

The Changing Ministry of Information

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I. Current Problems, Old Versions

Many years ago a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Department of Ministry solicited the opinion of an influential minister of a prominent church. Was a certain young cleric ready to move up? Here is the reply in full, with a detail or two omitted or changed:

I have yours of the 22nd regarding the application of "Andrew Paul." Three years ago I helped to ordain him. He is a likable, little, colorless, well-meaning man. So far as I can see he has no brain at all. He is fond of music, and comes from a good family. I mean by that, they are good, earnest, hard-working, right-minded, humble people. The Council who ordained him did their work in a temperature of 17 degrees below zero, modified by such calories as a pot-bellied stove in the basement of the Church could furnish. The situation was not provocative of careful deliberation, but even so, his ordination was a touch-and-go matter so far as the Council was concerned. And one or two members have spoken of it to me since as a sort of joke, all of which means if I were you I would go slow. I don't know why he should not stay where he is.

Was ever a throat more elegantly slit? Issues of style and savagery aside, the presence of the letter in the young cleric's file raises hard questions about the ministerial search and settlement process. Search committees want to know, will so hopeless an incompetent be foisted off on them? Ministers want to know, how many (albeit more pedestrian) such letters lurk in their files, undoing their opportunities? And all who care for our ministry want to know, was the young minister, even if only half so inept as presented, allowed simply to stew in his own juices in a long, lukewarm career? Were no correctives offered, no resources?

II. Current Problems, Current Versions

Item. A member of a congregation's ministerial search committee speaks bitterly of its unsuccessful search for a new minister: "We were told that there just weren't many ministers wanting to live in our community. Our medical practice faces the same problem. But our medical practice is able to reach out and persuade physicians that they do want to live in our community. Why can't our search committee do that, too?"

Item. A minister recalls with anger and dismay the afternoon when a congregation's ministerial search committee becoming interested in her, a member of the Department "sat me down and for half an hour told me all the reasons why I could not effectively serve that church." The minister is now one of the most widely admired in the Association, and her relationship with the

congregation one of evident mutual regard. Is the error in prognostication merely an instance of inevitable human fallibility, or does it point to a systemic problem? How great a role should the judgment of the Department, substituted for that of search committees and ministers, play in the settlement process?

Item. A minister who several times sexually misconducted himself in the congregation he served (in the days before such sparked Ministerial Fellowship Committee review) was rusticated instead. Despite acknowledgement of responsibility, assessment and rehabilitation, the absence of repeat incidents, and demonstrated ministerial effectiveness, years later the odor of past insanctity still clings. A search committee, catching a whiff, raises questions. What should be said, and not said? And should the Department wait for questions?

Item. In the three evaluations preceding final fellowship a new minister was consistently cited by her congregation's leadership for insufficient warmth and empathy, defensiveness in the face of criticism, and lackluster preaching. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee concluded that the shortcomings, although problematical, were not enough to delay her progress. The minister is now in search, and her congregation's leadership writes and speaks of her glowingly. Is there collusion here, both parties seeking an easy way out? When the search committee calls, what should the Department's response be? And what should the minister know about the Department's response?

The common issue in these four instances is the proper dissemination of information in an association of free congregations. How can information be communicated to people who can use it? Where is the line between using information to counsel and using it to meddle? Should information be withheld from a committee with a "need to know- out of compassion for the minister or because a person in authority "knows better-? Should presumed attempts at concealment be challenged?

In the first instance, the search committee being unable to get (in its opinion) persuasive information into the hands of prospective ministers, the most attractive prospects withdrew from consideration, leaving the committee with unpalatable choices. Thanks to new communications technology, this is a problem readily solved.

In the second, a less self-confident minister might well have withdrawn, and a less determined search committee backed off, in the face of consistent, presumably well- informed, authoritative skepticism. It takes courage to say "we know we're right" when the "expert- says you probably aren't. Yet it can be argued that the Department was right on target, probing the soft spots, testing the depth of commitment. The fact is that the Department put the minister's name on the search committee's list in the first place. But what if the Department's skepticism about the match had run so deep that it withheld the minister's name? This, too, is now a soluble problem.

