



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Add Interim

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Neighborhood Church, welcome to the season of Advent. This time of year in the Christian calendar of celebration and worship asks us to wait for the arrival of winter and Christmas; the joy of knowing the length of daylight will slowly begin to increase again. However, your congregation has been in a time of advent for close to half a year now: with the departure of your long-serving Director of Religious Education and my hiring as *Interim* Director of Religious Education, you began the wait for a new settled religious professional and a new settled time of religious education ministry.

For some, the title is unfamiliar or difficult to grasp; for others, their experiences with academia, law, or corporations makes the term commonplace: *ad interim* is a Latin term that means “in the meantime” or temporarily. Thus, people with “interim” in their title serve in that position only for a brief time—until someone takes a permanent post. In ministry, the temporariness of the position is not all that defines the role.

Interim religious professionals and interim ministry are specialized ways that congregations choose to engage their spiritual life. The field of interim or transitional ministry has rapidly developed over the past 30 years in order to help lay leaders and professional religious leaders navigate the changes in ministry that spiritual communities might see. The way we choose to make decisions as Unitarian Universalist congregations—our polity—makes it so that there are no formal requirements for being an interim religious professional; however, most people serving congregations in this way have received specialized training in the unique challenges of interim ministry including a deep understanding of how congregations of different sizes vary structurally.

Interim religious professionals generally serve a congregation for anywhere from 18 months to two years; however, there are significant differences in the terms of length of service depending on the type of professional. Whereas interim parish ministers *may not* be called as a settled minister of the congregation they served during a period of interim ministry, that same restriction does not exist for religious educators, professional musicians, congregational administrators or membership professionals. Moreover, congregations and their interim professionals might choose to renegotiate their covenant or contract after a period of time—interim professionals serve congregations for as long as their skills are needed and the relationship between the two groups serves the mission and vision of the congregation.

Roger S. Nicholson, one of the founders of the Interim Ministry Network, describes that one of the major tasks of interim ministry is seeing the church in transition as a human

system, or as a family. This allows the interim professional to help the congregation see both the process as well as the content of transition. In viewing the congregation in this way, everyone involved can begin to see the different levels of emotional activity that influence the transition.¹

As with any human or social system, a period of being in between will bring a variety of feelings from joy or excitement about the future to sadness and longing for the past. Sometimes, the interim time brings feelings of disinterest. Comparing church transitions to spring, commentator on Christianity Phyllis Tickle elaborates on this last point:

because at a practical or useful level, spring isn't "here" until it's fully enough here to make a difference in our mundane lives—in what we decide to wear, how we plan our activities, and what to do with our time, even in what and how much we decide to eat.²

So it is with interim ministry. Tickle continues:

If it was indeed coming our way, then most of us would prefer to deal with it after it was fully here and not while it was merely sending intimations of itself. There's a certain economy of effort in the "Wait 'til it actually gets here" attitude.³

Jesus also speaks to this point in an excerpt from the Lectionary readings for this first Sunday in Advent. Discussing fig trees, he says, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near."⁴ The desire to be in a settled period with ministry greatly impacts how a congregation gets there. Yet, there is no way to the spring but through the dark and cool winter and the first shoots and leaves of plants in the spring signal, but do not mean, it is already summer.

My work as your interim director of religious education is to help you harness the power of all your emotions of joy, sorrow and even of indifference to hold you in the time between the winter and spring or between the spring and summer, before you fully transition to a different time of settled shared ministry. The period of interim

¹ Sawyer, D.R., (1998). "The church in transition as a human system." In R.S. Nicholson (Ed.). *Temporary shepherds: A congregational handbook for interim ministry* [Kindle Edition] (locs. 607–800). The Alban Institute: USA.

² Tickle, P. (2008). *The great emergence: How Christianity is changing and why* (p. 14). Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI.

³ *Ibid.*, p.14

⁴ Luke 21:29–30, NRSV

religious education ministry is a time for deepening and changing the stories of how a congregation learns and grows in faith together. I have already begun to help your community tell some of its stories through the Listening Circles process, in which participants have explored the history of the congregation and offered input to clarify the scope, mission and vision of lifespan religious education at Neighborhood Church.

