

ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO PASTORAL TRANSITION: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

William McKinney, Ph.D.

Social institutions face the challenge of leadership transition and local churches are no exception. In some faith traditions, a bishop decides when the time has come for one minister to leave his or her position and appoints a successor. In others, the congregation makes that decision, usually in consultation with a regional governing body. Churches in denominations with a “congregational” polity make this decision on their own, often with support from denominational officials.

In the past half century or so, the practice of relying on the services of an interim minister to assist the congregation in bringing one pastorate to a close and preparing for the transition to new pastoral leadership has become the norm in many denominations.

Many in the religious community are asking whether this practice is appropriate in all times and in all settings. The book, *The Elephant in the Board Room*¹ by Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree has been an important resource in this reassessment. Advocates of alternative approaches recognize that there are times when a local church needs a period of discernment following the voluntary or forced departure of a minister. They ask,

however, whether there are times when a congregation runs the risk of losing momentum when a pastor leaves.

In 2012, the Pension Boards-United Church of Christ convened a small consultation of local church leaders to explore alternative paths to pastoral transition. Using *The Elephant in the Board Room* as a starting point, the group identified several issues for further research and exploration. One identified need was for research on congregations that have pursued alternatives to the traditional interim pattern. This paper presents a comparative case study of two large UCC congregations that have done so: First-Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ in Lincoln, Nebraska and Plymouth

Congregational United Church of Christ in Des Moines, Iowaⁱⁱ.

Otis Young began his work as senior minister at First-Plymouth in Lincoln in 1972. Prior to arriving in Lincoln he had directed the national church development program of the United Church of Christ. He also served UCC churches in Connecticut, Chicago and St. Louis. Over the course of his 35-year ministry at First-Plymouth, he oversaw a tripling of its membership, an extensive media outreach program, an expansion of the church’s music program and several building projects. First-Plymouth and its senior minister became major voices of progressive Christianity in Nebraska’s capital city.

James Gilliom became senior minister at Plymouth in Des Moines in 1978, after having served churches in Upper Montclair, N.J., Indiana and Washington. At the time, Plymouth was among the largest congregations in the United Church of Christ, with a long history of ministers with a strong public voice. Under his leadership, Plymouth continued to grow and maintained its position as a progressive voice in Iowa's capital city.

FirstPlymouth and Plymouth have a good deal in common. Each reports a

A WEEK AT FIRST-PLYMOUTH (excerpts)

Adult Fellowship Groups

All Adult fellowship groups have e-newsletters. To be added to a list, email addie@firstplymouth.org

Single Adults (30s-60s). For more info, check out the Singles newsletter, "The Individualist" on www.firstplymouth.org.

Singles Upcoming Events:

Sunday Brunches Monday Night Volleyball

Rumbles Concert At Cappy's Bar & Grill (5560 S.48th), Fri. Oct 25. Meet at 7:30PM.

Singles Plus+ News

Single Adults (60 and older)

Upcoming Events:

Breakfasts & Brunches Bridge (2nd & 4th Wed. Room H).

Church Social Monthly social gatherings in hosts' homes Sat., Oct. 19, 6:30-9PM

Plymouth Pride Fellowship

Potluck & movie night, Sun., Oct.27, 5:30PM, Mayflower Hall. The feature will be "The Stonewall Uprising," for LGBTQ History Month. All are welcome and encouraged to attend.

For information, contact Rev. Nancy Erickson at 402-476-7565 x 244

Adapted from First-Plymouth's Newsletter, *The Herald*,
October 2 - November 6, 2013

membership of over 3,000, has an annual budget of about \$2 million and supports a large staff and program. Each provides important financial support and leadership in its United Church of Christ Conference, and each is growing. FirstPlymouth's membership has increased by 1,300 since 1992 and Plymouth adds about 120 members in a typical year.

The two churches are located in similar communities. Lincoln and Des Moines are state capitals. Profiles of the communities in which members live show other similarities: above-average educational levels, median household incomes of about \$65,000 per year and about three-quarters of the population living in family households. Both communities are growing in population at about one percent each year, with births exceeding deaths by about two-to-one and positive net migration. The communities are predominantly white and Anglo.

Introducing First Plymouth UCC, Lincoln, Nebraska

First Congregational Church was the first congregation founded in what was then known as Lancaster (now Lincoln), Nebraska. In 1887, it gave birth to a new congregation, Plymouth Congregational. In 1923, the two congregations merged and became FirstPlymouth Congregational Church, using Plymouth's building. At the time, the congregation included over 1,000 members, about half coming from each congregation; twenty years later it had grown to 2,000. The church moved to its current location in 1930 and the building on that site has expanded with major additions in the 1960s and 1990s. It is currently engaged in a \$6.5 million capital campaign that includes new worship and fellowship space and significant upgrades.