In the third instance, is there any question that a search committee that asks a direct question-"is there any evidence of sexual misconduct by this minister?"-deserves a direct answer? What about the committee that fails to ask such a question: should the committee be allowed to identify its candidate publicly, and the congregation perhaps to call its next minister, only to receive through back channels disturbing information the Department could have provided earlier? And should the Department then conclude that past sexual misconduct, though it may not disqualify a minister for ministry in theory, in practice disqualifies the minister from being listed by the Department? I am sure this problem is not soluble to everyone's satisfaction. But there must be a consistent practice, widely understood, that allows enlightened and temperate decisions to be made in a context of trust by search committees and congregations.

And in the fourth and last instance, what is the Department's responsibility to search committees who may not receive candid reports from references? Here as in the item preceding, I would argue, the Department is obliged to interpret and convey the information in its possession, always with the understanding that the authoritative interpreter of the information is the search committee initially and the congregation finally, and *always with the minister's awareness*. Ideally but also in practice, the Department must inform search committees of its understanding of materials in its possession bearing on a minister, but only after informing to the minister exactly what it will convey to search committees and affording the minister the opportunity to correct the information and to include accompanying commentary.

The degree to which the changes in procedure with respect to the last two instances represent a greater sharing with search committees of information about ministers is not great. The degree to which these changes represent an increase in the Department's candor with ministers about what is shared is probably somewhat greater. They are occurring in a context of greater disclosure in every aspect of the search and settlement process: disclosure by search committees about the congregations they represent, disclosure by ministers in search about themselves as persons and as ministers, and disclosure by the Settlement Office to ministers of information it is conveying to congregations. This greater disclosure is itself one element among many in the Unitarian Universalist Association's efforts to minimize triangulation and to enhance healthier, more direct interactions-"right relations"-in the complex system of systems which is an association of free congregations.

III. Opportunities for Change

Only those intended changes occur that can first be imagined. New communications technologies enable new images, and new images enable new intentions. For decades, East European communism placed severe restrictions on the individual and collective imagination of its peoples. Only one image of political economy was permitted. But once the fax machine and other earlier-

generation communications technologies enabled new images to circulate among an information-starved population, it became clear to them that their national economies had been walking corpses for years. The fall came with unpredicted swiftness. The East Asian economic crisis of only a year ago is another, related case. Regional governments and banks had long cornered the market in information, shrouding their operations in secrecy. The global capital markets made possible by new, web-based communications media, however, require transparency as a condition of doing business. Once the veil was rent, and hitherto corrupt arrangements exposed to the light of day, the old system went weak in the knees. In both instances, the functioning of political and economic systems was dependent on the choke-hold on information maintained by a well-placed few. Such systems could not survive the greater disclosure the new technologies permitted.

The most sweeping instance of a power structure's implosion due to the wider dissemination of information is the Protestant Reformation. The advent of the printing press and the rise of literacy gave the "end-user- direct access to the most important information then deemed to exist: the Holy Scriptures. In the process, the role of "middle-man" was, if not cut out, at least greatly weakened. Once a monopolist in the dispensation of salvation, the religious leader was relegated to the status of interpreter- of text, creed, and conduct. He, and eventually she, began their long journey toward the modern liberal ministry: at its most effective, conjoined counselor, sage, motivator, and leader; at its most inconsequent, spiritual equivalent of a "personal shopper."

If commercial banks and entire national governments be not immune from the contemporary information revolution, if Protestant Christianity itself be a result of an earlier version, how can the Unitarian Universalist Association's search and settlement procedures not be deeply affected? The important question, of course, is not, how can the Settlement Office maintain its existence? The question is: in the light of both age-old and new factors-the search and settlement needs congregations and ministers have always had the new, nearly universal context of freely flowing information, and the new demands on and suspicions of ministry-how can the Settlement Office best serve both congregations and ministers and, through them, the future of liberal religion itself?

