

Looking Back

An Interim Minister needs to discover the role of prior clergy, members who are ministers or long to be, movers and shakers, key players, and the people with power. Some of these will be active in a congregation. Others will exert strong influence, quietly, in a non-public way. Try asking congregants who the three most important people in the congregation were and who the three most important people are now. Pay attention to those whose names come up over and over again!

You'll want to learn about your congregation's relationships with:

- neighboring congregations
- the district
- the UUA
- the larger community, neighborhood, city, or town
- itself, its family system, and its ways of doing things

Get “the facts,” as widely interpreted as possible. Talk to pastors of nearby churches. Talk to the District Executive and/or Program Consultant. Ask the UUA for a membership profile for the last ten—or twenty!—years. John Weston has described the role of an interim minister on arrival as something between a detective and an anthropologist.

Interim work requires deep listening, sturdy trust, commitment to the process of learning and growing, and explicit recognition and honoring of the congregational community.

Arrive with a voracious curiosity. Ask wise questions with your mind and with all your senses wide open, with no “shoulds” attached. Be a sponge, absorb all the information you can gather. Keep a copy of Lyle Shaller's *The Interventionist* handy for cues and insights.

As you begin your interim work, stay constantly alert for systems and patterns in the congregation's activities and history. Aim to maintain an objective, discerning ear for echoes of the past in the present. Refresh your awareness of family systems dynamics and your own inner buoyancy for remaining non-anxious, centered, and connected amidst the tumult of a congregation in transition. Reread Kenn Hurto's *STREAMS* paper, “Practical Tips on Applying Family Systems Theory,” [reproduced here with permission in appendix C].

Perceiving Systems

Interim ministry thrives when the minister has a keen eye for systems, for it is in the patterns in the chaos of the moment and its underlying context that recurrent issues have their roots. Some systemic dynamics cease causing damage once people understand them and, thus, can manage them.

- **Polarity Conflicts:** Contrasting perspectives that are two halves of one whole, each of them “100% half right.” Examples are woven throughout our Unitarian Universalist principles, such as the tension between one’s personal conscience and the commitment to the democratic process. The push and pull between individual worth and dignity and the desire for a deep belonging to a cosmic community poses yet another example of contrasting perspectives. A polarity is lurking in any issue that keeps recurring in a given congregation. Familiar examples are spiritual growth vs. social action, humanistic vs. theistic worship styles, and delegated vs. consensus decision-making. Polarities are conflicts that cannot be resolved; the suppressed half of a larger wholeness will perpetually re-emerge. Indeed, the community would sicken, perhaps die, if it did not. Polarities cannot be solved, nor should they be, but they can be richly, healthily, managed, to the benefit of everyone. [ref: Barry Johnson’s book, *Polarity Management*, also see *Understanding Your Congregation as a System*, by George Parsons and Speed Leas]

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator contrasts four diversities in human personality, each of them a polarity. If interpersonal friction is causing chronic conflict between people, knowledge of MBTI can help the players understand and appreciate what’s happening, and ease the tension significantly. [See *Appendix D* for a very simple exercise to introduce the model.]

- **Size and Space Crunches:** Has membership leveled off in recent years, despite diligent efforts to retain newcomers and reduce attrition? There are two possible causes for this: the first being the space available to a congregation. If the worship seating, the parking space, or R.E. room is running on average 80% full, the church has reached its limit on welcoming room. Individuals will come and go, and the total number will stagnate. If this is the situation, illuminate it for the leadership and congregation.

It may also be possible that the congregation is hovering on a plateau between congregational sizes. This is bridging place where congregational structures must shift to fit the needs of a larger or smaller membership. See Alice Mann’s *The In-Between Church*. Congregations may maintain their familiar size through unconsciously exclusive habits, such as corralling friends rather than meeting newcomers at coffee hour or using first names and acronyms in announcements because everyone familiar knows them. Random eruptions of conflict can also put the damper on burgeoning numbers. Do not perceive or depict any of these as mean-spirited habits. Size pressures are powerful and unconscious. Bringing them to light invites enlightened choices about future directions. [For brief descriptions of congregational size relative to organizational dynamics, usable as handouts, see *Appendices E and F*.]

- Other systemic dynamics cry out for a **paradigm shift** in organizational life and often in personal consciousness. For example:
 - scarcity living vs. abundance
 - need-centered vs. gift-centered engagement
 - simple and singular vs. complex and multi-faceted truth

Paradigm shifts do not happen instantly or easily. What you can do on your watch as interim minister is to open the windows of the congregation's mind and heart:

- Witness.
- Entice awareness.
- Invite transformation.
- Do it again and, then, yet again.

Know that what you sow will be reaped after your departure.

Deep Listening

Most of us (especially the extroverts among us) are good at talking, but we may have to learn how to listen. Members of the transitioning congregation will appreciate being listened *to*, and they need and deserve to be deeply heard.

A prudent interim will begin by making appointments with:

- People who ask for them.
- “Movers and shakers” in the congregation: ask each member of the board to make a list on a 3x5 card of ten movers and shakers in the congregation. Interview the top ten most frequently mentioned names.
- Past leaders: learn the congregation’s anthropology. Make a breakfast or lunch date (once a month for 3 or 4 months) with the past five presidents of the congregation. Ask them to address one or two questions you have identified each time.
- Staff
- Important people who have left the church. Don’t aim to get them back. Let them know you simply want to listen to what their experience was in order to understand how things happened.
- The “scariest” (i.e., most intimidating) folks, even at the risk of appearing to reward bad behavior. Learn their fears and their heartaches.