In addition to these tasks, three additional focused opportunities for growth await your community. Throughout the next calendar year, I will also help you to determine the appropriate mix of paid and volunteer RE leadership necessary to support the mission and vision of your congregation; assist with strengthening connections between this church and other UU congregations; and, finally, I will help you focus on the next steps toward living into your vibrant future as a multigenerational spiritual learning community.⁵

These tasks are as large as they are manageable and necessary for your ongoing success as a community of faith. While I am here to act as listener, guide, facilitator and even resource during the interim period, the work of transitioning rests squarely on the shoulders of the congregation. It is all of you who have and will speak across generational, class, gender, and spiritual boundaries to dream and achieve a sharper vision of lifespan religious education at this church. It is each of you who will ensure that during this transition your programming continues to embrace the best of your history as a community and to wrestle with those stories that are troubling. I am here to help you unveil, celebrate, and engage the unique and beautiful spiritual gifts of learning your congregation can offer to one another and to the world.

Adding an interim, both the period and the religious professional, is no simple task then. While the interim period represents an intentional break from the normal functioning of ministry to focus on exploration, innovation, and storytelling, the spiritual community must continue: new members and families will join; children must be dedicated; worship services that meet the needs of members, friends and spiritual seekers must occur 52 Sundays a year; the community must tend to and embrace its pastoral care needs. The interim religious professional must also assist a congregation with all of these ways of being in covenant while nurturing the process of transition.

Returning to an understanding of a congregation as a human system, the interim period is a vital part of spiritual life, as it allows the community to focus on who they are right

⁵ See Unitarian Universalist Association. (2013). "Developmental tasks for the interim period for professional religious educators." Retrieved from <http://www.uua.org/careers/re/107495.shtml>

now⁶, and to combine that knowledge with their experience from the past and their hopes for the future so as to articulate a coherent identity.⁷ Finding answers to both the questions “Who do you say you are?”⁸ and “Does who we say we are line up with reality?”⁹ is the defining characteristic of the interim period: all other actions flow from the responses to these questions. And, it is in this space of self-exploration that a congregation must decide to thrive—not only for the needs of its current membership, but also for the generations we will never know and who will never know us.

The primary link that any of us can have to the future is to know that we are working together to build a community that others can be proud to claim long after we are gone. In between times are special periods when congregations can devote a great deal of energy to this understanding of bringing about the Beloved Community where we all welcome and care for one another. The process requires patience and the ability to balance the demands of determining how you can be that Beloved Community with the knowledge that the world needs this type of community urgently. The poet June Jordan helps us here:

And who will join this standing up
and the ones who stood without sweet company
will sing and sing
back into the mountains and
if necessary
even under the sea
*we are the ones we have been waiting for*¹⁰

As it relates to interim ministry, you already have everything you need to navigate the path to an even more dynamic future of lifespan religious education: you are the ones you’ve been waiting for. You can and will gain broad input on your RE programs and act on the accountable decisions you make together during this time. It is a momentous and exciting time to be involved in the life of this congregation.

At the conclusion of the interim period, the congregation and the interim professional must prepare to take their leave from one another. This is a time to celebrate—and with

⁶ Snyder, L.L., (1998). “Discovering a new identity.” In R.S. Nicholson (Ed.). *Temporary shepherds: A congregational handbook for interim ministry* [Kindle Edition] (loc. 1298). The Alban Institute: USA.

⁷ *Ibid.*, loc. 1325

⁸ *Ibid.*, loc. 1297

⁹ *Ibid.*, loc. 1332

¹⁰ Jordan, J. (1978). “Poem for South African women.” Retrieved from <http://www.junejordan.net/poem-for-south-african-women.html>

as much energy as both groups engaged in the transitional time: it is at the end of this time that your future as a congregation can begin. Whatever comes to be the future of lifespan religious education at Neighborhood Church, I am confident that it will “focus clearly on that point of intersection between your unique gifts and the world’s great needs.”¹¹

May it be so.

¹¹ Snyder, L.L., (1998). “Discovering a new identity.” In R.S. Nicholson (Ed.). *Temporary shepherds: A congregational handbook for interim ministry* [Kindle Edition] (loc. 1413). The Alban Institute: USA.