IV. The Changes Described

Perhaps the most important change about to be implemented, the institution of the Congregational Record, could only be introduced once electronic communications had advanced to the point that virtually every search committee and the great majority of ministers have easy access to the UUA website. Once this relatively straightforward, primarily technological improvement in the dissemination of information takes place, other changes-changes in patterns of communication, in frequency and fullness of communication, and finally in the

locus of power"fall quite naturally into place. The presumption shifts: it is not what ought to be communicated, but what ought *not* be, that is the ever more pressing question. The quite legitimate pressure on the Settlement Office is what in banking circles is called "disintermediation," which means, more or less, "get out of the middle." The Settlement Office becomes less a valve than a fairly complex network of tubes. Settlement work is what it has always been, a "ministry of information," but in this field, as in many others, as the volume of information and the velocity of its flow increase, the control exercised by the Settlement Office must decrease.

Change no. 1: informing ministers about congregations in search. Heretofore, ministers could only obtain much of the most meaningful information by the most unofficial, indirect, even privileged of routes. Ministers "in the know- knew a lot. New ministers, and ministers less adept at tapping into the ministerial "grape vine,- knew far less. Furthermore, congregational search committees were not always candid about the conditions their next minister might face. But new technologies enable a wider dissemination of information. Beginning in July 1999, the Settlement Office will ask each ministerial search committee to post a Congregational Record (CR) on a section of the website accessible to ministers in fellowship and UUA staff only. The CR is designed to elicit much of the information ministers in search want to know. It will also provide search committees with a marketing tool by which they can reach the vast majority of ministers potentially interested. The CR's accessibility should encourage search committee candor.

Change no. 2: informing search committees about interested ministers. There are really two changes here. The milder change, again beginning in July, is that ministers will be asked to provide enriched information about themselves on their Ministerial Records (MR; these were previously termed "Ministerial Record Sheets"-but "sheets" are on their way out!) The goal here is to give search committees a livelier sense of potential ministerial candidates as persons and ministers, rather than as epiphenomena of schools attended, community and denominational work accomplished, and congregations served. The stronger change is that at the time of receiving its initial list of ministers to consider, a search committee will be informed of the name of every minister who indicates interest in considering and being considered for the position it offers.

Here's the way the information will flow. A minister, having surveyed the CRs of congregations in search, will identify to the Settlement Office, with the click of a mouse, those congregations the minister finds of interest (maximum of fifteen such indications per year to start). When the search committee is prepared to receive a list, the committee will inform the Settlement Office of the number of ministers whose MRs it wishes initially to consider. In some cases, where the number of interested ministers is small, that may mean every MR. In other cases, twelve to fifteen MRs may represent less than a quarter of interested ministers. In the latter event, although the Settlement Office will first send the MRs of only

those ministers the Settlement Director selects for the initial list, the list itself will include the names of all interested ministers. The remaining MRs will be sent in bite-sized batches as requested.

Change no. 3: empowering search committees and ministers. Under the search and settlement process as it previously operated, a minister could only gain a place on a search committee's list by action of the Settlement Director,¹ and a search committee could only receive names as the Settlement Director recommended them.² In this respect the system was exclusivist, even Johannine: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). It will be no surprise that the result of such an arrangement was occasionally intense resentment and often unhealthy triangulation. Ministers could become convinced that the Settlement Director had it in for them; search committees could become persuaded that they were only being sent the dregs. By contrast, with the institution of the changes at hand the settlement system is becoming resolutely pluralist, with as many centers of power and value as there are ministers and congregations in search. Any minister may indicate interest in any congregation; all search committees will receive the names of all interested ministers.

Change no. 4: placing the responsibility where it belongs"on search committees and ministers. With power comes responsibility. Those ministers who may depend on the Settlement Director to send their name to "just the right" congregation will now have to make their own selections on the basis of CRs. In fact, questions on the minister's application to enter the search process about the hoped-for financial package and geographical region will no longer appear. Ministers will take those factors into account on a case-by-case basis in deciding on the rings into which they will throw their hats. Ministerial requests to the Settlement Director to be listed for this or that congregation (the "Book of Hope-) will likewise be a thing of the past: the choices are the ministers', not the Settlement Director's.

Similarly, search committees will be responsible for making their case directly to ministers through the CR, rather than indirectly through the Settlement Director. Too often, the ministerial profile drawn by a search committee is a compound of unrealistic fantasy and consumerist hunger, and the congregational profile a camouflaging of congregational problems. Unwillingness to engage in considered thought about the congregation's identity and its needs will very likely be met by a deserved lack of ministerial interest. Insistence on receiving a list even when the compensation offered is below ministers' expressed needs will gain no better a reception.

