

The Tasks of Interim Ministry

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For me to do my job as interim parish minister, you need to understand something about my job. Because in fundamental ways it is *our job*. It is *our* interim, and our shared ministry. The transitional period which this "interim" is is a project we can only carry through *together*.

There is a reason why interim ministries have become almost universal in our churches. You know this if you've been here a few years. I am not the first! They may have only been "passin' through," but I suspect you remember them well. That's one of the things I learned in my previous interim ministry: The institution remembers every significant event and person, even interim ministers. Several of the ministers noted on the small brass plates in the back of this sanctuary were here as interim ministers. And some might say that a few of the ministers there memorialized who came as "settled" ministers were in reality interims -- we could say "accidental interims."

How did that happen, even after the painstaking search process we go through? No one answer fits all sizes. There is no one, clear answer to that question. Each case is too different. Ministries are often seen as marriages, and congregations as families; inexact as the analogy is, the minister-congregation relationship is sometimes fraught with the same difficulties as marriages and families. Tolstoy famously said that all happy families are happy in the same ways, and all unhappy families are unhappy in different ways. I think it's the same for ministries; each unhappy one is unhappy in a different way.

But how can it be that something begun so hopefully can end so painfully? It's like asking, Why do bad things happen -- to good people? So we could say interims are inevitable. Better they should be intentional than accidental.

Most of what I have learned about intentional interim ministry I have gained from doing it (for a year-and-a-half in the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, Fla.), and from colleagues -- informally, and in training conferences sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association. The UUA now has whole new categories of ministry: AIMS (accredited interim ministers) and AIMITs (accredited interim ministers in training) and even AIMIT-Wannabies. (Well, that's my name for it -- and I assure you I'm progressing rapidly through the hierarchy. In fact, I have my eye on an archbishopric of interimdom.) There's even book learning to be had in this heady realm; here I will follow Roger Nicholson's outline of "the tasks of interim ministry" in his book, *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook of Interim Ministry*.

If you've ever hiked up a mountain, you know the experience of trudging ahead, feeling the hard labor of it, and then pausing to rest, finding a nice flat rock, preferably with a vista, to sit a while. *Ah, how far we've come! Looks beautiful! There were times I got so tired I thought I'd never make it, but it sure feels good now!* I can picture such resting spots on the way to the summit of Old Rag, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, and maybe you can picture the experience on a favorite climb of your own. The looking back to where you came from is an important part of the experience.

The first task of interim ministry is the looking back, into the congregation's history. We can learn immensely about what we are by listening to each other tell the lore of the church -- not only the stories about the ministers, but also about the members and major events.

And of course, as with all stories, there's not only the good news; there's the bad news -- the unhappy memories, the unresolved conflicts, the painful losses. Some would rather sweep the unhappy stuff under the rug; but that is not "coming to terms with history," it's denial. (And denial is not the name of a river in Egypt.) Remember the story of "The Rabbi in the Attic." It was only after angry confrontation brought the true feelings of the antagonists to the fore that reconciliation and peace became possible. Who are the rabbis in our attic? Have we come to terms with them, without capitulating to them utterly, as Rabbi Marion finally learned to do?

There is distant history, more recent history, and history hot from the griddle. Distant history is history that probably lies beyond the experience of any living member, but that has shaped the church. Through written records or oral tradition, it can be recalled. Jerry Muntz recalled a bit of our history from one of the first ministers, Frank Carlton Doan, when he spoke to the town board of adjustment last month, for this was a notable event testing the church's commitment to the free pulpit, a commitment that transcended the church board's disagreement with Doan's pacifist stand during the First World War. (The laypeople of the board are the real heroes of the story.)

Most events from "distant history," events remembered by later generations, are triumphant events: buildings built, tragedies overcome, heroic deeds in social causes. But "the good news" and "the bad news" alike feel much more immediately pertinent when it comes to the middle distance, the distance which is within the living memory of many members. Does anyone here remember the ministry of A. Powell Davies? Davies left Summit in 1945 to become minister of All Souls' Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., and was surely one of the leading voices of liberal religion of this century. (Forrester Church has recently published a book of excerpts from Davies' sermons, called *Without Apology*, and his small book of prayers, *The Language of the Heart*, is a classic.) And if I asked, how many of you remember the ministry of Jacob Trapp? Well, now the living memory grows, and glows, stronger. And Jake Trapp's books of poems and meditations and prayers, plus his hymns, are very much living literature of contemporary spirituality. But even Jake Trapp's era ended in the 1970s, didn't it? As one of you commented to me after last week's sermon, he was a "rabbi in the attic" for many years to come -- in a sense blessing, but in another sense bedeviling, those who came after him.

Such is the middle-distance history I'll be asking you to tell me about. I don't want to try to interpret it for you. Nor still less the "hot griddle" history, the history that, more than likely, is controversial within the present body politic.

Potters say, "The clay remembers." If you have worked with clay on a potter's wheel, you know what this means: You take a lump of clay and begin to form it into, say, a bowl, and then push it down; as you bring it up again, it tends to take the same shape ... and you want it to, too, only you want to stretch it farther. The clay helps you -- it remembers. So it is with the institutional memories of a church: They tend to shape the future, and if they are good memories, recorded, as it were, in the very patterns of the platelets of the clay, that is good; if they are bad memories, well, sometimes there's hell to pay. Bad patterns in institutions are like bad habits in individuals: They keep coming back, even from generation to generation.

So how should we go about remembering to remember, celebrating the good, the bad and the ugly ... and the beautiful besides?

