

TRANSITION TEAM REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

June 3, 2024

Executive Summary

Based on our research, hours of meetings, survey results, and group discussions with congregants, the Transitions Team recommends that the Board of Trustees undertake a search for a full time Developmental Minister.

Background

In January 2024, the Board of Trustees appointed Alison Forsgren, Anne Perkins, Kat Robinson Grieder, Susan Fernald, and Susan Richards to a Transition Team. Our charge, as we understood it, was to review the various types of ministry available, gather information from the congregation, and to make a recommendation to the Board.

Approach

Our Team met regularly twice a month for approximately 1.5 hours each time with individual reading, research and email communications between meetings. Rev. Althea Smith attended most meetings, and Board President, Barbara Elder, attended some meetings and was copied on all email communications.

The Transition Team took a systematic approach to researching, discussing, and gathering data to present an informed recommendation for our future ministry. We began by reviewing together where our congregation is now, our history, our strengths, and our challenges. Our reading materials included the UU publication, In the Interim - Strategies for Interim Ministers and Congregations, the most recent edition of Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide edited by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, and the UU Transitional Ministry Handbook. We also met in person with Keith Kron, Transitions Office Director for the UUA. His experience and the information he shared with us about the process, the types of ministry available, and what other churches are doing was extremely helpful. We then developed a survey and led three discussion groups to give congregants opportunities to give their thoughts and input. Finally, as a team, we reviewed all the information we had gathered. Using a consensus approach, we unanimously agreed on the recommendation to present to the Board of Trustees.

Congregational Survey

The survey we developed was designed to solicit information about respondent's priorities, preferred qualities in a minister, valued church experiences, and desires for the future of our congregation. With the understanding that our Nantucket UU community (people who value and are connected to our church) extends beyond our 80 active members, we emailed the survey to our entire email list to allow a more significant number of people connected to our congregation

to respond. We received 32 completed responses which the Team reviewed, discussed and analyzed.

A few trends emerged from respondents' answers to our initial survey questions regarding their longevity and mode of attendance. Respondents with a longer attendance history, especially 20+ years, show a strong preference for in-person attendance year-round. This suggests a deep-rooted connection to the congregation and a commitment to sustained involvement over time. While longer-tenured members prefer in-person year-round attendance, there is diversity among newer and mid-length attendees in terms of attendance mode and seasonal patterns. This diversity reflects varying preferences and needs based on individuals' experiences and circumstances.

These patterns highlight the importance of understanding members' preferences, adapting engagement strategies to cater to diverse needs, and leveraging technology to facilitate participation, especially for newer or remote members. Additionally, recognizing the strong commitment of long-term members can guide efforts to foster deeper connections and sustained engagement within the congregation.

We then asked respondents to rank qualities they would like to see in our next minister. The ranked results from most important to least important are as follows:

- 1.) Congregational Leadership
- 2.) Inspirational Speaker
- 3.) Authentic
- 4.) Social Justice
- 5.) Pastoral Care
- 6.) Administrative / Technology
- 7.) Faith Formation / Religious Education

Analyzing the responses across the rest of the survey questions provides several key insights and conclusions:

1. **Desired Qualities in a Minister:**
 - o Respondents value qualities such as experience, patience, authenticity, leadership, and a sense of humor in a minister.
 - o There is an emphasis on social justice leadership, community engagement, and the ability to inspire congregants.
2. **Factors Influencing Initial Attendance and Continued Engagement:**
 - o Curiosity, seeking liberal community values, and spirituality are initial draws to the congregation.
 - o Continued engagement is driven by a sense of belonging, shared values, supportive community, meaningful sermons, and connections with ministers and fellow congregants.
3. **Meaningful Church Experiences:**

- o Respondents shared that they are moved by thought-provoking sermons, guest speakers, community support during personal challenges, music, and rituals such as joys and concerns sharing.
 - o The church serves as a source of comfort, inspiration, and connection during personal and communal milestones and challenges.
4. **Vision for Future Congregation:**
 - o Respondents envision a vibrant, inclusive, and diverse congregation actively engaged in social justice, environmental issues, and community outreach.
 - o They desire multigenerational participation, meaningful worship centered on spirituality and questioning, and a welcoming environment for families and new members.
 5. **Challenges and Opportunities:**
 - o Challenges include financial sustainability, leadership transitions, balancing traditional and progressive values, and ensuring inclusivity and diversity.
 - o Opportunities lie in strengthening community bonds, fostering youth and family engagement, expanding outreach efforts, and adapting to changing technological and social dynamics.
 6. **Feedback for Improvement:**
 - o Respondents appreciate transparency in financial matters, effective leadership communication, and opportunities for involvement in decision-making processes.
 - o There are suggestions for enhancing volunteerism, addressing burnout, improving technology integration, and fostering open dialogue on sensitive topics.
 7. **Community Resilience and Commitment:**
 - o Despite challenges, members show resilience, dedication, and a strong sense of community, highlighting the congregation's importance in their lives.
 - o There is a collective desire for growth, inclusivity, and meaningful spiritual experiences that align with Unitarian Universalist principles.

