

## **Interim Ministry-A Temporary Shepherd of Cats**

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So, you might be asking yourself about the strange title. How is interim ministry like a temporary shepherd of cats? I took part of the title from part of the required reading for interim ministry training 101, Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry by Roger S. Nicholson. It was an excellent book, but obviously using the traditional term for Christian ministers of "shepherd" and the corresponding title that is also used in many Protestant churches for the minister, "Pastor." It comes from Jesus as the Good Shepherd looking after his flock of sheep, just as the pastor does in the sense of pastoral scene in agricultural terms. It's also why Unitarian Universalist ministers are NOT called pastors for the obvious reason that our congregations prefer not to be called sheep! Indeed, we often talk about how being a UU minister is like trying to herd cats! Perhaps now then, the title makes sense to you, that the interim minister is temporary, in our case, we have an agreement for 18 months, and we're more like a shepherd of cats than sheep! But we also have to be careful about the metaphors we use about ministry and interim ministry, don't we. Shepherding often has a negative connotation of control, and that's not the metaphor I want to convey, nor do I think the congregation should be a herd of cats! I think instead, we should be developing a religious relationship where we work together to build up the beloved community of this particular church and more especially of what this church may become, for it is always changing, though it may sometimes be so slowly it is imperceptible.

It is important, however, to remember the words of that Unitarian scientist Charles Darwin who said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."

You'll find I love humor and stories, so let me tell you a story.

During the French revolution, things got out of hand and it seems everybody was turning on each other and sending people to the Guillotine. Finally, it was decided that the clergy were royalists and should be executed.

So they brought up a priest and asked him whether he would like to be face up or face down. The priest replied, I want to be facing up so that I may see the arms of my maker reach down and hold me to his bosom in heaven when I die.

So he was face up. When the rope was pulled, the blade did not move. The crowd was now afraid that God had been working to save the priest and started yelling, "Its a miracle; let the priest go."

So then they brought up a UU and asked her the same thing. She said that she'd like to be face up so she could see how it worked. Again they pulled the rope and the blade did not move. Again, the crowd yelled, "Another miracle; let her go!"

But the UU minister pointed up to the blade stuck on the rope and said, "Wait, I see the problem!"

Never question miracles even if you don't believe in them. One person's miracle is another person's malfunction. Religion is relative; let's not quarrel about what the words mean, but let's share what they mean to us, how we experience them, how they change our lives, and how they might even transform the world!

I also like lists of ten in writing various pieces over the years- like what I believe, the Top Ten Reasons for Joining This Church, and many years ago, because we Unitarian Universalists don't take kindly to commandments, I wrote THE TEN SUGGESTIONS as part of a wedding ceremony to give sage advice to a young couple just staring out in life. I found that it works well for a congregation as well.

### THE TEN SUGGESTIONS

Rev. Arthur G. Severance

1. Find out who you really are and what you want out of life; then find out what life wants out of you. Find your own way to be religious.
2. Give up the need to be right, (usually you're not!). It's usually better to be loving than to have to be right! When there is stress in your relationship, find your part of the blame and admit it; be the first to apologize, and then change that part of your behavior.
3. Cultivate love all around you; develop and nurture a deep and profound love of life and people.
4. Be slow to anger and quick to forgive. Grudges are much too heavy to carry around, and they tend to multiply the longer that we hold them.
5. Take care of your heart, mind, and body - practice love, intellectual stimulation, and physical health.
6. Find a way to make the world a better, happier, more loving and just place for your having lived in it.
7. Beware the "sin" of cynicism; attempt to see the positive instead, and avoid putting others down. The world has enough devils advocates!

8. Be kind to animals- yes, but also to each other, your elders, yourself and to all people, be as kind to as you would toward animals! Be kind to Mother Earth.
9. Have lots of fun; don't work too hard, and don't take life too seriously. No one on their death bed wishes they had put in more hours working.
10. Learn to truly share, working for social justice in the world and relational justice in all your relationships.

We all have a different idea of what ministers as well as interim ministers do, don't do, should do, and of course, should never do, and our different ideas come from many sources, besides the last minister who served this church. We all have, well, some psychological baggage that we carry around, and it may be from as far back as our childhood and the religious way we were brought up. We ministers often have that same problem as well, especially we UU ministers, because we are free to have such a wide range of beliefs about whom, what, and why we serve. Many of us UU's, of course, have issues with authority figures, which is why we often left traditional religions and often even the traditional God.

