

UUA Beyond Categorical Thinking Case Studies

Revised August 2022

To Congregational Leader: *For in-person BCTs, please make one copy for every eight attendees and give to the facilitator prior to the workshop. For virtual BCT participants, please make sure to have this document available online and share the link in the chat during the workshop. Participants will need access to the document during breakout rooms and small discussion groups. Thank you!*

To know about the Case Studies:

All of the case studies below come from real accounts from Unitarian Universalist ministers and congregations in search. In a few cases, details have been altered to protect confidentiality. Many of the case studies have happened in more than one situation.

These case studies are designed to encourage thinking, allow for practice, and prompt continued discussion to ensure that when a moment or moments happen, you as individuals and as a congregation feel more ready to feel good about a response. In almost all of these case studies the initial response was described metaphorically as “deer in the headlights.”

As you discuss these in small groups:

- *Discuss the ones that are most relevant to your congregation or are directed to by the facilitator. To figure out which ones might be the most relevant, one gauge of that might be to consider the ones that you know you want to talk about or the ones you feel a resistance to talk about.*
- *Make sure to share time speaking and sharing. Allow everyone who wishes to speak. Allow people to choose not to speak. This may be particularly true of a case study where a member of the group holds the marginalized identity in question.*
- *To that end, we recommend that at least one small group is for people with a historically marginalized identity.*
- *You need not get through all the case studies and these case studies can be used in the congregation after the workshop.*
- *Responses of individuals should be kept confidential unless a person chooses to speak for themselves.*
- *Regardless of the case study’s setting (one to one, small group, search committee, entire congregation), respond as if you were a person there)*

Guiding Discussion Questions for each Case Study:

- *What do you think about this?*
- *How would you hope to respond?*
- *Whose problem is this and how should it be dealt with?*
- *How should the congregation respond?*
- *Is there a way to think about this in another way and reframe it?*
- *Are there congregational agreements (covenants/policies) that could help here?*
- *What questions do you still have?*

Race and Ethnicity

Case Study #1: African American Minister and the Single-issue Label

An African American minister is called to a congregation. They are excited about this new call and serving the congregation. There are many in the congregation who are just as excited.

Some hope the minister will finally address racial issues as they have not been brought to light in the congregation well before. Others are patting themselves on the back for calling a minister of color and feel like no further conversation about racism in the congregation is really needed now. This proves the congregation is not racist; the calling of their new minister is proof.

And still others are worried this is all the new minister will preach about - every sermon they will hear will be about race. And what if they (the congregants) say something wrong?

The new minister is between two rocks and a hard place. If the minister were to try and talk about being caught like this, then the one group will view this as proof that they are a single-issue minister.

Case Study #2: Accents

A congregational search committee is afraid to call a minister of Latinx/Hispanic origin who looks good "on paper." Having talked with the minister, the search committee noticed the minister's accent. They fear that someone with this accent that might be difficult for some to understand.

The search committee decides not to further consider further this person, who seems to be their best match otherwise, because of the number of people in the congregation with some hearing difficulties which came through "loud and clear" in both the congregational survey and from real life experience on Sunday mornings.

Case Study #3: Where Should the Minister Live?

A minister (who is BIPOC) in the middle of candida ting week is talking with a congregant about where to live. Living closer to the congregation's building is very expensive. The minister wonders about a couple of other neighborhoods. The congregant responds, "But what about (and names a neighborhood further away)? Wouldn't you want to be closer to your people?"

Case Study #4: Our minister won't look like us

Someone tells a search committee member, "We should not really be looking at a minister of color. They won't fit in here and stay long. Our congregation and community are so white. It would be unfair to the minister."

Case Study #5: Staff Diversity

A congregation is in search looking for a new minister. The search committee, after meeting with the assistant minister (who's African American), has a private discussion. One search committee member reports that they are being repeatedly approached about finding balance and that there are some folks concerned about the need to have a more "traditional minister" in the senior role. Another search committee member reports that several people have said, the new senior minister has to be "white" to balance the assistant minister.

- *If you were a part of this conversation, what does this make you think about?*
- *Would this also be true if you had a prominent staff person who is a person of color?*
- *What would your concerns be if your congregation's staff is all white and people said the congregation must have a minister of color next?*
- *Does this also apply to other identities (like gender/sexual orientation/disability) if the congregation already has a minister with a particular identity?*

Case Study #6: Microaggressions

A search committee is in a heated discussion over what to say about a previous minister of color. The congregation has reported their deep appreciation and affection for the minister. However, reports have gotten back to the search committee that one of several reasons the minister left was because of the almost daily microaggressions they experience, which exhausted them. Also reported is that the minister simply gave up asking for help because they encountered four repeated responses:

- "That's just Virgil. We ignore him. You should, too."
- "Oh. Did you do anything about it with them directly?"
- "I'm sorry that happened."
- "Well, this is what we pay you for. Virgil needs to learn from you to not be so racist."

