

Letter on the Shortage of UU Ministers
June 23, 2023

In what surely is a bellwether moment, the first round of interim search concluded Wednesday with 38 congregations searching for full-time interim ministry. Only 21 were able to make an offer.

Seventeen congregations looking for full-time interim ministry learned they did not have a mutual match. We knew it was going to be difficult. Only 32 ministers even entered the interim search.

Historically, we've always been slow to fill part-time positions as ministers rarely move for a part-time position. In the last few years we've seen that creep into interim ministry and smaller full time congregations.

Beginning this year we are recommending to any congregation under 125 members that they do contract ministry searches. The expense of settled search and leadership drain in smaller congregations with seven leaders now serving on a search committee is quite a toll.

This year in interim search we saw 4 congregations of over between 250 and 400 members not find an interim minister. That has not in recent memory happened before. A shortage of ministers willing to work with congregations is real.

On some level, this is not a surprise. In talking with other denomination colleagues, they report a similar shortage. Every denomination is struggling. It's not just about ministry. Membership is down. This too is across denominations, with despite public claims otherwise, the more conservative religions losing at higher rate than the more liberal denominations.

It's also not just about religion. We see a shortage of teachers, doctors, nurses—all helping professions. In some ways this makes great sense. All helping professions have been expected to absorb a certain amount of society's frustrations, often at less compensation. The world has been very frustrated these last few years. It should be noted that we really haven't recognized and certainly prioritized the need to deal with the fact that the world is angry. And human beings did not go into helping professions to quietly absorb this expanding burden of frustrations. We're seeing an exodus.

Specific to Unitarian Universalism, the biggest gap, as is often questioned is not a slew of new retirements. The biggest gaps are new ministers going into ministries that aren't congregationally based. This is followed by a jump in ministers deciding community ministry, chaplaincy, and social justice ministries are more likely to be rewarding than congregational ministry. For years, the Transitions Office would hear from about 25-30 newly fellowshipped ministers looking to consider congregational ministry. The last two years it's been 5 ministers, then 8. Rarely are any of those new ministers free geographically to search. More often, ministry has become, at best, a co-equal income in a household. Increasingly, it has become the second income in a two-income family.

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The author of the book, *Radical Curiosity*, Seth Goldenberg (CEO of Curiosity and Company) writes that we are in “In-Between times.” He’s talking about that as a planet, but I’ve yet to find a religious person who disagrees with that about religion as well. (This book would be a great common read for congregations and ministers.)

What does it mean to be religious now? What does it mean to live one’s faith? What does it mean to be a congregation? A denomination? A minister? A church member? I think in the midst of overly busy lives and an overly busy world, we’re trying to figure that out.

I would add perhaps as an important question for this moment is: What are reasonable expectations of ourselves, of others, of ministers and staff, of institutions and systems during this time?

I was in a conversation of ministerial colleagues trying to figure out how to be helpful to smaller congregations in Canada. One good colleague talked about all the little problems (and in some cases individuals) sucking the life of the proverbial rooms in our congregations. It was an insightful comment. It made me wonder, is there any room to breathe? And would any new visitor who shows up at congregation stay where the life of a congregation is being sucked out of it with anxiety?

My hope for this in between time is that we can engage in these bigger question conversations. As well as taking time to breathe. We need both.

While this is happening, we still have the shortage and 17 interim congregations in need of help.

What we know from previous years is that retired ministers, community ministers, and students with candidate status with Credentialing Office approval are willing to step up. Some are more than willing to serve in some capacity if it’s close by, to do so virtually, or perhaps arrange a short term but full-time ministry for up to 3 months assuming housing could be found at an affordable rate.

What we also know from two years of retired ministers stepping up, especially those commuting from more than an hour away, is that this takes its own toll. I’d encourage all retired ministers thinking about wanting to help, and many do, to think in terms of manageability, and therefore, less. I’ve counseled a couple of colleagues who have talked about what they could do to reduce this by a third or so.

Doing several things, or even one thing, is likely to be of more help, than trying to do everything and feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. This would definitely be true for community ministries who likely are already working elsewhere. (I’d argue this is true for all ministers, actually—as well as other staff and congregational leaders.)

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We'd encourage the eligible ministerial candidates to consider offering preaching and pastoral care only. That alone would be of great help.

We also encourage those searching for interim congregations to begin to think about priorities. We want congregations to be well-served. And what prioritization could do is allow you to be well-served where you need it most, and it might be the opportunity to let go of some things, especially things that aren't missional, and ease the anxiety and burdens somewhat in the congregation.

If you are a retired or community ministry minister, think about what you would be willing to do well—and then how and where. If you are a candidate eligible to serve then think about what you can manage in terms of regular preaching and pastoral care. (If you are a candidate and unsure if you are eligible, you can reach out to Rev. Jonipher Kwong—but after May 30th since he's away until then.)

If you are a searching congregation, think about what you need, and if anything can be done virtually. You'll get more interest with virtual ministry, but it should also be of help. We've seen some examples of board consultations, adult education, specific projects, and even worship happen well from a distance. (Having been streamed into Sunday services while worship associates and musicians did the rest, I know the latter is possible.)

I would love to hear what is possible for you and from you. Ministerial colleagues, I ask that you send emails as the request for phone calls to talk about this was a bit overwhelming (even though I'd love to talk with you). I'll respond and reach out. You will also be able to see the congregation's profile here: <https://ministrysearch.uua.org/>.

We've converted the interim searches to contract ministry searches as this provides more flexibility for the congregations.

Searching congregations, please begin think about immediate needs and priorities in the likely event you don't have someone full time. (if you haven't already)

At time of this release, these are the congregations (listed alphabetically), that were in the interim search:

1. Albany, NY
2. Attleboro, MA
3. Auburn, ME
4. Buffalo, NY
5. Gainesville, FL
6. Goleta, CA
7. Grosse Pointe, MI
8. Madison, WI (Prairie UU)
9. Mankato, MN

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10. Middlebury, VT
11. Nantucket, MA
12. San Mateo, CA
13. Toronto First, ON
14. Toronto Neighbourhood, ON
15. Westport, CT
16. White Plains, NY
17. Wilmington NC

Also, note there are other ministry positions in the contract ministry section at <https://ministrysearch.uua.org/>. They need ministry too.

Ministers, if you are serious, it will help to fill out a profile if you haven't already for yourself in the link above. I would encourage this if you are thinking of offering more than one thing to a congregation. If you have one thing you'd offer to a congregation, putting that in an email to me is enough.

I have no idea what the response will be and what will happen. We are in In-Between times. And what was true last year may not be true now. We'll learn along the way.

You are free to share this. I would ask that you do not characterize any of the congregations in anything like a "Wall of Shame." So often congregations and ministers define success as getting a minister and failure as not getting one. I do not believe that to be true. I believe it's more that we are in-between.