

“Great Congregations Make Great Ministers”
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UU Church of Columbia
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A new phase of our interim journey is beginning. Your Ministerial Search Committee has been interviewing many talented ministers, first by phone and then in person. And now, even as we speak, they are hearing their last “pre-candidate” preach in a neutral pulpit.

On March 15, which is the earliest date they can do this, they will invite one of these *pre*-candidates to be your *candidate* – the minister who seems the best match for UUCC, the one who seems best-equipped to walk with you into a new future.

Within the next month, assuming all goes well, the Search Committee will make the candidate’s name public, and begin to tell you about this person. Sometime in April, he or she will come for Candidating Week. This is a nine- or ten-day week that involves preaching at two Sunday services, with many opportunities to meet and interact with you in between.

After the second candidating service, there will be a special congregational meeting, and you will vote, by secret ballot, whether to call this candidate as your new minister.

Some of you have been through this process before – but I’m guessing it’s new to most of you. Anyone who has been a legal member of UUCC for 60 days will have a vote. This is in keeping with UUCC’s tradition of congregational polity, in which congregations choose their own leaders, clergy and lay. The by-laws require a 75% affirmative vote in order to call, but the candidate will look for a margin even higher than that – 90% or even 95%.

If you vote to call, and the minister accepts - which is what almost always happens - then your new settled minister will come here sometime in August. In the very unlikely event that the candidacy is unsuccessful, you’ll move into a third transitional year.

But let me repeat: By the time they get this far, nearly all candidacies succeed. Your Search Committee has done its homework. They work very well together. They’ve carefully listened to you, and taken your thoughts to heart about the kind

of ministry UUCC needs. They're weighing their choices very carefully and deliberately.

Many of you have been kind enough to ask me what my plans are for next year. Chuck and I may decide to take a year off, but if we don't, I'll apply to serve another interim ministry. The interim matches aren't made until early May; if I'm lucky, I'll know something by Mothers' Day.

Only one thing is certain from my end. No matter what else happens, I'll be moving on from Columbia. I have no choice; an interim minister is allowed to stay in one congregation for only two years. It will be hard for me to leave, and I'll miss you very much. But I'll move on very grateful for our time together, and for the work we have done.

As we move into this new stage of our journey together, it's worth reflecting on the nature of ministerial leadership in the Free Church. Over the years, there have been many different points of view about what a minister should be, and how he or she should lead. Some of these theories have withstood the test of time, while others have turned out to be passing fads.

There's a certain mystique around the topic of leadership. How many times do we hear someone say, "This person is a born leader – and that person isn't." Or maybe, "Well, *I* couldn't do that – *I'm* not a leader." There seems to be an assumption that only certain people have leadership qualities. Leadership is seen as a magical "it," that a few people were born with, and the rest missed out on.

But there are many stories, going at least as far back as Moses, of reluctant leaders who become great. And even great leaders weren't *born* that way – they *learned* the art of leading, probably on the job.

Church consultant Kennon Callahan puts it this way: "Leaders *learn* to be leaders. They are not *born* leaders." He goes on: "Leadership is not a matter of genes or heredity, size or stature. Leaders are not manufactured, the product of some neat and nifty methodology. Leaders do not "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps..."

Callahan also disputes the commonly held notion that only people with certain types of personalities can be leaders. Thinking about the leaders I've known, I know that Callahan's observation is true. Leaders can be "tough minded [or] gentle. They may be sarcastic or humorless. They may be good fun or a pain in

the neck. Leaders are sinful and saintly – frequently more the former than the latter.”

A hard-driving field marshal type, who makes quick decisions, is only one kind of leader. The same goes for a charismatic orator who stirs crowds to the peak of excitement. Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop who became a political martyr 32 years ago, was a bookish, cautious monsignor. Cesar Chavez was very soft-spoken. Moses was “slow of speech and of tongue.”

Some people equate leadership with “being the boss.” They see the leader as the one at the top of the ladder, exercising power and control over those lower down. This theory of leadership even gains traction in UU circles from time to time, especially in large congregations.