The search committee is wondering what it should do with this information, both in the congregation and in their search materials.

Case Study #7: How Did This Happen?

A minister of Native American/First Nations/Indigenous descent is meeting the social justice committee for the first time. People go around the room and introduce themselves. The last person to speak raises one hand and simply says, "How!"

All the people in the room turn toward the minister to see how she will respond.

Disability/Mental Health/Health Concerns/Variations of the Human Condition

Case Study #8: Disability, Depression, and Our Fears

A minister on medication for depression keeps this information from the search committee. The minister is discovered by one of the search committee members taking it one day during the candidating week.

The minister is worried about discussing this so early in the ministry. "Will the congregation be able to see beyond this one piece of identity?" The minister asks the person who saw them taking their medication to not to tell anyone.

Update and additional reality that has happened: A reference for a minister intimates that they believe the minister is depressed.

- *How would you respond to both/either?*

Case Study #9: Accessibility of Person Using a Scooter

A minister who uses a scooter to travel long distances is selected to be a candidate at your congregation. Someone says, upon seeing the ministerial candidate, that

- The minister will be too difficult for the congregation because the building isn't accessible.
- Besides, the minister will have an agenda to make this their only issue.
- It will cost too much to make the building accessible for one person, and we can't afford that right now.
- And the person then wonders if this person will have the stamina to do the job.
- While this undoubtedly sounds terrible, it is not something the congregation should be forced to deal with now."

Case Study #10: How Smart Is a Minister with a Learning Disability?

A newly settled minister begins work in the congregation. Upon learning the new minister has a learning disability, someone in the congregation asks the search committee if the minister is smart enough to be their minister and will the sermons be intellectual enough - especially after the first couple of sermons were so personal.

Case Study #11: Bipolar

In checking references, a search committee learns that the minister lives with Bipolar. In talking it over with the rest of the search committee, a member of the committee asks, "Will we have to take care of the minister? Aren't they likely to be erratic?"

Another member says, "We'll just have to remind them to take their medication. I'd be happy to do that."

Another person says no one who lives with Bipolar should be a minister.

Case Study #12: Neurodivergence

A minister identifies themselves as being neurodivergent and reports that that means they are less likely to look directly at someone when talking to them. After a video interview, a search committee member says, "I don't think this minister is a good fit for us. They never looked at the screen once. I felt no connection with the minister as a result."

Gender/Gender Identity

Case Study #13: A Minister Who Is Transgender

One search committee member is advocating for a minister who seems to be perfect for their congregation. Someone else on the search committee notices the minister identifies as transgender, though they wouldn't have known that by the pictures that were enclosed.

There are several strong voices on the search committee who suggest that while this minister may be qualified, the congregation isn't ready for a transgender minister; "all you have to do is look at the congregational survey."

One person says most people don't understand what transgender really means in the congregation. Additionally, it is said that this community is way too conservative and not ready for a transgender minister.

Case Study #14: Pronouns

A minister has introduced themselves as gender nonbinary and has said they don't use he or she as a pronoun to describe themselves.

In the search committee meeting (where the minister is not present), someone suggests that all name tags should ask people for their pronouns. Someone else gets frustrated and responds, "We shouldn't do that. We shouldn't change our name tags for one person." Someone else says, "I think this is going to upset some of our older people. I've heard some of these folks constantly get it wrong, and sometimes I think this is intentional."

Case Study #15: Probing Questions

A minister who identifies as gender nonbinary is asked by a member during candidating week, “But what gender were you born?” by a member of the congregation. Someone else asks, “So when are you going to really transition?”

Case Study #16: How Will You Act?

A woman minister is asked during candidating week by a congregant, “We’re hoping you’ll be less angry than our last woman minister. She kept getting mad at the men and they stopped coming to church.” Someone else says, “We hope you’ll do some intellectual sermons for us. We really like that.”

- *If you overheard either comment, how would you respond?*

Case Study #17: A Cultural Stereotype around Gender

A minister of Indian (South Asian) descent is a candidate for the congregation. Several women have expressed concern to some congregation members that they wonder if he will be sexist to women. They cite several people they know and movies they have seen where they have noticed sexism in Indian males in relationships with women.

One woman says she'd like to talk about this, but she is afraid to ask him directly. She wonders if there is a good way to ask.

