

“The Five Tasks of Interim Ministry”

August 17, 2014

Good morning! I am pleased to be here and pleased to be beginning together a promising rite of passage—a collective rite whereby, if it all comes off according to Hoyle, a transformation will happen. After years of part-time ministry and a low profile denominationally, this congregation will call a full-time minister and start a new, higher profile, phase of its life. To increase the likelihood that you can successfully pull this off, denominational and other officials have developed a program: Interim Ministry. I’ve been trained in this. I’ve also successfully completed several interim ministries. I want to take this morning to share with you, in as matter-of-fact, down-to-earth a way as I can, what that program entails and how I hope—with your help and collaboration—to further it here.

A lot of what I’ll be doing is systems analysis: watching what you’re doing and seeing what works, what could work better, and what’s worth re-configuring, or maybe even scrapping. Like anything else, church dynamics can be studied analytically. Working in lots of different churches and seeing for oneself what works and why also helps. I’ve been a Unitarian Universalist minister 35 years this December; and while experience is a good teacher, probably the best, one thing it has repeatedly revealed to me is that new ideas and new ways of doing things are sometimes better than what I’ve experienced theretofore. So I spend the first few months mostly paying attention.

Interim Ministry asks of me to pay particular attention to *five developmental tasks* or *focus points*, which can be simplified into:

1. Helping the Fellowship know and appreciate its *history*;
2. Helping it achieve general consensus regarding its *identity*;
3. Facilitate changes, where appropriate, in *leadership*;
4. Nurture *lateral relationships* with the UUA, PCD, local clergy networks, etc.;
5. Leave the congregation poised and ready to adopt a new *vision*.

In recent years denominational and other officials have come to recommend two-year interims. It takes a while to facilitate all these tasks. It works a lot better if I know all of your names—and that takes time before we even get to the tasks themselves.

Now it's my contention that these tasks are integral to all good ministry, not just interim ministry, but in any settled ministry there are political considerations that come into play making it hard, sometimes, to address certain issues. Facilitating leadership changes, for instance, can expend a lot of the minister's political capital; sometimes, political calculations lead to an attitude that if things are tolerable let's just keep tolerating it. Interim ministers, however, have no such problem; I already have my pink slip. I expect to *use up* my political capital not store it away, and to leave you and my successor two years from now with a clean slate.

Before looking over the Five Tasks one-by-one, let me share some overall thoughts I have about what we're about to begin. I want you to understand what my goals and intentions are and a little bit about my strategy. I have already made clear that much of what I'll be focusing on throughout out time together is systems analysis: how are you organized administratively? Who is accountable for what? Who reports to whom? What's working and why? And—this is usually much harder to see—what's missing?

The book on interim ministers is that they “shake things up.” And there's some truth to that. It's not that I enjoy discombobulation—far from it. It's just that after 22 years with one minister, no matter how part-time, any congregation will have established ways of doing things. Here those ways include a tradition of strong lay leadership. All this is “text book,” as they say, and nothing to be particularly concerned about. But it can lead to dust-ups. Consider what happened at my last congregation—the UU church up in Redwood City. A short while after arriving I shared with members of the Worship Committee that I intended to change the Order of Service a little bit, moving the Announcements from the end closer to the beginning of worship. Whoa! They had an active yahoo-group up there and within a day or two there was a big uproar! How dare he! (Now as it turned out, coincidentally, a terrible stomachache led me to the hospital where it was discovered that my gallbladder was bad and had to be removed. Word got out that I'd been stricken and sent to the ER! People were suddenly very remorseful; “Ohmygosh! We've been too harsh on the man and sent him to the ER!”) By the time I recovered everyone realized that moving around Announcements was, in fact, a proxy for deeper concerns: first, the realization that their beloved former pastor was, in fact, gone away. Someone else was in charge. Would he be autocratic? (As many believed the last interim minister from ten years earlier had been.)

Changes in the Order of Service (that is, changes in our standard Sunday liturgy) draw everybody's attention. Unitarian Universalists typically say they're not into ritual all that much, but my experience is otherwise. A little change: OK. But not all that much. I'm comfortable with that, actually. But its important for you to know that in our Unitarian Universalist movement, traditionally, the *only* aspect of congregational life that the minister had complete authority over was—and remains—worship. I've attended services here a couple of times and I like your liturgy well enough. But part of my responsibility is to help you get ready for your next minister: who will have and expect to exercise her or his right to design and lead Sunday services. Another thing: etymologically, the word “liturgy” means, “work of the people.” We may have the right to lead worship, but—like virtually everything in a UU congregation—collaboration always makes it better. And nothing's etched in stone, either. As the year goes on and working in partnership with members of the Worship Committee, I'll initiate a few changes. And when I do, please consider giving them a chance. Nothing will be done by fiat. Or, if it is, it'll be voted upon later to see—after giving the thing a chance to how it flies—whether it's worth maintaining.

Another area of congregational life that, while not one of the five focus points, will draw my attention is finance. I have been working in churches for a long time and I've done many canvasses, many pledge drives, many special fundraisers and the like. Some

people—here like in every other congregation—are particularly anxious about the deficit budget you're currently operating under. Please be advised: I'm *not* anxious about. I *am* aware of it keenly. Keep in mind: I've done this before. These things can work and work almost magically—something about casting your bread upon the waters or about investing, not burying, one's talents. Trust me: I'm paying attention. And helping you achieve a firm financial foundation is among my goals. Make no mistake about it.