Do not, however, enter into *any* risky situation alone. Pair up with a wise and reliable lay leader.

The setting for any conversation should be one that reflects safety for all those participating. (Sadly, this is now a consideration every minister, whether male or female, needs to keep in mind.) You must be careful about physical safety for yourself. You must also arrange the meeting in such a way that there is no possibility that the other person could later claim inappropriate actions on your part. Beware of meeting anyone in an empty church building, alone in your home or parked car, or alone in the home or parked car of the person with whom you are speaking. If you are in the church, make sure that there is at least one other person in the building. If the person requests a “private” meeting and there are not other people in the church building, meet in a public place such as a quiet café or a public park.

About Confidentiality, Privacy, and Anonymity

It is important for all groups and individuals to understand how information that the interim minister receives will be used. The difference between confidentiality, anonymity, secrecy, privacy, and confessional conversation must be made clear.

Speed Leas, in his groundbreaking work in conflict management, suggests a three-part response when one individual is approached by another with a complaint or concern about a third party. The first question should be, "Have you talked with so-and-so about this?" If the answer is no, then ask "Would you like me to go with you when you talk with this person?" If the answer is again no, then ask "May I speak with this person, and tell them of your concern?" If the answer is again no, the complainer may not be ready to resolve the issue. If this is the case, the best advice to the second party is to choose responsibly and let go of the matter. [See *Appendix S*]

In your role as minister, however, you may become the recipient of information that is either confided during pastoral counseling, or given anonymously, and this information may sometimes be privileged. Part of the conversation then becomes what, if anything, the concerned person wishes the minister to do. Bear in mind the following points:

Anonymity: The minister can do nothing overt with anonymous information. It is hearsay. You may hold it as data to help identify a pattern of problems, and may act to reach out if you see a pastoral need, but anonymous information can rarely go farther.

Confidentiality: The minister may learn things confidentially, through a private conversation or pastoral counseling session. Though we Unitarian Universalists have no sacrament of penance, the minister often functions as a confessor, i.e., as an absolutely safe place to "get something off one's chest." It is well to remember that the process of **personal confession**, to be effective, includes:

- Recognizing that there is a serious wrong.
- Taking responsibility for one's actions in the wrong.
- Being sorry for the action.
- Resolving to not continue the action.
- Wishing to make amends or to take action to set the situation right. It is in this fifth area that minister and congregant do the hardest work. The healing cannot occur if the congregant is unable to speak or act in a wider, appropriate setting.

Confidentiality may be requested in a group conversation, and must be freely agreed to by all in the group. Even then, it is well to weigh the possible consequences *if* someone should break confidentiality. If the possible damage is perceived to be great, it is best to not speak in a group.

Deliberate breaches of confidentiality are rare. It is common, however, for an individual to simply forget where s/he learned something and thus break confidence without meaning to.

Confessional Conversation: *Confidentiality cannot be honored if criminal actions are revealed, or if a child is at risk.* In most states, a minister *is* a mandated reporter. The only exception *may* be information divulged during the sacrament of penance (a practice not found in Unitarian Universalism). Check with local Child Protective Services if you have any doubts.

Secrecy and Privacy: Secrecy and privacy often become badly confused in congregational conflicts. Privacy is the right of every individual until their actions damage others. Unaddressed damage is not privacy, but becomes secrecy. Secrets tear congregations apart because they never, ever remain truly secret. Eventually, they ooze through the pores of the congregation creating fear, confusion, and a feeling of unsafety. The minister must not become a secret keeper.

No matter what the conditions of confidentiality, privacy, secrecy, or anonymity are, the congregation must be confident that the minister *must* and *will* act responsibly to protect the physical safety of any adult, or the physical and emotional safety of any child. Once again, we may do our best work by modeling truthful, care-filled speech and action.

Collecting History

One of the vital tasks a congregation in transition needs to accomplish during its interim is to understand its history, anger, grief, habits and achievements. Copy the next several pages to share with the congregational leadership and, together, assess which activities or exercises are most appropriate and most helpful. You may wish to do them all. You may wish to do only a few. Here, and as you proceed, freely use this workbook as a toolkit and resource to help you and the congregation take best advantage of your time together.

Using Groups to Gather History

HOW groups are selected, advertised, moderated, and utilized is very important. Be clear about the purpose, and the ground rules. The goal is to provide a venue for members to tell you as much as possible about their experiences of congregational life—both the highs and the lows. These groups are not intended to be gripe sessions or grievance airings, though that may become part of the conversation.

Random Groups

The selection of “random groups” is a time-honored tool for simple information gathering. Sign-ups are posted for self-selecting groups of 6-9, at several times and locations. Each congregant or friend may sign up for one group. Ground rules are simple. The moderator (you) prepares a couple of questions for each person to respond to. (The questions may be announced ahead of time.)

