

UU Community of Charlotte
Interim Report, Narrative Summary
presented to the Congregation by Rev. Lisa Bovee Kemper, Interim Minister
May 21, 2023

Overview

The purpose of an interim ministry is to move together through the areas of focus with intention so that the congregation as a whole has a clear sense of their identity and where their priorities lie moving forward.

The initial priority in any transitional period is joining the system, which involves listening and learning in order to begin assessing systems and refining goals. During this time, I have asked lots of questions and worked to engage as many different people and teams as possible in conversation so that I can hear many perspectives. Now that I have a better understanding of how the system operates, we can begin to see how the interim goals need to be refined and broken into actionable tasks. My recommendations are at the end of this report.

The congregation has been wonderfully welcoming and open to getting to know me and my family, and leadership in particular are vocal with their support of the interim process and my work. I am well-supported by the board, and communication remains open and productive. I am quite grateful for that.

I have been able to offer a couple of classes and discussions, am staying apprised of congregational care needs, providing pastoral care as needed and have provided a widely varied range of Sunday service experiences. I have also worked with the Intersectional Justice Team and Engagement Group to assess and streamline their processes. There have been a number of deaths this year, two of which happened within weeks of my arrival, which shifted my focus initially in challenging but necessary ways.

In addition, we have introduced more multigenerational programming, including bringing children and youth into the service for first fifteen minutes once a month, and implementing Community Sunday, a terrific program spearheaded by the Director of Member Relations and adopted by the whole congregation. The congregation has been open to this kind of experimentation and has embraced these changes, especially the prioritization of multigenerational offerings.

I would be remiss if I neglected to highlight the work of UUCC's *exceptional* professional staff in this assessment. They are highly competent, deeply committed, and cumulatively long-tenured, and have developed strong working relationships over their time together. The decrease in staff numbers over a period of years coupled with the challenges of "doing church" in the midst of COVID19 is already a massive change in any system.

Nonetheless, Alesia, Kelly, John, Belinda, Melissa, Lisa, and Linn have provided high quality program support, remained flexible through countless changes, and maintained continuity of leadership. I am privileged to be able to work with them during this transitional period.

What Does Success Look Like?

We all have a tendency to want to know if we're doing "it" right, whatever "it" may be. In the case of interim ministry, there is no one right way, nor are you being graded on your performance. Working through a ministerial transition is a combination of concrete tasks and emotional engagement. It isn't linear, and no congregation's process looks the same. That can be frustrating, especially in times like these when nearly everything around us is in transition or upheaval.

There is no objective "best" minister that can succeed in any congregation. What you are looking for is the best minister for UUCC at this time. The best way to find a good match in a settled minister is to know who *you* are. That makes it possible to provide an authentic and transparent narrative that helps ministers in search see the whole picture. The best matches I have seen are the ones in which both the congregation and the minister are clear about their skills, experience, and goals for the future – so that you are calling a minister who can do what you are hoping to do – and vice versa.

If you're doing interim ministry "right," it will probably feel a bit uncomfortable. A system experiencing change wants to revert to homeostasis (the status quo) because change isn't comfortable. It helps a lot to maintain your caring relationships and support one another through the times when it feels messy and unpredictable.

Review: Interim Areas of Focus

- Review how the congregation has been shaped and formed; Claim UUCC's past in order to heal griefs and conflicts. (Heritage)
- Identify and Explore UUCC's unique identity, strengths, needs, and challenges. (Mission)
- Review and Clarify UUCC's governance structure and leadership, navigating the shifts in leadership that occur in times of transition. (Leadership)
- Connect and Reconnect with available partners and resources both at a regional/denominational level and in the community around UUCC. (Connections)
- Prepare for new professional leadership, strengthen our shared ministry, and engage our future together with enthusiasm and hope (Future)

Loss and Conflict

The settled minister's last day and goodbye celebration were on Sunday, and the next day on Monday, I reported to work. It turns out that such a close ending and beginning had significant unintended consequences. Primarily, the quick turnaround did not allow for any organic

emotional engagement with grief around the departure of both ministers, including the lead minister of nearly two decades. Most ministries end in June and begin in August, so that during the month of July the community can begin the process of releasing their connection to the outgoing minister and preparing for new leadership.

I have acknowledged this complexity, but I can see as time passes a need to engage in that work more deeply. The impact of this transition has been different for the staff, board, and congregation as a whole, so the avenues for meeting that need will vary. Ultimately, until grief and loss are given more space, clear understanding of identity and strengths is likely to remain elusive. After such a long ministry, it is essential for the community to discover and claim who you are outside of one minister's style and leadership.

In addition, the community experienced a public conflict at the June 2022 Annual Meeting. Questions around UUCC's commitment to diversity were raised and the phrase 'white supremacy culture' invoked. While there has been some engagement in repair between individuals since that time, the community as a whole has not had an opportunity to seek repair and reconnection. According to the listening sessions, a commitment to intersectional justice is a high priority and a key aspect of the community's identity. A notable tension was exposed between that commitment and ambivalence about how and when to implement related changes to the system.

