

“In the Interim: the Developmental Tasks for a Church In Transition”
Rev. Beatrice Hitchcock

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High Plains Church, Unitarian Universalist

Reading: “The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time,” by John Andrew Storey

The ceaseless flow of endless time no one can check or stay;
we’ll view the past without regret, nor future with dismay.
The present slips into the past, and dream-like melts away;
the breaking of tomorrow’s dawn begins a new today.
The past and future ever meet in the eternal now:
to make each day a thing complete shall be our New Year vow.

Message and Music: Rev. Beatrice Hitchcock

“In the Interim: the Developmental Tasks for a Church In Transition”

Tonight at sundown, the Jewish world will begin the ceremonies and celebrations that mark Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. These are high holy days in Judaism, not a time for drunken revels as in the secular world’s New Year celebrations.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, will begin at sundown on September 25 and last until sundown the next day. That is the day on which the Book of Life is sealed for the coming year. In between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the Days of Awe, or the Ten Days of Repentance. This is the time for putting one’s spiritual house in order. For asking forgiveness, and granting forgiveness, and making amends to anyone we may have wronged in the past year.

This church has ahead of it... spiritual work. Putting your spiritual house in order, collectively, and personally. There will be forgiveness to ask, and forgiveness to grant, and, perhaps, amends to be made. It will take more than ten days, but this is an auspicious time to start.

Interim ministry used to be a one-year process. The problem with this is that calling a settled minister is also a one-year process. So churches would be in the process of calling a new minister before they had had any time to process events around the former minister, or to reexamine their vision and mission, or heal from conflicts, or anything else. Now, two year interim ministries are the norm. This allows a year for intense interim work, and then, during the second year, when the search for a new minister is in earnest, to continue with any interim work that needs more time.

One of the things that happen to a church when its ministers leave after a short time – for whatever reasons – is that members develop a lack of trust in their leadership. When a pattern develops, such as you have had here, of short-term ministry, members may begin to mistrust each other, as well.

I've seen some suspicious and blaming behaviors here already. Not a lot, but some. I'm wondering if this lack of trust accounts, at least in part, for the multiplicity of teams and sub-teams you have at High Plains. I don't know yet. I'm just wondering...

But we will sort this out. And you will be OK. That is what the Interim time is for.

You are about to embark on some important work together. There are five congregational tasks for the interim period. They are not all sequential, although the first needs to happen first and the fifth cannot happen before the others.

I will first name the five tasks, and then return to tell you more about them.

The first congregational task is to claim and honor your past. This requires engaging and acknowledging your griefs and conflicts, as well as your successes and accomplishments.

The second task is to recognize your unique identity and strengths, see clearly your needs and challenges, and forge a plan to achieve your goals.

Third, you'll need to develop a clear understanding of the appropriate leadership roles of minister, staff, and lay leaders. And you will navigate the shifts in leadership that happen during times of transition.

Fourth, you will renew your ties with the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Mountain Desert District, and learn to make appropriate use of their resources and other outside resources.

And fifth, you will come into proud possession of a renewed vision and strong stewardship, and be ready to welcome a new minister into your church life.

Interim ministry is about change, transition, and transformation. Change is defined as the inevitable movement of life's forces. Change is inevitable, which means it will happen whether you want it to or not.

Transition is the process by which we must deal with those inevitable life changes. It is the interim period. There are opportunities in transition, to find the best options for healthy change.

Transformation, which will come when you are ready for your new minister, is the new shape that occurs after transition, a birth, so to speak.

So, now to deeper understanding...

1) Coming to terms with your history... In order to prepare for the future, you need to come to terms with your past. It is not enough to simply know your history. Church members experience loss and grief in their relationships with ministers, staff, and other members. That grief needs to be expressed.

If your grandmother dies when she is old, after being in pain with some ailment or other for a long time, many people will say – “Oh, it’s for the best.” “She was ready to die.” “That happens to everyone.” -- These rationalizations do not in any way address your own sense of loss and grief over losing your beloved grandmother.

Those who have not come to terms with their own history are doomed to repeat it.

Some years back now, the members of this church were ready to call your extension minister as your settled minister, when he announced he was leaving. Of course, he had good reasons for doing that and of course, he had every right to do that. But knowing that does not address the pain and disappointment of his leaving.

Your first called minister was only here three years before he began looking for another church. Of course, he had good reasons for doing that and of course he had every right to do that. But knowing that does not address the pain and disappointment of his leaving.

Churches that do not come to terms with their own history are doomed to repeat it.

We’re going to take a moment to sing a song: *How Could Anyone*, by Libby Roderick. Libby is a lifelong Alaskan, singer-songwriter, lesbian, activist, University of Alaska faculty member, communications workshop facilitator, and friend of the Anchorage UU Fellowship. Libby was contracted to lead some workshops at the Anchorage UU Fellowship while I served there, and introduced a process called deep listening.

I thought of this song when I realized that some of you were feeling “not good enough” because of these experiences with ministers.

#1053 How Could Anyone

*How could anyone ever tell you
you were anything less than beautiful?*

*How could anyone ever tell you
you were less than whole?
How could anyone fail to notice
that your loving is a miracle?
How deeply you're connected to my soul.*

Conflict in the church – which is inevitable and can be quite healthy – also needs to be acknowledged and analyzed. Has it been resolved? How was it resolved? Were there winners and losers? Is there a pattern to conflict in the congregation?

Conflict means there are things that people care about enough to invest their energy and time.