But top-down leadership, even at its best, is problematic in our free church tradition. It goes against the grain of our belief in “the priesthood of all believers.” At its worst, top-down leadership can be highly dysfunctional.

To be sure, there are emergency situations, when someone needs to step in and be directive. But over the long haul, true leadership in our system doesn’t need absolute control, or rigid hierarchy. It works best when it’s “power with” – not “power over.”

In reaction to top-down theories of leadership, a second theory developed that ministers shouldn’t be leaders at all – that they should be “facilitators” or “enablers.” This view was particularly prevalent in the 1970s.

But the pendulum has swung away from this model. Facilitation skills are definitely useful in ministry, and they can be one part of a minister’s constellation of talents. I’ve always believed that a major part of ministry is helping others to realize their own gifts, and giftedness.

But the idea that ministers should be *only* facilitators has fallen by the wayside. Congregations hope for a minister who will help them realize *their* dreams, *their* sense of mission - but they also hope that the minister will come with vision and passion of their own, and lead from there.

A good example of how facilitation can subvert leadership is found in the book of Exodus, with the famous story of Aaron and the Golden Calf. The people have left Egypt, and are wandering in the wilderness. They’re feeling free but lonely, and

getting anxious and upset. Aaron responds by placating them, by giving them something that's temporarily soothing. But Moses knows that the Golden Calf is a dead end. He's on a quest for truth, and knows that the payoff lies further down the road. Aaron enables – Moses leads.

Still another theory of leadership equates it with managerial skills. Of course, some ministerial leaders are very good managers. But leadership is different from management. Managers are concerned with preserving the organizations in their charge, keeping everything running smoothly. They're very helpful people to have on your team.

But sometimes, an organization needs to be *shaken up*, rather than to go on running as it always has. That's where management leaves off, and leadership begins. It's been said that the management question is, "Are we doing things right?" - while the leadership question is "Are we doing the right things?" Management without leadership – failure to step back and reflect – can sometimes simply mean rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

A fourth view of leadership involves a longing for charisma. Such a longing is quite prevalent these days – in congregations and elsewhere. Some even see charisma as the *sine qua non* of leadership - what it's all about. But once again, although charisma can be useful to a leader, there are many excellent leaders who rate low on the charisma scale.

Charisma, like any style used in excess, can eventually lead to dysfunction. It can turn participants into passive spectators, dependent on the leader for a regular "charisma fix." It can raise expectations that are impossible to sustain over a long period. It can also cast a shadow, keeping others from realizing their own leadership potential.

Reliance on a charismatic leader can even lead to the collapse of an organization. One dramatic example of this is found in 19th century UU history, with Theodore Parker's 28th Congregational Society in Boston. Parker was an amazing orator and prophet. While he was leading the congregation, it grew by leaps and bounds, as people flocked to hear him. Then he died unexpectedly, at the tender age of 50. And his congregation died with him.

What if Parker had continued his charismatic preaching, while sharing leadership with people who were good organizers? People who were good at working behind the scenes to build the congregation, helping people discover their own potential?

The congregation might have survived Parker's death, and helped to nurture a succession of ministers to greatness. Perhaps the congregation would still be with us, carrying on the legacy of Parker and his successors.

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This brings me to the main point I want to leave you with this morning. The person who comes to be your next minister will be a human being – not a savior. This person will be very good at some things, and only adequate at others. The success – even the greatness – of your ministry together, will depend in part on your new minister. But it will depend just as much – and probably even more – on you!

The new minister will bring gifts of leadership – and they may include facilitation, or management, or charisma – but none of these will be enough in themselves. The new minister will need your gifts of leadership – and “followership,” as well.

The new minister will come prepared to minister, with heart and mind and strength. He or she and will also depend on your ministry to one another, and in the wider community.

He will come with sermons – and will need you to be present, to listen and respond.

She will come with ideas, and passions – and you'll need to bring yours, too.

To quote The Rev. Jack Mendelsohn:

“The future of the liberal church is almost totally dependent on two factors: great congregations (whether large or small) – and skilled, effective, dedicated ministers. The strangest feature of their relationship is that they create one another.”