The second task of interim ministry is to help the church discover its identity anew. Notice I did not say "discover a new identity." Better I should say "renew its sense of identity": who we are and what we stand for. The church will never gain a wholly "new identity," and we wouldn't want it to if it could. But neither will it be stuck, we hope, in the same-old same-old patterns and identity. Institutions, like families, like neurotic individuals, do tend to repeat themselves, compulsively. But healthy congregations, like healthy individuals, are not subject to their own past in this negative way. They are free to celebrate and to repudiate elements of their past, as they affirm their identity anew. This second task is, in a sense, the flip side of the first. It says that whatever the past may say, we are free to accept, or deny, or modify the message. We are in charge of our own destiny.

When all is said and done, change is ineluctable, an irresistible tide -- as much as we may resist change, as often as we may identify change with loss, especially as we get older. (Sometimes people in churches even identify change with betrayal: "You can't do that in this church" or "You can't say that word in this church," they protest. Vetoers make us nervous, and we often give in to them. But they do not have veto power over the group, unless we give it to them.) A healthy congregation will reflect both continuity and change. How can we involve the congregation in clarifying and uniting around the task of renewing its sense of identity? Well, through our Committee on Ministries, we are already beginning a process of re-examining our several statements of purpose, and helping us devise a new statement of our mission.

(According to Peter Steinke, a good mission statement is comprehensible by a 12-year-old, and so memorable you can repeat it at gunpoint. Here's an example, the mission statement of an urban church: "The church in the heart of the city." Great!)

The third task of interim ministry is to nurture and liberate leadership. Sometimes we talk about "leadership development," as if we knew how to "develop" a "mere follower" into a

"robust leader." I don't think we do. Once, years ago, I went to a leadership workshop; it was at Princeton Theological Seminary, so you would have thought it was a pretty rigorous thing. In a sense, it was: The workshop leader sat back and did nothing but sit and watch. No accident, as we finally discovered. He let us gab and fuss, and vent frustration, mostly on our absent and supremely imperturbable leader, until finally some of us began to assert ourselves. Leadership? I'd say the experience brought out the worst in all of us -- maybe this was some kind of perverse demonstration of original sin. I'm not sure I'd try the technique here -- though I came close just last week when the Council on Committees was fussing over our inability to find somebody to chair hospitality and do coffee hours. I said, "Well, you could let there not be any coffee one Sunday and see what happens -- see if someone rises to the challenge." "Oh, we've tried that," somebody said.

I think that leadership and leadership styles are situational, at least I think my style is -- sometimes I'm directive, sometimes facilitative. All we know, so far as I know, is that we need to work deliberately to establish conditions that allow new leadership to emerge. Every committee needs to be a real committee: three people (at least) who meet regularly (not often, just regularly) and keep a record of who was there and what was decided. Period. That means a one-person committee is a misnomer, for it means there is no possibility for group discussion and consensus, and it means there is no room for new blood to flow into the body politic.

My task -- no, *our* task -- is to ask questions about organizational structures (Are they open and inviting? Are they "transparent" and comprehensible?). And to ask questions about attitudes (Do we *really* want to engage more people, especially new people, in the life and work of our church? Do we understand the work of the church as ministry, that is, service to the spiritual and moral needs of ourselves and our world? Is coffee hour a spiritual need?).

A fourth task of interim ministry is to renew denominational linkages. In some of our churches there is positive resistance to anything perceived as "outside interference"-- a misapprehension that our congregational polity, or self-government, is a license to "build a little nest, out in the West, and let the rest of the world, go" ... you-know-where. But I see this congregation as already engaged on many levels with the denomination, so this task doesn't look difficult. A good number of us are involved in programs of the Metro District and in New Jersey cluster affairs, in the UUA continentally and the Partner Church movement internationally. And that means that many more of us could be involved. But the means of communication about all this activity are too few; our Web page will be a great help, more and more, but in the meantime, I question whether a monthly newsletter is adequate to the need.

Why are denominational linkages a concern of interim ministry? Because the process of finding and engaging a new settled minister is one that involves us with the denomination at several levels: First the church leadership meets with a district settlement representative, to learn how -- how to form a good search committee, how to assess the church's needs for professional ministry, and how pre-candidating and final candidating

are conducted. Later, the committee will work with the UUA Department of Ministry to secure names and basic information about potential candidates. (Beyond suggesting names, the department exercises no influence pro or con with regard to them. Neither will I as interim parish minister have any part in promoting or commenting on any candidates. And in no case can an interim minister be considered for the settled ministry.)

The fifth and final task Roger Nicholson calls "Commitment to new directions in ministry." All the other tasks -- reflection on our history, renewing our sense of identity, inviting new leaders to join with established leaders, renewing our ties to the denomination -- all build toward this final task. New directions in ministry means, for us, recognizing our shared ministry, as well as recognizing the qualities of the professional parish minister we seek.

If you asked me what I accomplished in my interim ministry in Jacksonville last year, I would say: Well, several things, but it all comes down to one thing -- that a church which had been somewhat fractured and somewhat disheartened managed to come together and attract a top-notch new minister -- namely John Young, formerly of Paramus and Sacramento.

This church is confident and upbeat. It is energetic and it is focused, particularly on plans for renewal of our physical facilities. Yet we are a long way from achieving that goal. Reaching agreement on building plans and assuring their financing will be arduous processes. The construction phase will uproot us and disrupt familiar patterns. We will be something like the children of Israel wandering -- if not for 40 years, for many months -- in the wilderness of our own displacement: It will take real commitment to the core values of our liberal faith, and a strong vision of the community we can become, to get us over the Jordan, into the promised land. Will we make it? *That is for you to tell me, in word and deed.*