service, it was with implicit awareness that you would be packing it up again as you leave. If you handed a walking stick to the president as she handed you church keys on your first Sunday, then your last Sunday is the time that you each return these items to each other. Waive to them with your re-acquired stick, speak words of commissioning to the congregation, accept a bouquet of flowers or other collective gift, and do an after-service receiving line as final act.

Keep the reality that you will be leaving alive in congregational consciousness throughout the year. Use every appropriate opportunity to say so, however subtly. Step up the frequency and specificity as your departure grows near, however kindly. There will be resistance. You may experience resistance within yourself, as well, and it may break out when you are unaware. (Watch out for saying "we" when referring to the congregation. Beware of this all year.) Prepare them to be independent of you.

Always identify yourself as interim minister: in self-introduction, in print, on your calling card, on voicemail, on your nametag, in the newsletter, and on the order of service. Everywhere your name is linked with the congregation, you should use the designation of interim minister.

Expect that members will find opportunities to tell you that they wish you could stay. It is well to keep in mind, once again, that largely it is not about you. This is not to say that their affection for you is any less genuine, simply that in unsettled times, people hunger for stability. No matter how poor a match you would be, there will be members who want you to stay. One proven response to such longings is simply to say "That's not the plan." It seems to offer the ease that extended explanations do not.

People ask whether leaving good friends behind after a year together is not painful. One seasoned interim offers this wise response. "In the truest sense, we never leave friends. Friends remain friends wherever we may be. And it is essential that I say goodbye so that you may say hello to your settled minister, who will become an integral part of your lives." As another colleague observes, learning to love within boundaries is part of growing up.

Leaving is the always the hard part, but your departure is what makes the benefits of interim time possible. Even as you prepare to leave, new opportunities are beckoning you and the congregation onward, on forking paths. Let your own enthusiasm for what lies ahead, for both you and the congregation, shine

transparent.

Saying Hello to the New Minister

What fun! You can help the congregation plot how they will welcome and embrace their newly settled minister. Share this list of ideas with them, and help them extend open arms. Some possibilities the congregation might consider include:

- Making sure that the minister's office is spiffy clean, windows included, and adorned with a bouquet of flowers on arrival day.
- Leaving a "follow-up" file: 12 file folders, one for each month, with a list inside of what occurs in congregational life during that month. Include birthdays of members, especially board members and staff. Drop a copy of the annual calendar into the arrival month folder. Tuck in flyers for concerts, dances, and community events.
- If the congregation has no maintenance manual, create a map of the building, marking where to find light switches, keys, electric breaker panel, main water valve, etc. If there *is* such a manual, leave a copy on the desk. Also, leave a board manual, personnel policy manual, policies and procedures binder, etc.
- Add a personal letter from one or more chosen key leaders, welcoming the new minister and expressing how glad the congregation is that they are coming.
- Gather a team of members together to help the new minister and family unpack.
- Organize food for the first week: casseroles, cookies, fruit, etc.
- Offer a guided tour of the town. Or perhaps a bookstore tour? A restaurant tour? A hiking, biking or boating tour?
- Deliver a luscious breakfast to their lodging the first morning, such as fresh fruit, coffee latte, and delectable rolls from a favorite local bakery!
- Discover what the new minister and family will need or delight in (e.g. auto repair shop, bagel bakery, chiropractor, biking trails, etc.), and compile referral lists of member favorites.

What you, as departing colleague, can do personally

Phone an early welcome! Take the chance to confer with the incoming minister and learn what groundwork he or she wishes you to lay.

Alert the local ministerial association and your UUMA chapter to their new colleague's arrival.

Encourage the worship committee and board to invite the District Executive to come preach on clergy care and feeding on a date between your departure and the new minister's arrival.