Each person has a turn at speaking, with the initial right to pass. Each speaks without interruption, except for clarifying questions. Each initially honors a time limit (5-10 minutes). Speakers are asked to use “I-statements,” and to speak of first hand experience rather than to repeat stories.

You may want to introduce a technique called the “**talking stick**.” In this practice, a ceremonial object—such as a decorated stick, a string of beads, a carved stone—is passed from person to person, either in turn or to whoever wishes to speak. For an agreed-upon length of time, only the person holding the object may speak and after each person has spoken (or chosen to pass), general discussion can follow. A talking stick can encourage more reserved or shy individuals to take their turn at speaking. It is also a useful technique for any group meeting where quiet members are eclipsed by others who overrun air time.

Affinity Groups

Affinity groups have similar ground rules, but are gathered based on a shared identity, such as that of past presidents, treasurers, religious educators, other staff positions, committee chairs, youth or youth leaders, and long-standing or powerful committees.

The Appreciative Inquiry Process (by Barbara Child, AIM)

A Note about the Theory

The thesis of Appreciative Inquiry is that an organization (such as a congregation or some group within a congregation) can be constantly kept thriving and recreated by its conversations. AI builds upon a congregation's best stories. It is not chiefly a planning method. It is a new way of seeing and creating. And if that new creation is to feature the most life-giving forces and forms possible, then the conversations must be shaped by appreciative questions. These are very different from what happens in a group whose approach to their life together is to identify and solve problems. If your committee or other group is interested to infuse the positive spirit of AI in your way of being together, you might see how you could adapt the following steps for your use:

Step 1 – Interviewing Each Other

This is very different from having a group discussion. It involves individuals really reflecting thoughtfully on certain kinds of questions, and also listening to each other. The questions are some variation on the following:

- Describe a time when the congregation (or group, etc.) operated or performed really well. What were the circumstances? What was your part? How did you feel about it?
- What do you value most about this congregation (or group, etc.)? What activities or ingredients or ways of life are most important here? What are the best features?
- How has this congregation (or group, etc.) made a difference in your life? How has it affected you?
- Make three wishes for the future of this congregation (or group, etc.). (Notice that this is purposefully open-ended rather than asking what you would like to see changed or stay the same.)

Step 2 – Extracting Themes

This step is much easier if notes on the interviews have been kept – better yet if the answers to each question are sortable, such as on different index cards. A small group sits down with the written interview notes and looks for themes that recur. Themes may be expressed explicitly, or they may appear more subtly in metaphors or recurring images or repeated turns of phrase. In other words, this step is interpretive. It is a mining job. The people who do it need to be perceptive, preferably not strict literalists. They need not have an agenda or their own but be open to whatever is to be discovered in the data. If their initial read of the data yields many more than about five themes, they probably need to go back and look for ways to reduce the number to five or fewer. The product of their work is a statement on each selected theme that may be a short paragraph or may be a page or more. The statement fleshes out the theme to describe it in some detail and say what its components are, what is important about it, etc.

Step 3 – Creating Provocative Proposals

These are descriptions of the future as if it were the present. They are not proposals in the usual sense of saying: “The Board should do this” or “the Minister should do that.” Instead, for each theme statement, the group working on that theme writes up a vision of the future wished for in relation to that theme. One Provocative Proposal may contain multiple elements. It may be about the future six months from now, a year from now, or five, or possibly ten years, but probably not further out than that. The idea is to be thought-provoking, to stretch or challenge or innovate. At the same time the Proposal needs to be something likely to excite people and produce passionate engagement. The more vivid examples to appeal to the senses and the imagination, the better.

Step 4 – Implementing the Proposals

Some group or body takes on the task of designing a plan for making each Provocative Proposal (vision of the future) come true, seeing that the plan is put into action, and then keeping an eye on the results to see when adjustments are appropriate – or when it’s time for another Appreciative Inquiry cycle to swing into motion. In other words, AI is not a process that a group does once, once and for all. It is a way of being, thinking, and working together that becomes constant so that the group is always more or less engaged in some step or other.

Resources

- *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, 2d ed., Sue Annis Hammond (Thin Book Publishing Company, 1998). As the title suggests, this book gives a brief account of AI theory. It is geared not specifically to congregations but to organizations generally. If my two-page summary sparks your interest, you could use this book as the next step to discover whether you want to investigate more deeply.
- *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*, Mark Lau Branson (Alban Institute, 2004). This is the book that the Transition Team at First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor used as a detailed guide throughout its AI project. This project engaged the congregation for the better part of two interim years. It was the primary mechanism for coming to terms with the congregation’s history; discovering its present identity, strengths, needs, and challenges; and conjuring a vision for its future. I regard this book as a gold mine and a Bible all wrapped up together between two paperback covers.

Timelines

The idea of a congregational timeline is widely known. A long roll of butcher paper is taped horizontally around the room, with intervals marked in decades (or, for some congregations, centuries!). The interim minister conducts a well-populated, freely-flowing meeting in which significant events in the congregation's history are posted on the paper. Out of this scarcely controlled chaos a rather detailed history emerges.

