

The Hire-to-Call Process

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Introduction

Briefly, the hire-to-call process is a means of bringing a second (or third or fourth) minister to a large congregation designed to help maximize the chance of a great relationship between a senior minister and an assistant and, if necessary, to give a graceful means of exit for the congregation and minister if the match is not good. In this process the minister is initially hired by the board of trustees for three-year period with the understanding that at the end of the second year the congregation will vote on a call. If the minister receives the requisite plurality (often 85%) from the congregation, the assistant minister is considered “called.” Frequently, at this point the minister is promoted from assistant to associate minister and receives a proportionate increase in pay. If the minister does not receive a vote sufficient for a call, she or he is offered a one-year terminal contract. During this year both the minister and congregation usually enter the search process.

I hope in writing that I invite others to fill gaps in my own understanding. As yet, little is written on the subject. The *UUA Settlement Handbook* and *Interim and Consulting Ministry Handbook* contain material that can helpfully be used to guide this process but only once refers to the process directly and never mentions it by name.¹ This treatment of the concept in the UU settlement bible is indicative of the growing but still institutionally unsettled status of this practice.

I write additionally because I sense in my initial conversations on the subject that we are at somewhat of a turning point regarding this process. The early experiments have grown and have gained greater acceptance and have led to many stable, successful ministries. Some still have doubts. It has long been a basic understanding that the authority of a minister is based, not primarily on skills or on professionalism but on a call. In our congregationally based

¹ The direct mention of the process is found in the *Settlement Handbook*: “In view of the critical importance of a well-functioning, mutually cordial ministry team, the search for a new minister in larger congregations offers special complexities, depending on the position to be filled and the accountability relationships anticipated among the ministers. An assistant minister is generally supervised by a more senior minister and hired by the board rather than called by the congregation. Thus wide congregational involvement in the search—surveys, group meetings, and candidating week—is inconsistent with the relationships to come. This minister is best sought by a search committee made up of board members, chairs of committees responsible for areas in which the minister will concentrate, and the supervising minister” (p. 14, http://www.uua.org/documents/mpl/transitions/settlement_handbook.pdf).

The most helpful material related to the hire-to-call process is found in the *Interim and Consulting Ministry Handbook* in the section “Calling a Consulting Minister Already Serving the Congregation” (See Appendix A).

denomination, Unitarian Universalism, this call comes through a congregation if not from it. This is why, among us, congregations have the unique power to ordain. Yet, gradually, these understandings have made way for the growth of the hire-to-call practice. While this is by no means the standard or universal method of bringing a second minister to a large Unitarian Universalist congregation, it has become common-place in large congregations. Moreover, this method acquired the cache of being the new or more progressive way.

At the same time, experience with this method has developed. Something on the order of 20 ministers have been bought to congregations in this way (beginning with Kelly Crocker in 2001 at First Unitarian Society of Madison). This track record has given momentum and a certain measure of acceptance to the model. It has also given painful object lessons teaching, at least, that there is no full procedural fix to the inherently fraught vagaries of how ministers and congregations form relationships and dissolve them. In the worst cases, some ministers and some in congregations have ended up feeling that the hire-to-call process was more a two-year audition than a ministry.

Optimistically viewed, the fact that we have now had seven years experience with this model means that we are at a moment when we might gather some wisdom both about when and how this model is best used.

Where Does This Come From?: Beyond the Tyranny of the Mid-Sized Congregation

Immediately, the idea for the hire-to-call process derives from painful experiences regarding second ministers in large congregations. These were primarily instances in which the traditional call process had failed with painful results for the congregation, the assistant or associate minister, and the rest of the staff including the senior minister. And this also included experiences in which large congregations hired interim second ministers and were very frustrated that the rules regarding interims forced popular second ministers to leave after one year. In somewhat wider scope, three shifts have contributed to creating the moment for this innovation.

First, there is the perception in the UU and in other denominations that there has been a tyranny of the mid-sized suburban congregation. What worked for them was taken as the standard and norm for all congregations—large and small, rural and urban. Increasingly there is the realization that in every area of congregational life the standard models must be adapted, sometimes radically, to work outside the mid-sized suburban congregation. This is true of RE curriculum and ways of getting building loans. This is true of administrative organization and methods of doing social justice. And it is true of ways of forming and dissolving relationships with ministers.

