

The Search for Interdependence or the Interdependence of the Search
Kay Fairwell
Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley
July 5, 2015

“That’s our next minister!”

That is a sentence I heard three times, in one form or another, at the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly in Portland last week. As you may imagine, there were many opportunities to experience different ministers: worship services, workshops, business sessions. Each time, a different member of our congregation’s delegation excitedly came up to me with that claim. And each time it was a different minister: a young woman, a middle-aged man, and a transgender man.

For those of you who may be here for the first time or are new to UUCB, we are just launching a search for a new settled minister. Our ministers of 17 years retired last year, and we are in the middle of an interim ministry.

Right here at UUCB, before General Assembly, a number of you came up to me with the following suggestions for our next minister:

We need an astounding preacher.

I need a shoulder to cry on.

Someone who will make us grow.

It is important that our next minister be active in social justice.

I think it should be a man.

I want a woman minister.

I really think it’s time we have a person of color.

Do you think we are ready for a gay, lesbian or transgender minister?

Someone young, someone who is right out of seminary.

We need an older, experienced minister.

I even had a very specific request for a young woman who graduated from Cal Poly. “I want a scientist type,” this member insisted.

For those of you who remember Jack Paar, I call upon his famous quote: I kid you not. Those were actual suggestions. And these are just the ones I heard. I’m not even counting suggestions made to other members of the Search Committee.

As you can see, we have a challenging task ahead of us. Individually, we may all be looking for different things. Our challenge is to get past our individual wants and step into what UUCB needs now and in the future.

How do we do this? Imagine the process being something like the TV show Top Chef. One of the challenges has a team of individual chefs creating a recipe together that will please the judges—the judges in this case being all of us and those who will follow us.

One is a gourmet chef while another is a meat-and-potatoes kind of cook. The next chef is into deconstructing familiar recipes while the final chef is into molecular gastronomy. The task for these chefs is to work together to create a new recipe that will work for everyone or almost everyone.

So how are we going about this search for a new minister? How are we creating this new recipe? One of the first tasks was the selection of the Ministerial Search Committee, which happened last month. Seven UUCB members were selected to lead this process.

It has been pointed out to us, and believe me we are also aware, that we have only one man on the search committee. We have also noticed that there are no persons of color, nobody with a disability, no young person (although some of us think of our 55-year-old as young), and no parent of young children.

We want you to know that we brought this concern up with our Ministerial Search Representative Bob Miess. He pointed out to us that there is no way with a 7-member team (the recommended number for a search committee) that we can directly represent every cohort in the congregation. It is our job to connect with all populations in the congregation. We are not here to each represent a silo; we were selected to represent the entire congregation. Our process will be to work hard to get to know each other (which we started at our retreat) and UUCB very well.

The weekend before General Assembly, the search committee and our Ministerial Search Representative held a three-day retreat at Freestone. One purpose of this retreat was to get to know each other, find out about our working styles, and figure out how we could work together. We did a number of exercises and took a number of tests to help us figure out what roles we should take on the committee: chair, congregational record and congregational packet editor, reference checker, publicity and recording secretaries, arranger, treasurer, member of the negotiating team, survey conductor, organizer of focus groups. As you can see, there is a lot of work to be done.

What I found really wonderful about this process of selecting our roles is that we were unanimous in our final selection. First we did the exercises. Then we indicated which roles we wanted to take on. Then as a whole we voted on the assignment of roles. After a bit of finagling and moving tasks around, our vote was unanimous. In our parlance, we had consensus.

Speaking of consensus, another part of our retreat was determining how we would make decisions. Our choices were leader decides, consensus, consent, super majority, and majority.

Our definition of consensus is everyone in agreement. Consent means a number of us are in favor and the others can go along. We even decided, for various decisions, how many have to be in favor and how many can go along. As you might imagine in this—or any—UU congregation, there aren't many decisions where the leader decides.

We have already set up a weekly two-hour meeting. We are assured that sometimes in the process we will be meeting more frequently. And I have already lost count of how many emails we have exchanged. Speaking of which, we have set up internal and all-church access email addresses. You might be interested to know that our most difficult challenge so far has been setting up a Google calendar for the search year. I won't tell you how many UUs it took to set up this calendar. And I'm sure this won't be our most difficult challenge.

So back to our process. At General Assembly there was a special workshop for congregations in search. You can be proud of your delegates to this Assembly. When Keith Kron, the UUA Transitions Director, was taking roll, asking who was representing each congregation, the participants gasped at the number of us UUCBers who attended. I believe there were five of us. Each of the other congregations had one or two attendees.

At this workshop we were told that one of the most important parts of the search process is how the last ministry ended. Retirement brings a different situation than “negotiated leaving” or re-settlement. And how the transition happens matters. Usually, the first six months of the interim are about grief. Congregants take the time they need in order to move forward. The interim helps the congregation grieve and move forward so they will be ready for a new minister. When there is no interim, some congregations just look at the previous minister. They look at what they like, keep those parts, and get someone exactly the same. Others look at what they don't like, and get the opposite. Some look at a minister from 50 years ago and decide they want that same kind of minister.