The danger of this approach is that while many congregational truths are hereby made known and transmitted, so are just about as many myths: fond, unfond, and unfounded. So a good deal of initial homework is in order. Who were the ministers, including the interim ministers, and what were terms of service? How about church staff? When were any congregational moves made, buildings burnt, and/or built? What were the membership numbers, using five year increments, going back forty years? What were the annual budgets in those years? How did the endowment rise—or fall? The timeline may have parallel layers for such categories of data.

An excellent model and resource is the UUA Financial Advisor's carefully compiled "UUA Statistics". The table indexes annual giving, taking into account inflation, and then charts increases and decreases of giving in constant dollars. The results are eye-opening. Access it at <http://www.uua.org/TRUS/financial/UUAStatistics.pdf>.

The homework required to exhume membership and financial history can be extensive. A valuable shortcut is the Active Society Report available for each congregation from the UUA's Annual Program Fund (e-mail: apf@uua.org). It includes membership, RE enrollment, giving, and other information.

Including seminal events in the community, the UUA, and the larger world may add insightful perspective to your timeline, also.

Equipped with such supplementary information, the congregation is well prepared to craft a critical history of itself, thereby creating a firm foundation on which to build.

Barbara Child's Historical Odyssey design [see *Addenda*] documents a start-to-finish model for this good work, exemplified with a real-life congregation.

Scrapbook on the Wall

Find a big space or bulletin board for people to post pictures, old programs, souvenirs, and etc. Invite (from the pulpit, every Sunday for a month) folks to bring in any pictures they have of themselves, key people, key events past or present. Introduce it when you are doing the *Timelines*.

Leave this gallery up for a lengthy time. Encourage people to add to it. It's great fun to see each other ten or twenty years ago at the work party, the costume party, or campout. Ask people to label what they post (have a supply at hand of the removable kind) and to identify the people and the event.

History/HerStory

A History/HerStory month is a way to corral together several activities aimed at telling the congregation's story. It might begin with an all-day workshop that would include creating a timeline. Following the timeline with small group sharing can then invoke insights and feelings from that experience which struck them most keenly. Next, gather feedback from the small groups under headings such as "happy about," "not happy about," "the minister who left, " etc.," and then encourage further insights and responses from the whole group. (Take note of any likely candidates for one-on-one conversations.)

Wrap up the month with a service reflecting the congregational story that has emerged.

Sacred Cows

Sacred cows can be put on very high pedestals during times of change and stress. It is well to find them quickly and to be intentional about which ones you wish to topple, steer clear of, or barbeque.

The best way to find the sacred cows, or at least their ranges and home corrals, is to ask frankly:

“Are there things that folks would be *very* upset about if we were to change? Oh? Tell me more about that?”

Sacred cows may include such things as:

- a sacrosanct order of service
- the message on the church answering machine
- the proper Sunday for flower communion
- acceptable choices of music
- clerical attire
- the sermon talk-back
- an inadequate volunteer glued to a longtime role
- firing and hiring of staff
- the design of the pledge drive
- your accessibility on days off
- the color of paint in your office
- works of “art” that no-one dares to move.

You know what you are listening for: the *“don’t mess with it”* messages.

As the cows become visible, do you see any patterns involving issues or individuals?

Part of your job as interim is to move things around, but always with a purpose. You are there to do things a bit differently. You do not want to appear to be a random mischief maker. You want to be an intelligent, steady-going gatherer of information and the bringer of a fresh perspective. It is well to find all the cows you can, but then you must decide which to rope and which to leave alone. And, as always, watch where you step.

Trust Building

Ministerial trust and authority are gained only by invitation. Congregations design the role of minister, first and foremost, to be a position of authority and of trust. Because the interim period is a time of need, the position of minister requires an even deeper trust. Thus, embodying integrity and trustworthiness will always be your highest priority. Most people, most of the time, want to trust and rely on the minister chosen by the church and will do so unless they feel that trust has been violated.

Following a Long Pastorate: It is vital to be clear, with others and yourself, that you do not intend to replace the outgoing minister in the hearts and minds of the congregation. You do, however, thoroughly intend to act in the capacity of minister of the congregation. To do this in an authentic and trustworthy manner, you need to be clear in your own mind about the difference between love, loyalty, and authority. You have authority by virtue of your role. Love and loyalty, as well as trust, affection, and appreciation, may follow, but, only at their own pace.

Following Conflict: Trust will need to be built not only with you but also among the congregants themselves. Rebuilding trust, in the wake of conflict between members, will be an ongoing theme of interim life.

Following a Negotiated Resignation: The congregation's trust in its clergy will have been frayed, perhaps fractured, and trust building will need deep attention. The importance of the interim minister being trustworthy is paramount.

Self-reflections as You Build Trust

The following checklists of questions for self-reflection can help you negotiate the potential pitfalls in this work.

Differentiating from the departing minister:

- Am I authentic in claiming the differences I choose to emphasize?
- Am I choosing constructive differences to emphasize?
- Are the differences that I have chosen dangerous in that they may lock the congregation into patterns the new minister will not easily be able to break?
- Am I emphasizing things about myself that are especially attractive and thus likely to bring disappointment in the new minister?
- Have I given proper weight to claiming differences that will be effective in stirring the pot and creating fluidity?
- Am I truly hearing the pain of those involved in the conflict which led to the former minister's departure, without taking sides, especially the side of those who "won" the battle?
- When I deem qualities of the former minister to be deficiencies, am I merely judging him or her in the light of my own chosen style? Am I buying into the anger of those in the congregation with whom I am sympathetic?
- Am I straight with colleagues on staff about the above issues, and are they on board with the strategies I have chosen? What about their own disappointments, distresses, and longings regarding the former minister?