Unitarian Universalism, rather than organizing around shared beliefs, relies on our relational promises, or covenant, to define and maintain healthy communities. Prior to my arrival, UUCC created and approved a relational covenant. The process of educating the congregation about this document and implementing it throughout the institution has not fully begun, though using it as a foundation for community relationships will positively impact collective ability to work through loss and conflict.

Leadership and Shared Ministry

In any long ministry like the one just completed, roles and lines of accountability within the system tend to become heavily associated with the leadership style and habits of the minister. Everyone in the system begins to rely on habit and memory rather than written and agreed upon policies and procedures. This is a natural progression that happens over time and is not at all unique to this congregation. Therefore, it is good practice to periodically review roles and clarify the accountability structures. An interim period is a common time to do this work.

The review of the governance documents and clarification of our expectations of one another is part of that work. At this point, I do not see any indication that there are major changes needed – simply a re-acquaintance with policy, role, and authority, as well as open conversation regarding expectations and accountability relationships.

This is important because there is some ongoing confusion about expectations which is slowing progress on tasks. The congregation and its leadership appear somewhat reluctant to directly engage in difficult conversations that could lead to disagreement or conflict.

This is at least partially related to the significant difference in leadership style between me and my predecessor and the natural challenges of adapting to a different leadership style. Direct communication and transparency of process will help this process, as will increased focus on collaboration and shared ministry.

I have introduced the concept of shared ministry to the board and teams over the past six months, and to the congregation in a recent sermon. I look forward to continuing to build more collaborative leadership and encouraging partnerships between teams. Shared ministry is a model that acknowledges that everyone in a congregational system has a role to play, and that the minister and professional staff's role is to support the congregation in enacting its mission and vision.

As we return to "right-sized" staffing with the August arrival of the new DLRE, a management priority will be to continue to refine and adjust staff portfolios, encourage adherence to weekly and annual time off, giving attention to changing the culture of overwork that has long been the norm among staff.

Explore Identity and Mission

This work is in the beginning stages. The history timeline and the accompanying worship service (in January) led by the Transition Team really began the process of naming the key themes and qualities unique to this community over time. That has been reinforced by the listening sessions provided by the transition team over the past few months.

The board and staff are still sorting out what is theirs and what was the previous ministers' while concurrently attempting to understand the congregation's identity post-COVID shutdown. The overall low capacity-high anxiety cycle that has been reported in congregations of all denominations and across the country has added complexity to this work. I see both groups working hard to understand and engage proactively with these leadership shifts and I expect that things will start to fall into place as that engagement continues.

The process of recognizing and accepting needs and challenges is ongoing. Lots of feedback has been shared with me and/or the board as well as in the transition team's listening sessions. Reporting back and continuing to name the challenges is a first step. Identifying and accepting action steps *and the resulting changes* that may be necessary to move forward after recognizing the needs is also essential to the transition.

At this time, the most important thing that the staff, leadership, and members of UUCC can do to further this area of focus is to familiarize themselves with the current mission, vision, and ends that the congregation

Length of Interim Ministry

UUCC is doing really good work and I am delighted to continue to serve as interim minister for a second year. The congregation and its leaders have been through a challenging past few years, as all congregations have due to the pandemic. Here at UUCC, these challenges also include the complexities of the two ministerial departures, as well as the annual meeting conflict.

There is some anxiety in the system regarding whether the interim period should be moving faster or slower than it is. Maintaining clear and regular communications from the board, transition team, and me should help this, but it is also necessary to consider whether two years is sufficient time to complete the interim tasks.

Note that the decision to extend the interim ministry for an additional year is NOT a decision to extend the current interim minister's contract. That decision would be made separately – if the interim is extended, then both congregation and minister would determine whether to extend the current interim contract or look for a different minister to complete the additional time.

I cannot at this time make a definitive recommendation regarding whether a third year of interim is advisable, though the transition team “officially” asked the question in January and encouraged the board to consider it. I will continue to make and report my own assessments as it is helpful.

I will note that due to ongoing and accelerated shifts in engagement with religious communities and how we “do” church that have been compounded by COVID19 shutdowns, there is a case to be made that no congregation is advised to complete an interim ministry in two years right now – there is simply too much change to process at the same times that the systems that undergird the work we do are rapidly deteriorating.

In April, my recommendation to the board was to convene the search committee now (to be elected by congregational vote at the 2023 annual meeting) making it clear that the question of two years vs. three years is under consideration. I further recommended that a deadline be set for when the decision needs to be made, and that key stakeholders be identified and remain in conversation until a well-considered decision can be made.

My goal is to support the congregation in deciding *on purpose* and after serious consideration rather than either moving forward because the initial term was set at two years or being forced to extend because we bumped up against a hard deadline without asking the question. If it comes to a point that I see a definitive recommendation is advisable, I will certainly share that information.

Revised/Updated Goals

- Engage more with grief/loss around recent events (including departure of ministers, pandemic changes, and recent conflict)
- Continue post-shutdown work of re-engaging and re-envisioning ways to build community and strengthen relationships
- Clarify roles, responsibilities, and accountability relationships throughout the organization
- Increase accessibility, clarity, and transparency of communications
- Prioritize implementation of congregational covenant
- Explore and implement shared ministry model
- Increase congregational awareness of and engagement with mission, vision and ends
- Revisit the vision statement and accompanying materials – particularly the appended list of "Vision Questions"