Leave a survival kit behind, supplementing what the administrator and lay leadership will provide, so that these bases are covered as much as possible:

- Membership list
- Photo directory of most recent vintage
- By-laws, policies (building use, weddings, memorial funds, etc.)
procedures manual, board manual, etc.
- Personnel manual, job descriptions, and staff contracts
- Board and congregational meeting minutes and reports
- Annual reports of the past three years
- Budget and financial reports; stewardship history
- Newsletters of the past year
- Keys
- Calendar of events
- Sunday service procedures, orders of service
- List of hymns familiar to the congregation
- Sunday attendance figures
- List of committees and leaders
- Maps (and notes you have of directions to members' homes)
- Instructions for church systems (security, computer, lights, heating,
etc.)
- Church history and traditions
- Community resources
- Collegial contacts
- List of places where the church does business
- Referrals
- Current information, such as members in need
- Leave a clean study, with neat and clear files

The Former Minister Who Stays

Here we must say that it is often very difficult for both the former minister and his/her spouse to remain in the area, separate from the congregation, and *not* feel cut off. Anticipating this, many retiring clergy make relocation part of their retirement plans. Some ministers do not, and it is both cruel and unrealistic to expect them, literally or figuratively, to “get out of Dodge.”

In finding a role for the retired minister and spouse, it is important to act with compassion, honesty, kindness, and care, and to stay in dialogue. The congregation and the departing minister will both be the better for it, as will the soul of the interim who will one day be departing as well.

When the former minister and spouse remain in the area, their role and memory in the congregation must be the most positive possible. Ideally, their plans have been discussed with the church leadership during the minister’s final year. Adding a UUMA good officer or District staff member to the conversation may be very helpful in assisting minister, spouse, and congregation in thinking out what the new relationship may look and feel like. If the minister and spouse have spun much of their social life from congregational relationships, this shift will be particularly painful. The spouse, in particular, may *not* feel bound by UUMA guidelines and may feel that no one is in a position to dictate how and with whom he or she may socialize.

The best approach in this situation is to couch the conversation in two parts:

- What is in the congregation’s best interest?
- What will best meet the needs of the former minister and spouse?

When the prior minister and/or spouse continue to relate with the congregation, deep attention needs to be given to making this relationship healthy. Recommend that the leadership undertake a covenanting process between the congregation, the former minister, and the called minister upon his or her arrival. Especially if former clergy have *emeritus* status, such covenants should be deemed a matter of course.

Another step may be helpful as well: the creation of a confidential committee to maintain a lifeline of care and communication with the former pastor. Would he or she welcome that? Consider including the spouse of the emeritus as well. Often spouses are overlooked or excluded, yet they may play a significant role in the dynamics of the emeritus relationship with the congregation.

Grief over leaving may play out in peculiar forms for the departing clergy and family, just as it does for the congregation. They may find themselves thinking and doing and saying things out of grief, guilt, loss, or felt mistreatment that they would never entertain if not in pain, yet the venues that are available to the congregation for healing are not open to them.

Other dynamics may be at work, which have the capacity to render the relationship between former clergy and congregation even more difficult. Colleague David Boyer quotes a savvy insight: "A good scapegoat is nearly as welcome as a solution to the problem." (And less effort.) Clergy rather often fill the role of scapegoat, and interims can often find themselves having to field recriminations targeting colleagues that have preceded them. In part, it is a grief reaction, and the anger is in response to the pain of loss or the feelings of abandonment. Issues may also be rooted in power struggles in lay leadership, anti-clericalism, and attempts to externalize all difficulties. The process of scapegoating is cathartic. Expect it, but never entertain it. It is a form of human sacrifice.

Have a serious conversation with the congregational leadership. Consider these questions:

- How are we going to talk about our departed minister?
- If this were a play, what dialogue would they want to have the audience hear? Step inside a magic theater. Imagine yourselves as others will see you.
- What is the very best way to look forward when talking about the past?

If the prior minister left via negotiated settlement, chances are minister and spouse will also leave the community. If they intend to remain, it is wise for the interim to initiate a collegial and candid conversation with the former minister about the future minister. Neither a covenant nor a committee of care would be appropriate to a minister whose departure was negotiated. The need is to separate as cleanly and healthily as possible to enable everyone to begin a new chapter in their lives.