I like to think of minister more as counselor, more like the Jewish idea of rabbi-teacher and interpreter of history, religion, and worship leader, and hopefully inspirer. The church community has always been important to my family and to me, as far back as I can remember, first in a small New Hampshire town where there was only one church, a kind of combination Congregational and Baptist, and I have warm memories of that church until we moved when I was 10 to a larger town about 40 miles away and joined a larger Congregational church where I felt called to become a minister when I was in 6th grade!

There was something about the spirituality of being in church with my family and singing those hymns which were designed, lets say, to bring on the religious dimension, the feeling of being connected with all of life under the guise of God and Jesus, though the concept of the trinity always was difficult for me. But frankly, I didn't think about the logical inconsistencies, because I liked the way I felt when I was in what I am calling the religious dimension.

In high school, however, I was in the youth group; and that I loved. Someone saw beyond my clowning and asked if I would like to be the church youth representative to the New Hampshire State Youth Ministry Council, and that changed my life and confirmed my call. I was asked to preach the youth sermon in my junior year and I did so gladly. I think the title was something like, "If there's Dust on your Bible, there are Cobwebs in your Faith." I went 500 miles away to a college that was affiliated with the church in 1967, but no one told me that the college was in an area where the

church was conservative, just as I was getting more liberal, even radical, as well as counter culture.

Perhaps it was the conservativeness of the college in those tumultuous 1960s, or the many courses I was taking on psychology and comparative religions, the plays of Existentialists like Camu and Sartre that I was in, or the books I was reading like Jack Kerouac, Kurt Vonnegut, Herman Hesse, and other counter culture writers, perhaps because I was a folk singer singing Dylan, Phil Ochs, and other protest singers, perhaps it was the anti war activity and the peace marches, and the church seemingly becoming more conservative, but I lost my childhood faith, though always retained a spiritual fascination with religion I loved the community of college friends.

After college, I found that sense of community with the staff as a counselor in a Residential Treatment program for troubled adolescents and with my friends. I didn't know any friend who was active in a church. I sure didn't know about UU-ism, but like many of us, when we started our family; it was time to look for a religious community. We tried a United Church of Christ, but I actually felt angry after church because I was seeking something, and I didn't know what, just that I wasn't getting it from this church. We joined another more open church that was more new age and lay led. We liked it, but there was really nothing for the kids. Finally, my college roommate invited us to a UU fellowship he and his family had just started going to. Many of you may resonate with the wonderful feeling of Eureka; I have found what I didn't even know I was searching for! Amazing grace, I once was lost but now I was found!

It was a lay led congregation with visiting ministers once every six weeks; indeed, there was an anticlerical feeling to the fellowship so much that there was a rule that we couldn't have a minister more than once every six weeks. That did two things for me. It made me aware of how much more I got from minister led services than most of the lay led services. I felt a deep sense of worship of the holy; however we wanted to define that.

It made me decide to put a service together. One of my creative passions was photography, so I decided to put together a slide show of my photographs and since another of my passions was folk singing and song writing, I would sing original and traditional folk music in the background. It was a spiritual experience putting it together and an even deeper religious experience presenting to the fellowship for a Sunday morning service.

As a result I once again felt called to UU ministry, though as a humanist, I wasn't sure WHO was calling. As I liked to say later, they didn't leave their name. No one at the

fellowship knew what I had to do for the next step, so I called the UUA in Boston and found out the first step was to have an interview with a UU minister. This began a process that would finally take about 5 years to go to seminary while I continued to work part time. I served a kind of student ministry when a small church asked me to preach for 2 Sundays a month while they looked for a new minister; I ended up doing that for 2 years, getting great preaching experience! So while I wasn't ordained until 1987, I've been preaching since about 1981!

Ministry is about being in religious relationship, which like romantic relationships takes plenty of hard work, especially to get over feeling like you have to have your way or the highway. Religious relationships are about learning to compromise and letting go of the need to be right and/or in control. My idea of ministry is of a loving relationship, a shared ministry, working together to grow, both spiritually and numerically. Indeed, we do not need to convert anyone; we need to reach out to those who we often describe as UU's without knowing it. Who are often desperately searching for a church like ours that they don't know exists!