The 1950s brought challenges and membership declined to about 1,300. The congregation also experienced a serious conflict over affiliating with the then-new United Church of Christ.

Otis Young's pastorate initiated 42 years of steady growth in membership

and church attendance. Young had been heavily recruited for the senior minister position and declined, but visited Lincoln during a family cross-country vacation and became impressed by its potential; he saw the church as a "sleeping giant." Current members remember Young as the perfect person for this job, this church and this city. He is described as having "a large ego but little need to be a star" and as "a player in Lincoln." "He was our sage, our wise man," says one lay leader. "He was also a large man; he had stature." A UCC leader was an admirer of Young's ministry: "He was a very successful minister ~ creative, a person of vision. He understood that to create a very special place in the church would take enormous effort." The leader's son often said that when he was in Young's presence at FirstPlymouth he felt he should have a clipboard for taking notes. Young was an avid reader and an intellectual. Shortly after arriving in Lincoln, he started a book review program, first as a 15-minute television program, then on KFOR radio and for 20 years on NET Radio.

Young was also a risk-taker. He was a strong supporter of women in ministry and began performing same-sex unions in the 1980s. In his own wordsⁱⁱⁱ, "All the stories about Jesus tell us that he included everyone. He included especially those who were the outcasts of his time. That's what we try to do here. To welcome all people into our community."

The turnaround at FirstPlymouth can be attributed to a number of factors but it is clear that worship was one of them. In a newspaper article published at the time of Young's retirement a reporter quotes the pastor: "People should always leave worship feeling better than when they came in. That's achieved through good preaching, uplifting music and meaningful worship." Current senior pastor Jim Keck recalls conversations with Young in which his predecessor described his attempt "to seek more Spartan worship with majesty and silence." Sanctuary worship is enhanced by two new pipe organs, an antiphonal organ in the balcony and a 110-rank Schoenstein

symphonic organ in the main chancel. The Lied Organ, named after a major community donor, is one of the largest and most versatile organs in the country.

Today, at 3,400 members with average weekend worship attendance of 1,200, First-Plymouth is often referred to as Nebraska's "Liberal Protestant cathedral."

A former moderator comments that "First-Plymouth sees itself as a welcoming, open congregation; the UCC slogan, 'God is Still Speaking' reflects this church. We are open to all the needs and issues of modern society. We blend traditional and non-traditional elements."

The church's identity is expressed on its website^{iv}:

"First-Plymouth strives to blend tradition and innovation, the historical and the contemporary. Our worship services have a quality that echoes through the ages and yet, speaks to the present and points to the future. Our religious life is shaped by five guiding principles: We are Christian, Open-minded, Spiritual, Evolving and Diverse."

Senior minister Jim Keck says that First-Plymouth "is not all that introspective a place. It focuses on what it's doing. We don't plan. We do."

The church is an enormously complex operation with four services on Sundays on the church's campus, a service on Saturday evening and an experimental Sunday service at a school in East Lincoln. Six choirs supply music for over 250 worship services each year. Hundreds of children and adults participate in an extensive education program, and in a typical year members performed volunteer services in Honduras, Guatemala, Missouri and the Pine Ridge reservation. The church's programs range from an animal ministry, to a ministry of sustainability, to the Plymouth Pride Fellowship, a gathering of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning (GLBTQ) community members and their friends. The church's television ministry, "Reach Out and Live," is broadcast on the local Fox cable channel in Omaha and on the NBC station in Grand Island and reaches



singing faith
sharing music
building community
creating beauty
seeking peace
offering hope
glorifying God
discovering artistry
expressing wonder
communicating love
embracing possibility

The First-Plymouth Organ

a state-wide audience of more than 30,000 viewers each week.

In his annual report for 2012^v, senior minister Jim Keck notes that "...more people worshipped at First-Plymouth in 2012 than any other year in our entire history - and we have set new marks each of the last three years. We performed more baptisms - 93 - than any single year in our history. With the capital campaign now underway, we have received more contributions to our ministry than any prior single year. Also, another 185 people joined the church this year, which keeps us on a strong growth curve. Even as historic Protestant churches struggle mightily against dwindling attendance and shrinking membership, First-Plymouth continues to thrive."

