

Article on Tasks of the Interim Period

An overview and explanation of what will transpire during the interim period is appropriate for the congregation and friends of Unity Presbyterian Church. So here is the process and some of the necessary tasks that will guide my work over the next many months.

The process involves the congregation engaging these specific tasks during the interim period. Briefly, these congregational tasks include:

- Coming to Terms with History
- Affirming the Congregation's Identity
- Opening the Door to Leadership Participation
- Renewing Denominational Linkages
- Commitment to New or Renewed Directions in Ministry

The stakeholders engaged in the interim process include all members and active participants of the congregation, its officers and leaders, church staff, Presbytery (through the Committee on Ministry), the immediate neighborhood surrounding the church facility, and the larger community of Fort Mill. Through this process of wide engagement, we believe the Holy Spirit can speak to the church regarding the future focus and direction of ministry at Unity Presbyterian Church.

One primary task of the interim period is **Coming to Terms with History**. This task provides the congregation an opportunity to view the past intentionally with both appreciation and candor. Good and not-so-good is a part of every history. Joy and laughter, along with grief and regret characterize these reflections. In these reflections it may become evident that certain things need to be let go. In addition, traditions will be reconfirmed as needing to be carried into the future. When this is done with intentionality, two things happen. First, the present life of the congregation is never merely a "replay" of what the church was in the past but a vital reality that has meaning today for the people of today. Second, the present life of the congregation always has a connection to those saints who have gone before us.

Coming to terms with history also allows the congregation to tell its story: a story of God's grace and love and justice that begins in scripture, running through the recent past and right up to today. The congregation

needs to tell its story because sometimes we forget (for long-standing members) and sometimes we don't know (for younger members and new members). Telling the story helps the congregation of today place in context important traditions and ministries, and how the church's present life is consistent with that history and has developed from that history.

Another task of the interim period is **Affirming a Congregation's Identity**. This may involve discovering a new identity or reaffirming a present identity. Discovering a new identity does not mean a congregation reinvents itself. It does mean that the congregation engages in self-reflection. One aspect of that self-reflection is to ask questions such as: "What is the congregation's self-image? How realistic is that image? Do others confirm the image we have of ourselves? Does that image enhance or detract from our ministry opportunities?"

Another aspect of self-reflection is the gathering of demographic information. This information includes data about our congregation and about our community. Such information may help to surface and refine new possibilities for ministry because we discover new needs that exist in our congregation and community. Self-reflection is also an opportunity for active participants in the congregation to affirm and express what is important to them, what they appreciate about Unity Presbyterian, and how they would make improvements in our life of faith together.

The self-assessment, demographic examination, congregational input, and visioning for future ministry are conducted by a specifically commissioned representative group from the congregation appointed by the Session. Typically this group is called the Mission Study Team (MST). The end result of the MST's work will be to write a mission study document with a vision for the future of UPC. This document will play a significant role in the search for a new pastor.

A third task of the interim period is **Opening the Door to Leadership Participation**. Over time, organizations develop "go-to" people that carry significant responsibilities in leadership. The interim period is a perfect time to invite others into the leadership team. That may mean changes in leadership. It is important not to interpret change as a

wholesale “Out with the old and in with the new.” Continuity of leadership among lay people and staff are essential.

The best way of understanding this task is as an expansion of leadership. A wider group is included in leadership roles. New leadership may embrace younger or newer members, members with different gifts and fresh perspectives and creative ideas, and members that have grown in faith and maturity who are now ready for leadership. The end result of the expansion of leadership is that the congregation can remain faithful in ministering to the needs that exist today.

Another opportunity surfacing during the transitional period is the engagement of a broader part of the congregation in decision-making. This means including all members in the process of determining key directions. One of the realities of a vital church is that all in the congregation understand that every member has a ministry! One way you exercise your gifts and your responsibilities is by participating in the process that determines future directions for UPC.

A fourth task of the interim period is **Renewing Denomination Linkages**. Congregations may be unaware of the essential relationship with regional and national denominational councils, and how that relationship may impact their search for a new pastor. If the relationship between congregation and Presbytery is strained or antagonistic, reconciliation is necessary so that the search for a new pastor (which the denomination will help facilitate) can be productive and successful.

Fortunately, UPC enjoys a healthy relationship with our denomination’s governmental bodies and councils. Church members and staff are leaders within the Presbytery and contribute significantly to its life and mission. The ties between this congregation and the Presbyterian Church USA are deep and strong.

The final primary task of the interim period is **Commitment to New or Renewed Directions in Ministry**. This task prepares the congregation for moving in new directions alongside a new pastor. As the Pastor Nominating Committee completes its assignment of finding and

presenting to the congregation a pastor-candidate for election, the congregation finds itself in the midst of another transition.

During this time it is appropriate to celebrate milestones the congregation has reached during the interim period. Also, the congregation and the interim pastor can express appreciation for the gifts and ministries that have emerged and been shared during the interim period. Recognizing progress, celebrating achievements, and expressing gratitude: these set the stage for beginning a positive relationship between the newly-called pastor and the congregation.

In all these tasks of the interim period, we have opportunity to grow and learn and give and receive! My hope is that you will play an active role in this process as Unity prayerfully discerns its calling for the future.

If you have questions or comments about this process, please contact one of the pastors or members of the Session.

Mark E. Diehl

NOTE: This process is taken from *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry* by Roger S. Nicholson, a resource used in training interim ministers.