Second, methods of governance are shifting or—at least—there is strong opinion that they should shift. At base many perceive that boards of trustees have become bogged down in the details of decision-making and problem solving when their more proper role is in setting direction and policy. There is decidedly mixed feeling about the most prominent fix to these problems—Carver Policy Governance. Yet, anyone who has sat through interminable board discussions, second-guessing the work of capable volunteers and staff, has an intuitive understanding that change might be needed. Out of this frustration has come the perception that key staff, especially the senior minister needed more and clearer executive authority, including in selection of staff. In the traditional search process, the search committee is intentionally insulated from the direct influence of the congregation and its leadership, and perhaps most especially from the influence of current staff. In some measure the hire-to-call process has been a move to redress this—to guard the congregation's ownership of the process while allowing

other staff and especially the senior minister close enough to the process to help ensure the working relationship between the second minister and the senior is creative and productive.

Third, views concerning interim ministry are shifting. In the 1980's the Alban Institute proposed that, especially in cases of long ministries or troubled ministries, congregations have term-limited ministers who come for one or two years to help prepare congregations for what would—hopefully—be the next long-term settled minister. This interim would have exceptional scope of authority to work to change those things necessary to creating success in the new settled ministry. Freed from the need to build her or his own long-term constituency, the interim is freer to be honest and to push to change what needs to change. Especially in the UU world, it increasingly became normative that there would be an interim after the departure of every settled minister not just after the end of particularly long or troubled ministries. More recently, the tide of opinion has flowed in the other direction. Increasingly, opinion has developed that the idea of interim ministry is another of those that presumed the realities of the mid-sized congregation. In a large congregation, there is increasingly mixed opinion about whether interim ministers are needed or desirable for positions other than the senior minister. For positions other than the senior minister the stress of the transition is less. It is arguable that, if work is needed on the traditional six tasks of the interim this work should be led by the senior minister or an outside consultant, not an interim assistant supervised by the senior minister.²

What We Have Learned

Sometimes this process has worked well. Sometimes not. Overall, it has worked satisfactorily enough that it seems likely that the use of the hire-to-call process will continue to be used.³ The problems with the process are that it can add an element of tentativeness to the first two years—sometimes making it feel like an overly long audition. And, it can insert into the life of the hire-to-call minister and the congregation a time-bomb of sorts. One might say, that the process does not insert the tension into the life of the congregation, only gives a healthy structure for dealing with it. However, ministries, like marriages have their ups and downs and there is a good reason we do not enter into marriages with a provision that two years, if both partners are not 85% satisfied, the marriage is over. Yet, overall, the experience with this model seems to provide a relatively good mechanism for accomplishing its chief purposes: (1.) to give the senior minister a healthy way to have a stronger role in the process, and (2.) to give less traumatic and more orderly exit strategy when the match is not good).

Some have recently argued that a way to fix the problems with the process might be to push the logic of hire to call even further: to only have one called minister in a congregation

² (1) claiming and honoring its past and engaging and acknowledging its griefs and conflicts; (2) recognizing its unique identity and its strengths, needs, and challenges, (3) understanding the appropriate leadership roles of minister(s), church staff, and lay leaders and navigating the shifts in leadership that may accompany times of transition, (4) making appropriate use of District, UUA, and other outside resources, (5) reaching beyond the dominant culture to include the multicultural world in social service and social-justice, and (6) renewing its vision, strengthening its stewardship, preparing for new growth and new professional leadership, ready to embrace the future with anticipation and zest.

³ It is unclear how the growing shortage of ministers will affect this trend.

with second and third ministers only being hired.⁴ Yet, it seems most likely that the hire-to-call process will continue to be a common and perhaps the most common method of bringing second ministers to large congregations.

Given that the practice of hire-to-call is likely to continue, it is important to gather wisdom on when and how it should be done.

The first piece of wisdom regards what to expect from any such process. The forming and dissolving of relationships between ministers and congregations includes messiness—always. It is destructive to blame a process because it has failed to tame entirely the messiness. Many congregations see anxiety and decide that anxiety is itself the problem when in fact the problem is their low capacity to work creatively amidst anxiety. Indeed much thinking about creative leadership in congregations focuses precisely on this: how to live creatively amidst a higher normal level of anxiety (Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=6138 & Ron Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*). So, the ideal for any such process is not that it tame the messiness but that it create an institutionally healthy structure for it—with a clear understanding of what will happen when and where the healthy places for involvement in the process might be. The aim is not to find a way to eliminate the pain of the end of a ministry. The aim is to make clear and well-understood channels for dealing with that pain and for turning it to organizationally and personally healthy purpose.