Applying "miracle grow" to opportunities to engender trust:

- Am I alert to every opportunity to confirm trust with trustworthiness?
- Do I recognize the small steps people take that would seem to be normal, everyday acts of trust but are noteworthy given the circumstances?
- Do I create, whenever possible, openings for people to venture forth with the risks of trusting me?
- Do I recognize offers to trust that are really disguised invitations to join in the still simmering feud over the former minister?
- Do I fulfill deadlines and promises faithfully?
- Do I check my fears that doing so might create expectations of me I cannot sustain? Worry not; you will not be there long enough for you to be concerned about future expectations.

- Do I trust myself? Well, no; not always. Most of us are keenly self-critical. Yet, despite deep knowledge of my own fears and failings, do I choose to profoundly trust myself?
- Do I keep in mind that trust can never be invited successfully in words alone? It is almost better to never speak of it explicitly.

Trusting them to a fault:

- Do I truly allow folks to make mistakes? Am I in touch with my inner urges to take control and take credit? And, am I in touch with my fears for being blamed for failures?
- Do I choose areas to let alone that are really only things I personally don't care to deal with?
- Do I choose areas to trust explicitly where chances of success are reasonably high?
- Do I offer support that is not disguised control?
- Am I truly a non-anxious presence when there is failure?
- Do I blame when there is a failure?
- Do I keep an eye out for blaming patterns in the leadership and congregation and then address them directly?
- Do I model trust of new people?
- Am I very clear with colleagues on staff about these issues, and do I promise never to blame them (even silently)?

Being transparent in all efforts to change or convince others:

- Do I have in my own mind a crystal-clear definition of *manipulation*, and do I test myself by it constantly?
- Do I model self-awareness and ask it of others?
- Do I meditate on the question "What's in this for me?" and then pursue answers that are worthy of God and this work?

Maintaining a family-systems perspective will help you with these checklists. [*Brush up with Appendix C*]

Clergy Roles and Authority

Congregations, in general, wish to "keep" all their former ministers, or at least keep the best parts of each! Individual members also often consider it their sacred right to choose who their own "real" minister is. Former ministers must disappoint them by refusing that role and graciously declining requests for priestly or pastoral care from former congregants, so that there is open room for the new minister to work and to create relationships. Congregants now have a new partner.

The interim minister thus has a three-fold task:

- 1) To encourage the congregation in feeling appreciation and love for its departed minister.
- 2) To aid congregational leaders in understanding the importance of defining the congregation's relationship with the departed minister.
- 3) To work with the departed colleague in reinforcing his or her responsibilities in letting go of ministerial authority.

These needs must not be set aside. When you speak of the former minister, do so with enduring appreciation. Foster confidence within the congregation, that it is capable and worthy of excellent relations with clergy. Be firm, clear, and kind when dealing with your predecessor. However, the hard truth, difficult for many to accept, will still remain; the former minister is no longer the congregation's minister.

The most delicate relationship at stake is the one that will exist between the next called minister and the congregation's *minister emeritus/a (m.e.)*. The very fact that the congregation honored the minister with this status indicates the esteem in which he or she is held. No interim minister should be under the illusion that waving aloft a copy of the *UUMA Guidelines* will define the relationship of the interim minister with the *m.e.* or that of the *m.e.* with the next called minister and the congregation.

Increasingly, congregational leaders are recognizing that these relationships affect the congregation, as well as its clergy. The *m.e.* designation wisely includes both honorific and covenantal dimensions.

An UU advisory group, the "Dearly Departed Project," recommends that two agreements ought to eventually be put in place:

1. A covenant, upon which the congregation votes, which defines the duties and limits that are being conferred when the title is conferred.
2. A three-way covenant among the *m.e.*, the congregation, and the settled minister, after a settled minister is in place.

The full recommendations can be found at:

<http://www.uua.org/programs/ministry/settlement/succession.html>

Thus, the role of the interim minister is not to act as an enforcer, but to work with the leadership to define the congregation's interim relationship with the *m.e.* or other former minister. Nevertheless, if the *m.e.* or other former minister inappropriately

interferes in congregational life, there are a few things you can do. Frank, kind, and direct conversation with your colleague is your first course of action. It may be wise to create a covenant of care, in which a small and excellent committee undertakes conversation and care for the well-being of the former pastor. This is possible if the former minister remains in the area; is in need of care, perhaps due to health reasons; and wishes to be under care in this structured manner.

Providing information from the church board or the Committee on Ministry to the congregation via pulpit editorial, newsletter note, or letter may be helpful. Sometimes congregants simply don't *know* what is correct and or understand why. (For the former minister who stays, see p. 61.)

If You Become the One Drawing Fire

In our work as interim ministers, we are stirring the pot, and one of the hazards is getting burned. Change raises anxiety in people, and anxiety readily erupts into conflict. Sometimes this is targeted at the change-agent, namely you. So if you find yourself taking some heat, it does not necessarily mean that you are doing anything wrong. But it does not mean you are doing everything right, either. This is what you will want to explore.

