

Being Open to New Ministry

A Sermon by Rev. Rod Thompson

First Unitarian Church of Toledo

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So, you're going to be searching for a new minister, are you?

I hope you're more realistic than the people who wrote that want-ad.

This is a sermon about Being Open to New Ministry

For visitors I am the Interim Minister and contractually can't be considered...

What are your expectations of your new minister? I know you have them. There are the ones you're gathering from the Survey to put into your packet. Your Search Committee [have them stand] will share those with you so you'll know what they are. This morning I'm more concerned with the unwritten expectations that you've got in the back of your mind, like you expect your new minister:

- To be exactly like your favorite minister, be it Arthur Olson, Wally Argow, Michael O'Kelly, Irving Murray Wendy Jerome, Gary Blaine, or me (for that matter)
- Or to be the exact opposite of Gary, Wendy, Irving, Michael, Wally, Arthur or me
- Or you expect your new minister

To make NW OH & SE MI sit up and take notice

- Or not to remind your neighbors of how different you are from them
- Or expect your new minister to be your best friend
- Or to be the person who makes you do the right thing
- Or to preach the best sermons you've ever heard – every Sunday!
- You probably expect her or him to always be available
- And to be all things to all people

In short, you expect your new minister to do everything but walk on water!

And is working on that!

I hope you know how unrealistic that is, if not, you wouldn't be the only ones:

Consider this [Ministerial Profile and Plan](#) from the Search Committee in the Newsletter of the UU Church of Central Nassau:

The surveys are all in. On the basis of careful analysis of our computer-aided tabulations, the Search Committee has developed a profile of the minister most likely to suit the needs of our congregation. Accordingly we submit this profile and the related plan for your review and comment prior to final printing for inclusion in the packet.

The ideal minister preaches exactly 10 minutes. He condemns evil, but never hurts anyone's feelings. She works from 8:00 AM until midnight and is also the church janitor. The ideal candidate makes \$40 a week, wears good clothes, drives a good car, and donates \$30 a week to the church. She is 20 years old. And he has 40 year's experience in the ministry. He makes 15 house calls a day and is always in the office.

We are not certain we will be able to find a minister who exactly fits our profile. Therefore, we have, after considerable discussion, developed the following backup plan.

We will, following the usual search process, find the best minister we can, and give him or her a year to become perfect. If he/she does not do so within that time, we are going to mail his profile to six congregations that are also dissatisfied with their ministers, then bundle up ours and send her or him to the first of those six churches. According to our computer calculations, if we play our cards right, in one week we should receive 1,643 ministers in return. A computer-aided simulation indicates that one of them should be perfect.

A word of caution. If we adopt this strategy, it is necessary for us to follow it to the letter. We understand that one church in a neighboring district broke the chain and got their old minister back in three months.

I know, it could be worse. Some of you might even be glad to keep me right now, but we all know that can't happen.

So, instead of wishful thinking, let's think about your next minister, and what your expectations of that minister should be. Maybe we need to start by looking at what a Parish minister does.

Since Lynn is also a Minister, in her case a Minister of Religious Education, we need to make this distinction. Of course an MRE does a lot of the same things, but this morning I'm focusing on the Parish (or as you call it here) Senior Minister.

There are 4 traditional roles (all Ps)

- 1st. Preacher to spread the good news (inside and out)
 Inspire,
 Challenge,
 Offer spiritual guidance
 Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable
 Champion UUism
 Share insights and Share themselves and their personal experiences

Of course, I hope you know what makes a good preacher is not entirely the preacher's responsibility (though reading and writing skills and a gift for language are helpful), it's the reception that the preacher gets – how well what the preacher says resonates with the listener, where they live – that really makes a successful preacher, and the preacher has very little control over that. That's your job as the listener. Responsive listeners create the best preachers.

[for example = not the sermon you preached, but one I heard)

Responsive listeners create the best preachers.

Whether it's the minister or someone else preaching,

Responsive listeners create the best preachers.

- 2nd. Pastor bringing comfort, being a comforting presence
 Sit with, be with, and hold your hand
 To Counsel, To give a Hug
 Of course the larger the church the harder this is
 And why you have 2 ministers and a CLL

Again, a minister can have all the skills, and years of experience, but is not a pastor until someone trusts enough to welcome him or her into their tragedies and triumphs. That's your job as recipient of pastoral care. Open, caring people create the best pastors.

[Story = Downhill from Chrisney]

Open, caring people create the best pastors.

- 3rd. Priest weddings and gay unions
 Memorial services and funerals
 Child dedications
 Rituals of all kinds

For many ministers this is the hardest, but most rewarding, role. I for one have always lived in fear of using the wrong name, or pronouncing it wrong, at a wedding or a memorial service. Everyone's emotions are so high. Nerve endings are raw. And, perhaps because of that, moments of something like grace happen. I remember one prime example:

[candles that started a big blaze]

For a minister to succeed in his or her priestly functions, you have to be encouraging of them and ready for experiences of grace when they happen. That's your part of the responsibility.