The second piece of wisdom regards the choice of whether or not to use the hire-to-call process or whether to use a more traditional straight call (or, conceivably, straight hire). Much involved in making the decision about which to do must be individual to a congregation. This much can be said in general: to the extent that a congregation has a strong executive role for the senior minister, hire-to-call should be considered more strongly. To the extent that a congregation has more egalitarian or less structured relationships in the staff and that the lay leadership takes a stronger management role, the traditional call process should be considered more strongly. To do otherwise on either side sets up a dissonance that is likely to lead to problems.

If a congregation decides to use the hire-to-call process, there seem to be five key things that are crucial to its success:

- *Strong role of the senior minister in the initial search and settlement process.* Often the laity and lay leadership feel strong ownership of—even possessiveness over—the process of selecting a minister. For this process to succeed, the congregation must be willing to relax this and the senior minister must be ready to push the congregation to do so. If the congregation is not ready for this, or the senior minister is not ready to press this issue, it is best not to use this process. The senior minister should not chair the search committee but should be and be seen to be an active member of the committee, active at every stage. This should include open, honest discussion in the

⁴ The major reason some believe that there should only be one called minister per congregation involves the sometimes awkward situation in which the senior minister departs and the associate or assistant remains. There have been instances in which the question of what was needed to balance the skills of a remaining second minister have been allowed to take precedence over the longer run needs of a congregation. There have been instances also in which congregations have ignored the lack of good chemistry between the new senior minister and a remaining second minister—leading to problems.

- committee of where the senior ministers' strengths and weaknesses need to be balanced. And this must include the right—and the responsibility—to have opportunities to judge and opportunities to express views about the intangibles of personal chemistry. For this to work, the senior minister and the assistant must have more than general compatibility and well-balanced job skills. They must “click.” They must find in each other a primary creative partner.
- *Clarity of communication and process.* Under the best of circumstances, UU practices concerning the settlement of ministers is confusing and mystifying, especially to the average lay person. The hire-to-call process is pretty much entirely uncodified and passes from one congregation to another by word of mouth. The purpose of this process is to serve as the means to make tough, important decisions and to give a channel to potentially strong emotions. There must be repeated, clear communication to establish this process in the collective mind of the congregation. I am tempted to say, it needs to be drilled in to people. This means, at the very least, establishing the process in writing with a timeline and repeatedly referring people to where the congregation is in the timeline. Positively viewed, a hire-to-call process is an excellent occasion for a congregation to learn good communication skills. Direct face-to-face communication is good. Indirect communication, especially anonymous indirect communication (as in questionnaires) is fraught with difficulty (Alban Institute just published a good book on communication in congregations: Ruth Kibbie Simmons and Karen McClintock, *Healthy Disclosure: Solving Communications Quandaries in Congregations*, <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=6138>)
 - *Strong intentionality in the relationship of the senior minister and the assistant.* This is not an easy relationship. In one moment, the relationship is one of supervisor and employee. In another it is as close creative collaborators. And in another it is two relatively equal colleagues in a profession. One senior-assistant team whose relationship went well described the lengths they went to in this regard: Yearly they had an outside professional consultation regarding their working relationship. They stuck to an absolutely regular schedule of weekly meetings. They took pains to clarify with each other their relative roles in the many, many endeavors they shared. They even went to the lengths of holding different types of meetings in different places. If the meeting was to be as supervisor and employee the meeting was held in one place. And, if the meeting was as two members of the executive team holding each other accountable, it was in a different place. And, if the meeting was as two colleagues, they meet in a third place. While the particularities of this way of relating is specific to these people, there is something about the intentional, even obsessively intentional nature of this way of working that is important to making the hire-to-call process succeed.
 - *The senior minister needs to learn to be a good supervisor and work past any ambivalence concerning this role.* Ministers don't learn to be supervisors in seminary. Even congregations, even few large congregations, have clear, regular routines of supervision and evaluation. Indeed, most congregations and most ministers approach the subject with studied ambivalence. To do well in this process, the congregation starting with the senior minister needs to build capacity in this area.

It simply isn't adequate for supervision to be confined to occasional compliments and criticisms and a once a year written process. The senior minister and the assistant need to have an ongoing rich conversation concerning growing edges and how best to build strategically on strengths.