These conclusions emphasize the congregation's strengths, values, and aspirations, providing a roadmap for enhancing member experiences, addressing challenges, and fostering a thriving and inclusive community.

Group Discussions

After evaluating the input we received through the survey, each member of the Transition Team considered what information we still needed to gather and proposed several questions. We then refined the questions and decided which of them to use for the group discussions. We chose the following:

1. “Embracing the inevitability of change” - how do you see our church accommodating change as we transition into new ministerial leadership?

2. Congregational Leadership was the number one quality from the survey. What are the components of Congregational Leadership?
3. What are "must-haves" vs "nice-to-haves." What functions definitely need to be performed by a professional minister and which could be performed by lay leaders/members of the congregation?
4. To grow our congregation, where do you see the richest sources of potential new members and how would our new minister facilitate that growth?

The first two discussions were offered simultaneously (one on Zoom and one in the Activities Room) on May 5th after the service. Much of the first two discussions were about the different types of ministry which were outlined in a handout that Anne created:

- Developmental Minister: is a 5-7 year commitment to sustained congregational culture change.
- Contract Minister: is a one-year commitment that can be extended multiple years. Contract to call, contract to development are options. This choice gives a lot of freedom and is becoming increasingly popular.
- Interim Minister: provides an opportunity to step back and reflect on the congregation and its ministry.
- Shared: A minister is shared with another church; a structure and schedule is created.
- Lay-led / Fellowship: A committee takes turns structuring and leading the service.
- Called / Settled: is permanent as long as 2 parties are willing and able. This is an extended recruitment process which is also the most expensive.

It was clear after the first discussions that more time was needed for conversation and dialogue so we scheduled an additional hybrid session on May 19th. The discussion took place during the regular service time as we had already planned to not have a service that day. We began by brainstorming the many functions of a minister. We then broke into smaller groups to discuss which functions we prefer to be performed by a professional minister (as opposed to members of the congregation) and reported back to the whole group.

The Transition Team proposes that the following five functions, which rose to the forefront in the group discussion, be prioritized when putting the search together for the future leadership of the Congregation.

- 1) **Strong representative of our church and congregation in our island community**
 - With the UU 7th Principle in mind, we expect the minister to be the face of the church and maintain a strong and active presence, participating in and developing outreach programs in the community and beyond.
 - Partnering with local organizations and mobilizing resources for social justice, environmental, and humane educational projects.

- Focusing on the importance of making a positive impact beyond the congregation's walls. This would reflect our congregation's values and mission

2) Inspire Leadership in congregants, coordinate/sustain lay leadership, maintain our vision and mission

- We recognize that participation from the members of our church are needed to make it the welcoming and supportive place of worship that we want.
- With our vision and mission as a guide we would like our minister to coordinate and provide support to committees that will help us grow our mission, as well as offer suggestions to other ways to govern ourselves in the UU Traditions.
- How can we support Lay Leadership? Create a vibrant Social Justice environment? Include/invigorate our current membership. Make new members feel welcome and valued

3) Pastoral Care care and counseling for the well-being of the congregation

- Pastoral care can mean visiting hospitalized, home-bound, or grieving congregants but also caring for the well-being of the congregation in general (i.e. during times of trauma such as pandemic).
- A pastoral care committee would be advisable: for sending cards, providing meals or rides to the doctor etc.

4) Sunday services:

- The congregation favors a full-time settled minister doing a minimum of half of the services with a strong summer presence. Inspirational words, reflections are key.
- As the uncertainty of finding a full-time settled minister has surfaced, other possibilities have been discussed. Lay led services provide a viable source of worship and can occur with services led by a part-time minister. Guest ministers from within the community or from off-island are another option. There is also the possibility that a full or part time minister could zoom in from off-island to conduct the service while a congregant is in the sanctuary synchronizing it. Reverend Althea has done that.
- As a congregation we are in the process of reimagining Sunday Service.