Case Study #18: Gender and Age

During candidating week, a female candidate is told,

- You’re very wise for someone so young.
- I don’t think you’ll be able to help an old person like me.
- Your sermon could have been more intellectual.
- Will you leave us to have kids?”

Sexual Orientation

Case Study #19: Queer

A minister has described himself as queer. Several older members of the congregation say they are offended by the word, they were told never to use the word, and they have indicated they will vote against the minister for using that word to describe himself.

Case Study #20: The Bisexual Minister and Promiscuity

A single, bisexual minister is selected to be your candidate. During candidating week, the board chair is told secondhand that there are congregational members who are afraid that he is going to sleep around in the congregation. Several have wondered what kind of role model he will be for children.

Case Study #21: Will We Become a Gay Church If We Call a Gay Minister?

A gay minister arrives for candidating week.

One member says, "Do you preach sermons on anything else?"

Another member asks if he thinks he will bring in a lot of new gay members to the church. He replies, "Would you ask a straight minister that same question?" The questioner says, "Why would I? I'm just concerned we'll be known as the gay church. We don't have enough straight people here now."

Case Study #22: Discrimination No Longer Exists

A candidating minister who is married to someone of the same gender identity is told by a member of the search committee, "We don't have homophobia in the congregation. You won't have to worry about that. There are some members focusing on racism and transphobia in the community, where those are bigger problems."

Age

Case Study #23: Too Young? Too Old?

A congregational search committee is looking at a candidate who seems like a good match. However, one person is quite vocal about the fact that “we need a minister who will stay with us and provide stability over the next decade; someone in their 60s will retire on us and we’ll have to be in search too soon.”

Another search committee member is concerned that the one rising star they are looking at is too young and green at 27 to be a good minister for them. “They don’t know enough. They haven’t enough life experience to be a minister, especially since so many of us are over 60.”

Case Study #24: Generational Differences

Many younger ministers report that the congregations they’ve served and are serving expect them to attract younger people, yet with the additional expectations that the minister and the congregation will do things “as they’ve always done them.” The ministers themselves have received complaints about not doing things in expected ways. The areas have included communication styles, worship, leadership, pastoral care, and how the minister/staff spends their work time—to name a few. Are there ways this has been true or could be true in your congregation?

Socioeconomic Class

Case Study #25: Previous working-class job

During candidating week, the congregation learns that the minister has a background working in what is considered a working-class job (road construction, hair stylist, janitor, etc.). The minister is told by someone in the congregation, “You don’t need to talk about your former work. That would just be putting yourself down.”

Case Study #26: Class and location

A historic congregation is in the older part of town, now referred to as a working-class neighborhood. In a conversation about what is needed in the next minister, one congregant says, “We need a minister who will be able to relate to the neighborhood and help us become a part of the community.” To which someone else responds, “I want a minister with whom I’ll feel comfortable; someone who is smart.”

Miscellaneous/Across Identities

Case Study #27 Sure We're Open to Any Minister of Any Identity

Ministers who identify as BIPOC, queer, trans and gender nonbinary, women, live with a disability report being told by congregations that they are welcome and celebrated serving them. After beginning their service to the congregation, they then find they are with the caveat from some members, often influential ones, that they act like a minister, often naming a previous minister who is straight, white, able-bodied, cisgender male. Yet they also report other members are grateful for the way they minister to them and the congregation, relieved to see changes they experience in the wider world happening in their congregation. When some have raised this with congregational leaders, some ministers have reported acknowledgement of it and said it's the minister's problem to solve. Others have denied the problem exists, including reiterating that there is a clear way to be a minister and the minister should do ministry that way.

Case Study #28: Will We Be Next?

Someone says, "If we call a person who is of Middle Eastern descent, then do we run the risk of being targeted for violence by some people in the community? Maybe we shouldn't call that person?"

Someone else says, "I was wondering about violence if we called someone who was transgender or queer."

A third person says, "I think anyone who is radical will likely make us a target."

Case Study #29: Only Certain Ministers Attract Families

Upon hearing the new minister is [a person of color, lesbian, disabled, or a combination of these identities, for example] someone says to you, "But we need a minister who will attract families here!"

- *Whose problem is this and how should it be dealt with? How would you respond to this situation?*

Case Study #30: We've Done That Before

There are several members of the congregation who say the congregation shouldn't call a minister who is [African American, working class, hearing impaired, etc. or some combination of identities, for example] because that's what their previous minister was.

Additional Question for Discussion

- Would there be resistance to a minister who is single?
- Would there be resistance to a minister who is also a military reservist?
- Would there be resistance to a minister who is fat?
- Would there be resistance to a minister who is a cancer survivor?
- Would there be resistance to a co-ministry team?
- Would there be resistance if the minister were a single parent?