- *Clear, strong role in the call process for the senior minister.* When it comes to the congregational vote for the call in the hire-to-call process, the senior minister must tread a very narrow line. The call itself is from the congregation. The congregation rightly owns this part of the process. Especially given the strong role that the senior minister plays in the earlier part of the hire-to-call process, it is wise and important for the senior minister to allow the congregation to take the lead in the call part of the process. And, at the same time, the minister needs to be visible in the process. Anything less would be read as ambivalence or lack support. This balance is not easy to maintain. Should the senior minister say that she or he favors the call? Should the senior minister directly ask the congregation to support the call? Some of those wisest about the process and with the most experience of it, paused when asked directly these questions. At the very least the senior minister needs to be up-front and visible in the process.

Crucial to the success of the hire-to-call process is that peoples' reactions be directed into the process: don't seek to tame the reactions. Remember, as was said above, the aim of this process is not to remove the pain often associated with ministerial settlement and departure. The aim is to create a structure strong enough to give healthy channel to strong reactions.

In conclusion, I thank all those who gave generously of their time and energy to help educate me concerning the hire-to-call process and what has been learned in the seven year since the hire-to-call process was first used.

Appendix A

From the *Interim and Consulting Ministry Handbook*:

Calling a Consulting Minister Already Serving the Congregation

Consulting ministries are established for a host of reasons. A consulting ministry that is going well often inspires leaders to seek to convert it to a settled ministry by means of a ministerial call. While a UU congregation is of course free to call to its settled ministry a consulting minister already serving (or any other person, for that matter), it should only seek to do so when the objectives for which the original consulting ministry have been largely satisfied, and only after the passage of a significant period of time. The wise congregation will concentrate on the issues that brought the consulting ministry into being for two years to thirty months before beginning to consider extending a call.

There is no restriction on a consulting minister's permitting him- or herself to be so considered as long as in doing so the conditions of the UUA's "inside candidate" rule are met. Under the rule, a minister who is a member or staff member of a congregation may not accept a call after the Transitions Office has submitted a list to the search committee. Thus an inside candidate must apply to the search committee early in the process, and the search committee must make a yes-or-no decision before considering other candidates. In other words, the consulting minister can only be considered alone and not in competition with other ministers.

Before getting deeply into a call process, the congregation's bylaws should be reviewed. If odd or counter-productive bylaws make compliance a challenge, it's time to change the bylaws! The experience of district staff and the Transitions Director suggests that generally, the call of a new minister should require at least a 90% vote (written ballots, absentee ballot ineligible), while for dismissal 30% should be sufficient. The threshold for calling a minister already on staff should probably be in the 85 percent range.

In the polity that characterizes Unitarian Universalist congregations, the Board and the called minister(s) are partners in leadership, both chosen by the congregation. With that relationship in mind, the Board would do well to shift the ownership of a potential call process from itself to the congregation. It will be the Board's task to hold the tension and the limbo of the process, without jumping in to try to manage it or fix it or "settle it" in a hurry.

In most instances, the Nominating Committee is the appropriate locus of responsibility for recommending the functional equivalent of a ministerial search committee to the congregation. The Board can ask it to create a slate of perhaps five candidates for a "Ministerial Transition Committee" or "Ministerial Options Committee." They can find guidance for their procedure in the UUA's *Settlement Handbook*, which outlines good characteristics for search committee candidates. It is conducive to an open and healthy process to add that during the meeting to elect the Ministerial Transition Committee, nominations from the floor will be accepted. Once again, check the by-laws for requirements on proper notice.

The Ministerial Transition Committee is responsible for "interviewing the congregation" for the next ministry. Whether the congregation chooses to call the consulting minister or not, there will be a new ministry. The Committee is responsible for interviewing the minister-candidate, too, as to what changes s/he would wish to bring about in her/his present role if called. It is up to this committee, just as with a search committee, to determine if the congregation's and the minister-candidate's desires match. They will or will not recommend that the congregation call that minister.

Assuming that the Ministerial Transitions Committee recommends the consulting minister for a congregational call, the Committee should conduct a full and formal candidating week as described in the *Settlement Handbook*: services on two successive Sundays, meetings with committees, the Board, and the congregation as a whole, a vote by secret ballot—the works! Only by this means will the minister and congregation truly know one another's mind.