Begin, pronto! Seek wise counsel from those trustworthy folk who can offer you perspective on the situation, deep listening, reflective questions, and a center of calm.

Soak in Kenn Hurto's tips on applying systems theory [Appendix C]. If you are encountering an especially vexing person, reach for Arthur Paul Boers' little gem of a book, *Never Call Them Jerks*.

Most of the time you are not the real target; you are just handy. You have hardly been there long enough for the conflict to truly be about you, unless you have really blown it. Though this is ever possible, it is far from likely. Even if you are up against a treacherous person, keep your eye on what is happening, not who is the problem.

It may help to image interim ministry as a hero's journey and draw upon the power and insight of ancient myths. The community could have destroyed the Minotaur, a half-human and half-monster creature, if they had only had the courage to do so. Instead, they fed it, annually importing six young men and six young women with which to feed their shadow-side monster. It was the great Theseus who put an end to this corrupt arrangement

If Janus is a companion at the doorways, Diana (Artemis in Greek mythology) is a partner for the woods. The goddess of the moon, of the hunt, of wise ones, and wild things, can be a good friend. Gail Collins-Ranadive notes that the bear is Diana's totem/incarnation and muses: "There are real bears in the woods, and no amount of compassion or understanding or doing more inner work can change the fact that there are only two ways to deal with a bear in the woods: first you identify the species and determine which is the proper response—drop down and play dead or puff up and stand your ground—then you do what's required." "For a woman to take a strong stand," she adds, "can tap into centuries of memory in the collective unconscious of what has happened to women who confronted the status quo of the church."

There will always be people who do not like you, lack trust in ministers, and battle any authority figure. There will be bears in the woods. Of course, they live there and have rights to life, also. Retired colleague John Wolf poses a wry "rule of 17," to wit: that in every congregation, large or small, there will always be seventeen people out to get the minister. Change the minister and their identities may shift, but the total will hold steady; if one dies and two move away, three others will show up. Allow yourself a little levity in the midst of it all.

What Robert Fulghum observes about parenthood can also be applied to interim ministry. You will never know how skilled an interim you were or what you did right or wrong. Never. In following the church's future, ever after from a distance, you will glean only part of an answer.

Robert Kimball once offered keen insight to a seminarian at a teachable moment: "when you assume a position of leadership you can't afford the luxury of expectations." Some churches will thrive in spite of our most misguided efforts, and some will falter and fail despite our very best work. We offer them all we can, and we set them free.

Working with Grief and Anger

When people trust each other, they can begin to work with grief and anger. Until they have lifted up these powerful feelings, little will change. Reactions to loss may play out in peculiar forms, echoing Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief. People may act and speak from various combinations of denial, anger, bargaining, resignation, relief and, therefore, think and say things they would never express otherwise. Catharsis, literally "purging," is a step in healing, and needs understanding and boundaries of safety. [See Appendix G for a simple and effective way to offer this to key leadership.]

The interim minister has a key role in recognizing grief-driven actions and words and in helping guide them. Good pastoring is important: comforting the speakers and recognizing their feelings, while, at the same time, not letting harsh words and judgments damage either good memories or future actions.

When working through difficult feelings, there will come a time to let them go. People will not all reach that readiness at the same time. Nonetheless, a communal ritual within the context of worship serves to encourage healing after there have been opportunities to process the pain and ease the grief. [Appendix H describes a ritual experience that Howard Dana created for his interim congregation, in the wake of a painful separation from its first settled minister.] [(Appendix J structures a small-group process that aids catharsis and can fit congregations of any size)]

Some UU congregations use forms of confession, communal acknowledgement, and forgiveness with regularity in worship, sometimes monthly, or with forms of communion. [cf: #637 in *Singing the Living Tradition*] In truth, all of us are in frequently in need of forgiveness throughout our lives. This is rarely more keenly felt than during interim times. The High Holy Days, on the Jewish calendar each autumn, offer unparalleled opportunity to initiate forgiveness and healing. Review "*About confidentiality, privacy and anonymity*" [p. 11] for guidance on the ingredients of effective confession. (Also see the **Worship and celebration** section and **Days of Awe** in the *Addenda*.)

Symbols can be incorporated into rituals capable of power beyond words. **Stones**, with their weight and hardness, are one such symbol [refer: p. 30]. **Fire** is another. Flash paper can be purchased in magic supply stores, if you are fortunate enough to have one nearby. It can be cut into strips, and written on (with a pen, or invisibly with a finger tip). When touched to a candle flame, it instantly turns to light and then ash, too rapidly to burn one's skin. Set the candle in the middle of a shallow bowl of water, as an extra precaution. (And store the flash paper safely.)

In a sermon on "hungry ghosts," Barbara Child spoke of the power of confession to enable unveiling them and letting them go.

The goal of the church is not justice but reconciliation—with others and with one's own flawed and yet still worthy self. ...When we tell our story with all its hiccups and pauses for tears, it is a confession. Here is what I did. Here is what he did, or she did. I could have, should have, might have done it this other way, but here is what I did, or didn't do. And here is what I wish—oh,

how I wish—the other had done or not done. But this is what, in my imperfect memory and understanding, happened instead. It was a long time ago. Or it was yesterday. And here is how I feel about it now. Here is what I have the capacity to change. Here is what is past changing. And now that I have remembered and noticed all that, and spoken about it, now I am ready to try to move on to a freer future.