Here at UUCF your Interim Search Committee and I agreed to a one-year contract, with the expectation that it will most likely be renewed as progress is made.

Let us now consider, one at a time, each of the five developmental tasks: The first one is to help you come to terms with your *history*, and to a full appreciation of both its high and low points. As a history major this is very important for me—and usually lots of fun. In an effort to learn some of that history I'll be interested in meeting some of you and hearing about how you got involved here and what's happened that kept you coming back—or almost caused you to quit. Give me a call and invite me over to share your UUCF story, especially those of you who've been here a long time. Another project we'll engage in, probably beginning in late September or October will be stretching out many feet—many yards—of butcher paper and inviting everyone, no matter how new to UUCF, to add their memories of what's been going' on. Coming out of all this I'll do what I can to write two or three sermons with an updated history from 1967 through today.

Maybe it's because I was a history major that I strongly believe that no one can know whom he or she are unless they know where they've come from. We cannot act as free citizens of a free country if we do not know what freedom meant to our ancestors and how they came to establish—and gave their lives to defend it. So until we know what inspired our congregation's founders and what kept their successors keepin' on keepin' on, we won't be able to keep on keepin' on ourselves. It's only when we know where we've come from that we can begin to fully appreciate the challenges and opportunities before us in the present, which is, essentially the second developmental task: Coming to congregational consensus about who UUCF is today. Yes, I know you're a Welcoming Congregation. I know you seem to be friendly. What else? What makes UUCF unique? What's your mojo? Your essence? Your collective chi? I cannot answer that. Not this morning. But I hope that by late January you will be able to answer for yourselves.

The third task is easy when it's easy... and sometimes it's not easy at all: facilitating, where appropriate changes in leadership. This can include both professional and lay leadership. I've had to deal with employees who needed to improve their work habits. As I've done elsewhere I expect to establish regular supervisory meetings with all our church staff, establish a practice of bi-annual performance reviews, including ongoing dialogue and goal setting. It's already begun. I've also begun the practice of weekly staff meetings. This helps everyone more fully understand and connect to one another's efforts, but even more important it helps the staff become a better team. A coordinated ensemble. This takes time and it takes patience, but it can make a *huge* difference for your next minister.

The fourth developmental task focuses on strengthening lateral relationships to the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Pacific Southwest District, and to local groups including local interfaith or community organizing groups. Your District Executive, Reverend Ken Brown, has made it clear to me that while this is an important part of what he's hoping I'll especially attend to, I will not be starting from zero. That's what I had thought at first. I knew that your Emeritus Minister, Jon Dobrer, was not in fellowship with other Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and so I assumed that there were almost no lateral connections. Instead, your tradition of strong lay leadership has overcome the isolationist impulse. Individual members have been involved in the District and in wider denominational activities. Still, this can always be improved. And it reaps manifold benefits. Always. I look forward to attending next spring's District Assembly and the UUA General Assembly in Portland this coming June. From what I heard, no one from this congregation attended GA in Providence, R.I. last June. Which is too bad, because it was fabulous! The theme, "Love Reaches Out" invited delegates to ask themselves and one another how love reaches out in the world and how to be part of it when it does. Many workshops, caucuses, discussion groups, presentations, and worship services highlighted and advanced the theme powerfully. And singing our favorite hymns 4000 strong is always restorative and empowering for me. Wouldn't it be great if I can lead a full delegation ten months from now in Oregon? I sure think so. And I'm hopeful that come June many will agree with me and off we'll go. Who knows? Maybe your next minister will be there, too, and be impressed at the dedication and commitment of the Fullerton contingent.

Different interim ministers understand the last developmental task slightly differently. As I understand it, the task is to bring you to the threshold of adopting a new vision. That vision will be a collaborative effort between you and the settled minister you call. I would cast my own vision, but it's not my vision that matters here: it's yours. Honed out of fully appreciating your history, a clear sense of identity, healthy and empowered leaders, connected in a healthy way to other networks, and in concert with a freely and happily chosen Settled Minister.

Two more thoughts. First, the Search Committee. Eventually, you'll need to gather a committee of seven people to conduct a survey, put together a congregational portfolio, review materials provided by potential candidates, conduct interviews and present a Candidate for congregational vote. This is a very formal process and it behooves you to attend to it carefully. I will help. Denominational thinking has changed in recent years regarding how to best convene one of these committees and I will make sure everyone understands what the current thinking is, why, and how we can benefit from understanding and following it. But none of that matters yet. Timing is of critical importance in these matters and it's not time now and won't be for several months.

And finally, I will ask you to think a lot about ministry – what is it? What do ministers do? How do they behave? How are they expected to behave? I will be preaching a lot on this subject over the coming two years. I don't have all the answers. Honestly, I've been at this a long time and sometimes think I know less and less. But I *have* thought a lot about

it, and I hope to share with you the questions I've struggled with and a few of the tentative answers.

May the year before us be a good and productive one. And may our time together be vital and empowering for everyone. May we grow in understanding and compassion, in sense of mission, and commitment to living out that mission authentically and with joy and gusto. May we remain in touch and in respectfully relationship throughout. May we grow in trust. May we have fun. May everyone be included.

Amen. Shalom. Namaste.

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