The UUA has found that congregations that do the most with the interim process do the best with a settled minister. Congregations that have done two or more years of an interim process find a settled minister 90% of the time. Those that have an interim period of one year find a minister 56% of the time. As Keith Kron told us: “Do it well. Don't do it quickly.”

So how do we do it well? As the description of this service read: We Unitarian Universalists are an independent bunch. And as we begin our search process for a new settled minister, we will be looking for someone who will not only answer our personal needs and wishes but more importantly fit our needs and desires as a church community now and in the future. Who are we? Who do we want to be? And who will help us get there?

Who Are We?

This is one of the questions we will be asking of all of us. What is specific to us and typical of UU congregations? We are in transition, in both spiritual and physical growth. We are still at the beginning of the 21st century. During this yearlong process we will be asking: What makes the life of this church? What is the burning coal? What is the life-affirming sense of community?

Who Do We Want to Become?

We will want to hear your answers. Some of the answers we came up with at the retreat are: We want to become the congregation that people want to join in changing the world. We want to become truly intergenerational, increase active participation, sustain ourselves, and live our mission statement. We want to be more reflective of the real world. Our process over the next year will be listening to your answers to this question.

Who Will Help Us Get There?

I won't state all of the adjectives the search committee came up with for a minister, but here are a few: inspirational, adaptable, empowering, visionary, accountable, appreciative of our history. There were many more. And during this year we will be asking you these three questions, over and over again. There are a number of ways we will be doing this. There will be a survey. This survey will be online and in print. We will hold focus groups. There may be another congregational conversation. We will be trying all sorts of ways of getting your input. We will ask to come to your committee or group to talk about what you are looking for in a new minister. And when we have done all that, we will be looking to see whom we might have overlooked. In fact, in our weekly meeting as a committee, we are setting aside three minutes of every meeting to ask ourselves "Who are we not thinking of right now?"

There will be one-on-one meetings, as there were in the Stewardship Connecting we just completed. And if you feel you haven't been heard, come talk to one of us. Our goal is to make sure that every voice is heard. Our process will involve questions that engage us at a deeper level.

Another activity that will be part of this search process is a Beyond Categorical Thinking Workshop. What expectations or prejudices do we have in regard to who our next minister should be? The purpose of this workshop is to discover where our biases and assumptions are. Do we think a minister needs to be a certain age, race, ability, gender ID? Is there a chance that someone we might ordinarily dismiss could be exactly what we need? This program will consist of a workshop and a Sunday worship service. As soon as we have the date finalized, we will let you know. It will probably be in October.

Once we have a clearer idea of who we are and who we want to be, we will be looking for who will help us get there. One major decision we will be making is how we present ourselves to potential ministers. The instruction we have been given again and again is to be honest! We are better served by honesty and

authenticity than by putting our best foot forward. Especially about troubles we are or have been having. Ministers want to help us make a difference. We need to be honest about our strengths and challenges. If we were to play down our challenges, we might just miss out on that minister who can help us overcome them. Ministers are attracted to where we want to stretch. An example of this would be a congregation saying “We are excited about growth” instead of saying “We have been having a 20-year conversation about growth.” Sound familiar?

This is a long process. But I believe a good one. What I say to people who find this journey unsettling is that I trust the process. Past searches have brought us Reverends Barbara and Bill Hamilton-Holway, our Director of Family Ministry Merrin Clough, and our Interim Minister the Reverend Greg Ward. One way or the other, I believe it will be OK. That said, it’s OK to be nervous or unhappy during the process. That’s often the nature of change.

As I’ve heard all our specific needs and wishes for a new minister, including my own, I think back on a story—or was it a joke—that I’ve heard a couple of times from this pulpit. I couldn’t find the exact wording, so I’ve inexpertly adapted it to our situation. After a long and thoughtful search, a church finally presented a minister to the congregation. In introducing her, it was revealed that she could actually walk on water. “Wouldn’t you know,” sighed a disgruntled congregant, “that we’d get a minister who can’t swim.”

So we’ll try our best to present for your vote someone who can both walk on water and swim! But he or she might just be the chef that helps us create the winning recipe for our future.

May it be so, amen, and blessed be.

- - - - -

Reflection

From the Fragmented World
By Phillip Hewett
Reading for July 5, 2015

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves.

Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.

We would hold fast to all of the good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.

Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.

In this spirit we gather.

In this spirit we pray.

- - - - -

Beginning the Journey

Beginning the Journey
Warren Zittel, July 5, 2015

Hi. I'm Warren Zittel.

I am a member of the Ministerial Search Committee. Today I get to share my continuing journey into the Seventh Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

The seven members of the search committee indeed do indeed constitute an interdependent web. None of us works in a vacuum. The committee itself does not work in a vacuum either. Hopefully you will soon join us as active participants in **this** web of existence, through focus groups, and a survey.

But the journey is new to me personally in one very particular aspect. This committee takes a most mindful approach to the specific task of "Ministerial Search"; more mindful than any other group I have worked with for any other specific purpose. In fact, we are being asked to step up to the next level of transparent consciousness, with ourselves and others, to enable us to achieve a level of synergy among ourselves that we do not magically bring with us simply by being Unitarian Universalists.

It is exciting, and scary, at the same time.

2015-07-05

7

It is hard work, but good work.

Please help us do good work.

Thank you.