As grief and anger are released and shed, people who left in the heat of the fray, some of them, often many, though rarely all, will tentatively venture to return. Insofar as healing has happened, they will be warmly welcomed, and this further accelerates the healing and hope. Remain sensitive and aware of the prodigal son effect, as those most responsible for the congregation's endurance are often taken for granted in the rushes of relief and joy. Find heartfelt ways to recognize and appreciate the people who have stayed and kept the ship afloat through all the rough water. (Some folks on the fringes will have been largely oblivious to all that had occurred, but staunch ones and key leaders will have weathered the battering storm.)

In the reverse effect, grief and anger may play out in accelerated conflicts within the congregation. Churches with no significant history of contention may become entangled in conflict during an interim period. You can reassure participants that this is not uncommon and is one symptom of loss, grief, and uncertainty. If the conflicts appear to be accelerating or are rooted in the damaging behaviors of former leaders, you will be wise to call on outside resources (such as a district's conflict management team).

Working with Conflict

Every interpersonal conflict is born as a problem to solve. It may then escalate through as many as five discernible levels of intensity, which, adapted from Speed Leas of the Alban Institute [*and further detailed in Appendix I*], consist of:

- **Problem:** An issue exists about which people differ. Players understand one another, but have conflicting goals, needs, or perspectives. They gladly collaborate to solve the problem.
- **Disagreement:** Players begin to fear the problem may not get resolved and, sensing some risk, grow cautious. The need to protect themselves comes to the forefront. Language shifts from specific to general.
- **Contest:** Win/lose dynamics arise, and players cluster into sides. They now aim to win. Information is distorted as limbic brain responses kick in, overriding fact with feeling. Personal attacks begin.
- **Crusade:** Winning or losing no longer concludes the conflict. Opponents now become enemies. One's own side is principled, the other immoral. Players must either fight or flee.
- **World War:** Not only must the enemy be banished, but the rest of the world forewarned. Firing the minister is not enough.

When seeking to assess the conflicted situation confronting you through one-on-one conversations with key members of the congregation, these questions are useful:

- Are there members who are disillusioned or angry?
- Were there sides or factions in the conflict?
- Were there "winners" and "losers"?
- Are there members who have left the congregation?
- How are you, the interim minister, dealing with the conflict and its aftermath?
- What do you, as minister, imagine the congregation needs to begin to heal or recover?
- Who within the membership needs your attention?

Remember that in these one-on-one conversations healing is occurring. It is a relief to talk about what happened with a neutral person from outside the conflict and to really be heard. Depending on the level of conflict, it may take a long time for some folks to resolve their feelings of hurt, anger or guilt. You may not see a lot of change in some of the members during your tenure as interim, but that does not mean that resolution is not in progress. The danger lurking in these conversations is that the conflicted person with whom you are conversing may attempt to draw you into taking sides with his or her camp.

It is important to recognize that if some members have left due to the conflict, there is much underlying emotion in the remaining membership. A serious rupture in the

life of this congregation has occurred. Guilt may be felt by those congregants who remain, as well as anger, by those who "lost" or "won," but in the end, chose to stay.

The Interim minister asks: "Who needs my attention?" Guilty winners? Grieving losers? Angry winners and losers? Those who have left? Those who are disillusioned and angry with the warring parties?"

You will need to do a type of triage here. You have listened. You have learned. Now, who and what should you attend to most immediately, and how?

When conflicts become contests, parishioners take sides, those for or against something or someone (often the minister). The players experience a correspondingly simple emotional response within themselves. Most contestants ignore their own conflicting emotions, so as to escape having to face decisions about loyalties and courses of action that entail complicated and ambiguous feelings. The intensity of conflict, the guilt and losses from "winning" or "losing" a fight, can be eased to a point where forgiveness and reconciliation are possible. This can be accomplished through processes that help people understand the complexity of their feelings, and, especially, the many feelings they have in common with those who were their adversaries. [See "Healing Focus Groups,"—Appendix J and "Who Am I?"—Appendix K.]

Barry Oshry, in his book *Seeing Systems*, describes "Taking Time Out of Time" (a TOOT) to illuminate what is occurring in an organizational system. Congregational members gather in one place, and each congregant is invited to discuss the following issues:

- Describe how you, the congregant, are experiencing life in the congregation.
- What are the issues you are dealing with?
- How are you feeling?

If and when people are *willing and able to tell the truth of their experiences*, and equally *willing and able to let in and accept as valid the experiences of others*, the results, he says, can be astounding.

If there are members who have left, you have the opportunity, if it appears appropriate, to invite them into a grieving and recovery process by:

- Inviting them back for *history/herstory* month (page 16).
- Inviting them to meet with you for one-on-one *history/herstory* sharing.
- Convening a group of those who have left for *history/herstory* reflection. (*Caution*: This situation carries considerable risk of entrenching and escalating anger. Do not try it without a trained partner and careful planning.)
- Inviting them back for services.
- Offering resources in seeking or creating a form of mediation for those who are still divided.