I wrote this Prayer for Those Who Have Suffered Too Many Meetings during my 16 year ministry in San Antonio during a difficult time. I think it was John Lennon who said that life is what happens while were busy making other plans. Religion is like that, too. So is ministry. Perhaps we could say that life is what happens DESPITE our making plans. Religion is like THAT, too. Ministry is SO like that! In the running of churches, (and my educated guess is that denomination doesn't matter), we might say that religion is what happens DESPITE meetings, that way we have of TRYING to make plans. Occasionally, religion happens DURING meetings and it perhaps those occasions that keep us who are part of the church running team going. Meetings are a must when ministry is shared.

### **Prayer for Those Who Have Suffered Too Many Meetings**

O Lord, save me from myself, and save me especially from myself at meetings when ego confronts criticism and raises the thick walls of defensiveness. Give me infinite patience, understanding, tolerance, but especially patience! Give me wisdom and temper my wit, lest I joke insensitively and hurt. And Lord it's hard to be humble when you've been called to be part of the church's leadership, but give me humility and faith to share the ministry of the church. Help me to believe in others. Let me be slow to anger and defensiveness, and quick to forgive. Save me from cynicism. Give me strength to sit for long periods of time. But most of all, remind me why we are here and restore my vision of working lovingly together to build a beloved community, which our souls thirst for, and which can transform us and the world to a fuller, more just and more loving world. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

While I was serving in San Antonio I was asked to be one of the Ministerial Settlement Representatives and took the training to help churches who were in the process of transition and searching for a new minister working first with the congregation, then with the search committee. I found I liked being the consultant and helping congregations through the process of change and growth. After 16 years at San Antonio I felt it was time for a change and decided to take interim training and served a year's interim in Boulder Colorado and again enjoyed the consultant kind of ministry, but found that I wasn't ready to give up the long term relationship of parish ministry, so received a call to East Shore UU Church outside of Cleveland, Ohio. Frankly, it was not what they called a "good match" and I experienced health problems, including two hip replacements, so decided to again become an interim minister where I could help a congregation in transition back to health and growth.

Scott Peck, the popular psychiatrist with a very spiritual bent, who's very UU-like book, *The Road Less Traveled*, was on the NY Times best seller list for many years, said, "The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."

The story, "Good luck, bad luck, who knows; it's too soon to tell" is the archetype of our lives, isn't it? Both our individual and our church lives. Life is full of transitions that are rarely easy and it is said that the only person who likes change is a wet baby! I believe that it is one of the reasons why we look to religion, especially to religious community, to what you will hear me refer to as beloved community as the salvation, not of our individual souls, but of the world! Not of our souls, but perhaps of our sanity!

The woman who I often describe as the Mother of UU-ism, especially UU Religious Education is Sophia Lyon Fahs, who wrote: "Life becomes religious whenever we make it so: when some new light is seen,/when some appreciation is felt,/when some larger outlook is gained,/when some nobler purpose is formed,/when some task is well done. The function of the church for both young and old is not to give us on Sunday certain religious kinds of experiences, (but) rather to teach us how to put religious and ethical qualities into all kinds of experiences."

I see my job as one of deep listening, helping healing, sharing observations, resources, insights, leading worship, pastoral care, helping lead you through the transition time and help you identify your mission and vision. In the book mentioned in the title are these 5 items that should be part of the interim time:

1. Coming to Terms with History.
2. Discovering a New Identity.
3. Leadership Changes during an Interim
4. Renewing Denominational Linkages
5. Commitment to New Directions in Ministry

A mantra that we often used in training was “trust the process;” not because we follow rules blindly, but because we believe that we are all in this together to help and love one another, so trust the process can also mean trust one another. That, I believe is the beginning of the religious relationship of beloved community, the experience of the religious dimension. Let love be our guide.

Amen, Peace, Love, Shalom, (“Peace” in Hebrew), Assalaamu Alaikum (“May Peace be Upon You” in Arabic), Abrazos a todos (“Hugs all around”) Namaste, (A Hindu greeting- the divinity within me greets the divinity within you) Blessed Be, and let me add one more blessing that I adapted from the Spanish long before I went in to ministry. Vaya con Dios is Spanish for Good-bye, but literally is “Go with God,” so I adapted it to say Vaya Con Su Dios, “Go with your (idea or interpretation of) God.”

Amen, Peace, Love, Shalom, Assalaamu Alaikum, Blessed Be, Namaste, Abrazo a Todos, Vaya con su Dios.