You may want to create a structure for the resolution of interpersonal stress and conflict. Perhaps that will be Compassionate Communication. Perhaps it will be deep listening skills. Perhaps you'll create a team (another team?) to handle interpersonal conflict.

We'll create a timeline of your history together, looking at not just the periods of crisis, but also the shiny, sparkling times that are worthy of celebration.

*Sparkling moments: the first sparkling moment that really attracted me to this congregation is in your founding story. This congregation was intentionally founded to serve the north side of Colorado Springs, and ease some of the overcrowding at All Souls Unitarian Church. It was nurtured in its beginning, and more recently when you bought this building, by All Souls.

*Other sparkling moments: Making music such an important part of your worship services.

*Watching the church news during the Waldo Canyon fire this summer – seeing how well you cared for one another during that time.

You have lots of sparkling moments in your history, and we're going to hold them up.

2) Becoming clear about your identity...

The interim period is “a time for self-assessment, and a time for visioning and recommitment to mission and ministry.” (*Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, pg 143.)

Life changes around us all the time, like it or not, and churches change with the times. Changes in church leadership, perhaps especially the minister, cause changes in the church.

What is your old and your current identity? What do you want your new identity to be? Where is the gap between the new identity you seek and the identity you currently perceive?

As part of this self-assessment, there will be a review of the congregational survey undertaken this spring. It will reveal a lot about the state of the congregation then, and your desires for the future.

Vision, mission statements, covenant – your bylaws say these will be reviewed every five years.

November – Diagnostic Leap Day – Board members and team leads – goal: look at what you’ve learned and set priorities for the rest of the year. 1) Things this congregation does well and should celebrate. 2) Things you can improve on or don’t do at all.

Congregational Covenant of Right Relations workshop

3) Developing a clear understanding of the appropriate leadership roles of minister, staff, and lay leaders. And managing shifts in leadership...

Other church leadership often changes when a minister leaves. Sometimes staff, sometimes volunteers.

Obviously, you have a new, and interim, minister
New director of faith formation
Soon to be new office assistant

This is a good opportunity to examine how your church leadership functions. Who is in charge? Are the responsibilities of minister, staff members, Board members, and Team leads clearly defined? Are the lines of communication open? What can everyone do to communicate better?

Your bylaws say that meetings of the Board of Trustees are open to all. When was the last time you attended one?

What are the role expectations of leaders? I’ve seen some confusion here over the difference between leadership and management.

Where are the next leaders to come from? The Leadership Development Team is planning some trainings. Who will come forward to take a turn as the lead goose in the V formation?

What more needs to happen to clarify roles for all concerned?

And while we're there, how can we lift up and celebrate all the volunteers of this church?

4) Rethinking denominational linkages...

Very often, when there has been conflict between the former minister and congregation, relations between the congregation and the denomination become strained as well. The congregation may feel that it was not adequately supported through the conflict, or that denominational authorities were on the minister's side.

Our denomination is more important than many realize. Even if you think that denominational representatives made mistakes, let's see what you can do to get to understanding and forgiveness, if necessary.

Our religious education curricula come out of this denomination. General Assemblies and Regional Assemblies offer workshops in a myriad of areas of interest and concern. They are places where UU's of all persuasions find that they are not alone in their passions and concerns.

I noticed that there was no one from High Plains Church at the UUA's General Assembly this summer. And it was so nearby, in Phoenix. You missed a great GA. Plan on attending next summer in Louisville, Kentucky.

There is an opportunity coming up at the end of this month. The Mountain Desert District is offering a Central Cluster FALL GATHERING for front range and Wyoming congregations. All welcome: Board members, Lay leaders, Ministers, Staff, Youth ministry teams, Youth & Sponsors. It will offer workshops in Leadership Development, Our Values & Theology, Building Beloved Community, Covenantal Full Community.

Our denomination has so much to offer, not the least of which is the knowledge that you are not alone and you don't have to reinvent the wheel.

5) Commitment to new leadership and a new future...

Through the developmental tasks of the interim journey, you will become more and more ready for your new future. You will work through your differences, resolve closure issues with former ministers, discover a new identity, allow shifts in your leadership to occur, reconnect with the UUA and Mountain Desert District, and be ready for success with your next minister.

All this will happen as we work together. Your Board of Trustees members, and my soon-to-be-formed Transition Team, are the key players in this work, but everyone has a part. Be ready to participate in discussions and special projects.

Here are things I ask of you during this time:

- Stay connected. Don't allow the anxiety associated with change to drive you away. Embrace it as a path to something better.
- Attend worship. This is the heart of congregational life.
- Engage in self-study, so you understand your own part in this congregation.
- Continue your financial support of the church.
- If you reasonably can, say, "yes," when asked to serve.
- Participate in the special activities of the interim period, such as creating a timeline, learning conflict management skills, or Vision, Mission, and Covenant work.
- Be willing to experiment. We won't always know the best way to achieve your goals.
- Please try to assume that people are operating with best intentions. If you don't understand why someone is doing something, talk to them directly.
- If you need to ask forgiveness of someone, please do. And if someone asks for forgiveness, please grant it.

Those are the tasks. I will be brainstorming with the Board and Transition Team to find the best ways for these to be addressed here. But they won't happen without you.

So, may this be a happy new year!

Benediction: By Frederick Gillis

May the Love which overcomes all differences,
which heals all wounds,
which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are separated,
be in us and among us
now and always.