5) Increase and Enhance Faith Formation and Development Opportunities for all ages

- Congregants still remember and value participating in UU curricula such as Cakes for the Queen of Heaven (which was offered in the 1980s!). More recent offerings of classes and workshops for adults that focussed on such topics as nonviolent

communication, world religions, and end of life have been well received and there is an interest in additional topics such as what it means to be a UU. We would like a minister who would lead and/or help organize opportunities for adult members and friends to explore and deepen their faith through groups and workshops.

- Due to the relatively few children and youth in our congregation, we have not had a formal faith formation (religious education) program for many years. Our hope is that our new minister can help us revisit this area to provide meaningful programs for our current youth and hopefully attract young families.

The other functions of a ministry that were discussed but not prioritized as specific to the Minister were:

- Staff Management
- Weddings/Funerals/Events
- Business administration
- Finance/Budget Priorities
- Resolve Disputes

The feeling of the team is that these areas are where a stronger congregational presence is necessary. Membership/Friend volunteers, along with paid staff, will be necessary to make these additional functions work successfully.

Based on survey and discussion input, the Transition Team thinks that a Developmental Minister is the most appropriate choice for our next minister, with the understanding that this involves a full commitment from the entire congregation to work with intention towards its goals. We understand that a Developmental minister typically works with a congregation for approximately 5-7 years and cannot be called by the Congregation to be a Settled minister. We also encourage the Board to consider a full-time minister, at least for the next few years, with the capacity to prioritize the five focus areas mentioned earlier in this report. We understand that there may be budgetary considerations along with the real issue of the availability of ministers but feel that it is our responsibility to present what we consider to be the most ideal option.

The areas of concern identified from the survey results could form the basis for developmental ministry:

1. Leadership Dynamics and Decision-making:

- There are expressions of gratitude for the Transition Team's efforts, but concerns exist regarding leadership dynamics, inclusivity in decision-making processes, and the perceived favoritism or exclusion within support networks like the care team. Respondents desire fair and transparent leadership practices that engage a broad base of participants.

2. Financial Sustainability and Transparency:

- Respondents highlight the importance of financial sustainability, transparent financial management, and realistic budgeting. There are calls for clear financial plans that support staff salaries, ministerial needs, and overall congregation health while ensuring responsible use of resources.
3. **Congregational Engagement and Burnout:**
 - There is a shared desire for increased congregational engagement, volunteerism, and attracting new members. However, concerns about burnout among existing members suggest a need for strategies to balance involvement and prevent exhaustion, possibly through diversified leadership roles and volunteer opportunities.
 4. **Inclusivity, Diversity, and Welcoming Environment:**
 - Respondents emphasize the importance of creating an inclusive, diverse, and welcoming environment across age, race, sexuality, and gender lines. Breaking down barriers to participation and fostering a sense of belonging for all individuals is a priority for sustaining a vibrant congregation.
 5. **Healing and Reconciliation:**
 - There are mentions of past incidents and the need for healing, reconciliation, and open dialogue within the congregation. Resolving conflicts, acknowledging past challenges, and creating spaces for understanding and empathy are critical for moving forward positively as a community.
 6. **Ministerial Qualities and Expectations:**
 - Respondents express expectations for ministers to possess qualities such as professionalism, authenticity, alignment with liberal values, and the ability to inspire and support congregants on their spiritual journeys. Clear communication of expectations and collaborative engagement with the congregation are essential.
 7. **Community Outreach and Social Impact:**
 - Several comments underscore the importance of community outreach, social justice initiatives, and making a positive impact beyond the congregation's walls. Engaging in meaningful social and environmental causes aligns with the congregation's mission.

Addressing these specific areas may involve:

- **Leadership Development:** Implementing training programs for leaders, fostering inclusivity in decision-making processes, and ensuring transparent communication channels.
- **Financial Planning:** Developing clear financial plans, engaging the congregation in financial discussions, and exploring sustainable funding models.
- **Engagement Strategies:** Creating diverse engagement opportunities, preventing burnout through effective workload management, and actively recruiting new members.

- **Inclusivity and Welcoming Practices:** Conducting inclusivity workshops, promoting diversity in leadership roles, and implementing welcoming initiatives for newcomers.
- **Conflict Resolution and Healing:** Facilitating open dialogues, addressing past grievances through mediation or counseling, and promoting a culture of empathy and forgiveness.