- 4th. Prophet challenge
 Lead us in social justice work
 Cajole
 Afflict the comfortable
 Speak the truth in love

Some ministers take on the responsibility of this role by stepping out in front, as many of your ministers have done. Others tend to work from behind and take on a cheerleader role. Always in the back of your mind, a minister remembers that a prophet is seldom honored in his own country (that's biblical, by the way.)

So, even when you disagree with your minister in his or her prophetic role, remember she or he is only doing the job you've called them to do.

- 5th Yes, some would add another "P" = politician, whose job it is to
 Get things done
 Affect the institution
 Provide strong leadership
 Move the system

Politicians are not our favorite people, but we expect our ministers to be able keep the balance between being out front, open, honest, personal, and still do what is often best done from behind the scenes by someone with a larger picture.

As my father used to remind me, it's amazing how much you can get done if you don't have to be given the credit for it!

So, your responsibility in being open to new ministry, is to be committed to staying at the table, even when the decisions are hard to make, and even harder to achieve.

Then there are the other things we want our ministers to be and do:

- Teacher Sunday mornings, yes, but in lots of other ways, too
 Religious education, both of our children and with adults and teens
 Teach in small groups, Teach in large groups
 Take advantage of "teaching moments"

No matter how good the minister is as a Teacher,

 You need to be willing to acknowledge that you still have more to learn.

Consultant always offering new ideas and programs
 Suggesting structures for your efforts
 Creating and following policies and procedures
 No matter how good the minister is as an Organizer and Consultant,
 You need to be willing to embrace change when it comes.

Administrator Involved in the day-to-day operations
 Financial savvy
 Human resources expert
 Staff Supervisor
 Will be involved in hiring and firing of staff
 Efficient and effective
 A problem solver
 No matter how good the minister is as an Administrator,
 you need to empower and trust your ministers,
 and all of your staff,
 to do their jobs.

And we expect all this to be done in 3 hours on Sunday morning!
 Of course not! Y'all know better than that!
 As Gordon McKeeman, one of my mentors, used to say:
 Being a minister means "A life of being pursued by Sundays"
 That's true, but . . . most of a minister's work happens on other days of the week
 Ministry is a job that is never done. There is always more to do
 Ministers may be the last of the generalists.
 No wonder we burnout ministers almost as fast as we can make them!

Anyway, that's what you need to expect of yourselves
 in being open to this new ministry.
 So what can you expect of the new minister?
 An imperfect human being who is
 Very good at doing some things
 OK at doing most things
 Challenged at being able to do a few things = need to recruit help with those

Because of your size and your likely compensation
 You may be getting an experienced minister
 But you may be getting someone who is fairly new to professional ministry
 Even so they're not brand new
 They've been to seminary
 Done field work in a church setting
 And learned by doing in an internship
 And since most are second or third career folks
 They come with lots of life experiences

One thing you can count on, you'll be getting a real person,
 with real expertise, eager to lead,
 eager to love and to be loved.

Just so, I would give you this advise (which I think is part of my job),
 Look for a *good enough minister!*
 Don't look for a ministerial star
 For even stars have their weaknesses

A Powell Davies story

So, don't look for a rising star
 Ministerial stars, like all stars, are on their way up and out
 Their focus is remote, in a galaxy far, far away
 A good enough minister is happy to stay here for a long while
 Happy to minister here
 Look for a good enough minister.

I think of Gordon McKeeman, whom I referred to earlier,
 Minister of the Akron church for more than 20 years
 Then President of of our Starr King School for the Ministry
 Though many would call him a star
 I think of him as just such a minister, a good enough Minister.
 Likewise Peter Lee Scott, whose words I used for the Chalice Lighting
 A fellow alum of Lexington Theological Seminary
 a retired colleague living in Little Falls, New York
 after serving congregations in NY, PA, VA, and WI
 He was a Good Enough Minister

I'd like to close with a meditation from another Good enough Minister, Richard Venus, minister of the Miami Valley Unitarian Fellowship down in Dayton since 1991. He writes:

What is it that we do, really? I mean, who do we think we are?
 What do we do that makes us ministers?
 We read, meet, flush, talk, sing, aerobicize, fight,
 dance, mow the grass, find partners, eat lunch, pray, make love,
 think, play, ask questions, marry, bury, are puzzled, get up early, divorce.
 We write, take risks, get up late,
 paint, jog, beg, cajole, buy, spend, save.
 Who are we?
 Sometimes we are more than we would be by ourselves.
 Sometimes we reach into our deepest selves and speak from the heart.
 Sometimes we hold a hand,
 or stand beside.
 We cry with, we laugh with,
 we mourn with, we speak with,
 we listen with, we argue with, we wonder with.
 We are the hand holders, the side-by-siders.
 We are the do-withers, the be-withers, the there-withers, the take time-withers.
 That is what we are. This is what we do.
 Really.

May you find just such a minister. A good Enough Minister.