Change no. 5: informing search committees about pre-candidates. One of the functions of the UUA is to credential ministers. Membership in its Ministerial Fellowship is in one sense an historical event, and in another sense a current privilege. A minister whose conduct fails to achieve the standards required by the Fellowship may have the privilege suspended or removed by the MFC. At the

MFC's direction, the Department of Ministry maintains exhaustive if not comprehensive records on ministers in Ministerial Fellowship to enable the Committee and the Association to perform the credentialing function. "Ministers' files" are thus files about ministers, not files belonging to ministers, and are held in trust for the benefit of the Association's member congregations.

In the settlement process there are abundant opportunities to shade the truth. Opportunities available to search committees will be minimized by the accessibility of CRs. Opportunities open to ministers will be minimized by Settlement Office practice: as soon as possible after a minister has been named a pre-candidate by a search committee, the Settlement Director will forward to the committee a brief interpretation of the minister's record. The statement will already have been viewed and perhaps corrected by the minister, who will have the opportunity to include comment, if desired. The point of this practice is to keep no secrets from those entitled to the information. Secrets- gossip, words about a person not said to the person-are the bane of our Association. Ridding our common life of secrets and the triangulation that permits them and flourishes on them, and entering instead on the path of right relations, is a task for all our congregations, our ministers, the UUA-and for the Settlement Office.

The most uncomfortable situations for all involved will be those involving suggestions or documented cases of ministerial sexual misconduct and other impropriety-financial, legal, moral. A search committee may well conclude that even though a minister may have been blameworthy in the past, the minister has done the hard work of recovery and is, perhaps even in part because of this history, especially well-suited to serve the congregation. In that event, the Settlement Office will recommend that the committee share its knowledge with the governing board of the congregation, and that the committee and board consider making the information a part of the discussion during candidating week and in the congregation-minister covenant. In settlement as in all other dimensions of congregational life, one may hope for an environment in which misbehavior is named, consequences exacted, rehabilitation encouraged, and recovery respected, and in which covenants are authentic compounds of realism, respect, and redemption.

V. Continuing Constants

The Settlement Office has earned a reputation for encouraging fairness, avoiding corruption, and advocating for ministers who may not fit the expected or, to some, the comfortable ministerial mode. It has been scrupulous, as well, in distinguishing between its counsel and its power, although that scrupulosity has not always been recognized. Speaking personally, I can hope to rival but never to exceed the dedication of David Pohl, Charles Gaines, and Daniel Hotchkiss, and of interims Elizabeth Anastos and Peter Raible, to these essential values. My further hope and expectation is that as this "ministry of information" takes advantage of the changes just described, the Settlement Director may be able to

devote less time to operational transactions and more time to the functions of guide, counselor, and coach.

The mutual election, the mutual choice, of one another by congregation and ordained minister is a complex one, both romantic and grave. If it is to have a reasonable prospect of enduring, the conditions under which the election occurs and the process by which it is made must permit the future the congregation and minister may share to be as accurately imagined as possible. No one wants candidating week surprises. Still less welcome are surprises in the first few years of a ministry, as the pretenses drop away in the stress of common life. But of course hidden truths will out: truths concealed intentionally, and truths no one thought to bring to light.

A prime function of the search and settlement process, as a committee and a potential candidate explore and then confirm their mutual interest in a life in common, is self-disclosure: *this is who I am, or we are, and how I am, or we are*. In this process as in courtship, not all disclosures should be made at once, much less in the first moment. They can only be made in a context of deepening acquaintance and growing trust. But they must be made. The Settlement Office can assist ministers and search committees by creating conditions under which acquaintance may deepen and trust may grow, and by advising on the process as questions are raised and obstacles encountered. Its presumption will always be that concealment—whether intentional, or thoughtless, or unconscious—will do harm, and that the truth will set us free.

¹ There was one exception. A minister could insist, in which case the Settlement Director was bound to include the name with the notation At Minister's Request, together with the reason the minister was not recommended.

² Here, too, one exception. A search committee could request that the Settlement Director seek to recruit particular ministers. This option will remain very much open.