If you encounter conflict between attending members or if conflict arises during your tenure, it is important that you acknowledge it, but it is also equally important that you do not assume responsibility for resolving it. Few interim ministers have the time or the training to handle it well. Call upon the District Executive or district conflict management team for assistance.

When a Former Minister Dies

- Offer the opportunity to “sit shiva.” Open the church all day and evening, set up a worship center (in the round, if the setting allows), and room for sitting. Provide candles to light and play quiet music. Offer paper and pen, a place to write thoughts and messages, and space on the worship center to leave them. Staff the church with pastoral care team members on shifts.
- Compose a worship service (on the following Sunday, if possible) created from the deceased one’s own words and favorite hymns, interknit with observations about the key themes that illuminated their ministry with the congregation. Involve one or more good readers who were worship leaders during those years.
- Blessings received during mourning for the deceased minister may be written on wide ribbons with permanent markers, then hung on a cord and draped on the wall or hung on a tree outdoors. Leave this up for an appropriate time, and then offer it to the minister’s family.
- If there is congregational interest in creating a memorial (chalice, pulpit, room, garden, etc...many ideas are possible), encourage the effort.
- The first anniversary of a beloved minister’s death is an opportune time to mark a milestone in the grieving experience. Plan a celebratory worship service. Include reflections on the gifts of his or her ministry from key members, fond remembrances, and humorous recollections, too. Consider setting up a memory table, on which members can place photos, objects, mementos, and then retrieve them before they leave or later, if their name is attached. This is an ideal opportunity to dedicate a memorial, if one has been created.

Worship and Celebration

One of the great gifts of worship and celebration is the capacity to ritualize accomplishments, closure, affirmation, and healing. Worship is also an aid in grieving. People grieve for ministers when they leave, as well as when they die. If your minister of thirty-five years leaves, that is a source of grief. If the minister you loved and trusted leaves as the result of a conflict, that is also a source of grief, as well as anger. Ritualized worship helps us heal.

Listed below are possible sermons or services you may wish to adapt to your needs:

- **A “Different Rooms” sermon:** Using Ken Patton’s evocative reading (*Singing the Living Tradition*, #443) can be an ingathering, honoring the varied traditions, beliefs, and points of view of the congregation, while acknowledging and honoring their presence under this one roof of community.
- **A “Sermon in Stones”:** There are a myriad of ways to use stones as a symbol of that which endures. Invite members to bring a stone from their house or a place they love. You can incorporate stones in a mingling of water as an ingathering service. Purchase small stones from a local landscape or building-supply company or gather them from a shore or river bank and include a “stone meditation” in the service. You might invite congregations to express what they bring of themselves to this enduring religious community. Their stones might be placed in a pathway, a pool, or a mosaic, and/or integrated into the building site.
- **A “Report-back” sermon:** This shares some of your listening-and-learning with the congregation. You may speak about how this congregation is seen by its members as well as by others, such as its former ministers, former presidents, the community, etc.
- **High Holy Days:** Our religious tradition has also grown out of Judaism. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur liturgies are both beautiful and moving and can be adapted to the congregation’s needs in this time of transition. [See *Days of Awe Addendum*]
- **Ghosts:** There are holidays during which the departed, either literal or figurative ghosts, may be invited back to bless us and be blessed by us. All Hallows’ Eve (Samhain) on October 31st or Dia de los Muertos on November 1st are particularly appropriate. Such a celebration should be explained and announced several weeks in advance in order to give people time to prepare. Invite them to bring a photograph or memento of someone they wish to remember. Create an altar or table at the center of the meeting space, on which people are invited to place their photographs and mementos during a musical meditation or interlude. Flowers and candles may be available for those who brought no tangible memento yet wish like to add something symbolic. (Marigolds are the traditional flower for Dia de los Muertos.) The

service may include readings, singing, responsive readings, prayer, meditation, and a homily on the legacies we receive from our forebears. “We Remember Them” [#720 in *Singing the Living Tradition*] fits this service well.

- A **Celebration of Congregational History and Continuity**, which lifts up anniversaries, elders, and multi-generations. You might have a candelabra with a candle for each decade of the congregation’s life and have a representative from each decade talk for 2-3 minutes and light that candle.
- **Autumn** is the earth’s season for grief work, and **Spring** represents transformation and rebirth. The northern hemisphere is your partner in the interim year. Go for the worship opportunities!

Too often, people forget to celebrate and be joyful. Each congregation has many events in its history worth recalling and many accomplishments to enjoy. Help them remember and honor them.

- Celebrate the congregation’s anniversary with a birthday party. Have a cake for every decade. Sing “Happy Birthday!”
- Have an Irish wake to bury expended anger following a conflict, thereby allowing the anger to die. Tell stories of transformation and new hope. Have great food and great music.
- A Halloween or Dia de los Muertos celebration can invite the departed back to dance.
- Stage a party to celebrate the year’s new beginnings! Invite the whole congregation. Dance! Sing! Play! Create a rainbow with helium balloons tied onto a ribbon anchored at either end.
- When you draw near the interim’s end and sermonize on all that has happened, remember to thank the people who stayed through the tough times and kept the light shining. (And let the implicit message to everyone, that a new transition awaits them, remain unspoken. It will be appreciatively heard.)