Introducing Plymouth Congregational UCC, Des Moines, Iowa

Plymouth is slightly older than First-Plymouth, having been founded in 1857. Its Articles of Government included a provision that "All applicants for admission to this Church will be required to give satisfactory evidence that they are neither in theory or practice Slaveholders." After occupying several sites in Des Moines, Plymouth built its present campus on what

was at the time "the edge of town." The property was expanded in 1978 and again in 2003. Over the years Plymouth has grown in size and influence, drawing its membership from a wide area extending as far as Ames in the north to Indianola in the south to Waukee in the west to Pleasant Hill in the east. It is known as a vital institution in the city, as a "progressive place with muscle." Plymouth's Sunday worship service is broadcast across Iowa on KRNT radio.

The church's website identifies Plymouth's mission^{vi}:

"We are people on a journey, witnesses for God and disciples of Jesus Christ. As pilgrims, we are energized and led by the Holy Spirit toward unity with God and each other. Living our faith in relationship to our Creator and each other, we seek to make a difference in the quality of all life. We are called to be authentic in our worship, fellowship, teaching and service. Individually we may differ in our calling, but we regard diversity as creative and productive. We desire to enable each other to work toward wholeness and peace in the world. We honor, celebrate and practice inclusiveness. Plymouth Church has been an Open and Affirming congregation since 1993."

In conversations with Plymouth members and staff one hears consistent reference to Plymouth's motto: "We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve." These words are attributed to Stoddard Lane, Plymouth's pastor from 1929-1943 and a prominent pacifist and national leader in the Congregational Christian Churches. Members take pride in Plymouth's ability to accommodate persons of varying theological and political views, often noting that for 16 years Plymouth's congregation included lieutenant governors of the state of Iowa, half of them Democrats, the other half Republicans. A former staff member refers to Plymouth as an "optimistic" congregation: "People are rooting for you to succeed; it's just a positive place." Susan Beaumont, an Alban Institute consultant who has worked with Plymouth, refers to the church as a "professional" congregation: "They are sophisticated, savvy organizational leaders, active in community organizations. They are excellent communicators and strategic thinkers. Members are rarely surprised by outcomes. They see multiple scenarios in advance; they are non-reactive. Plymouth's leaders 'work their plan' in a very transparent way."

In 1978, James Gilliom was called to the position of senior minister following an interim period. His predecessor, James Lenhart, is remembered as a strong presence at Plymouth whose final years had been a struggle for both church and pastor. Gilliom represented a sharp contrast. Says one leader, "Lenhart had more bravado; Jim

was more guarded and quiet, an introvert."

David Ruhe, Plymouth's current pastor, says, "Jim was a public figure in Des Moines, with regular op-eds in the *Register*. He was an excellent pastor, a wonderful pastor; 'plan the work, then work the plan.'" He points to "integrity" as the key descriptor for Gilliom's ministry at Plymouth. Ruhe recalls a telephone conversation with Gilliom during the search process that led to his call. A reluctant candidate, Ruhe had reservations about serving in a large church. The conversation went well but Ruhe was still not convinced. "Then I asked him, 'What is your job there?'" Gilliom's response: "My job to be center of theological integrity for this congregation." Ruhe went "Oooh. I would like to try to do that."

Gilliom retired in 1994 but returned to Plymouth in 2007 to celebrate the church's 150th anniversary. In a sermon, he told a story that reflects both Plymouth's progressive values and its affirmation of disagreement^{vi}.

"W. T. Dahl, who died in June, 2006, aged 97, was the founder of his store chain and a generous supporter—of Plymouth. My first pastoral visit with him was late in my first year. Right off he let me know, 'I don't want my preacher messing in politics.' I replied that if he meant trying to apply the Christian faith to public life, he was probably going to be unhappy with me. 'But,' I said, 'I know how hard you have worked to apply your principle of providing stores that serve people. I pledge to you that I will be just as dedicated in my calling to apply the

gospel for the good of all people. I hope that you will come to respect me, and I promise that I will always respect you.'

Our annual visits, usually in his office, continued for 16 years. Usually he had to grouse about something; it was just his nature. After he acknowledged the need for more women in major leadership positions, it was 'But I don't want them taking over!' The same after he finally acknowledged the rights of homosexuals: 'But I don't want them taking over our church!'

It was about my 13th year when W. T. said, 'I don't know whether you're changing, or I'm changing, but you're beginning to make more sense.' At the conclusion of our final visit, on the Friday before my last Sunday, he said, 'Well, I'm glad you're leaving. You've cost me too much money.' Then, as I was in the doorway, 'You were good for me. You made me think about what I didn't want to think.' I didn't tell W. T. that I loved him, but I think he knew. And I think he loved me."

With about 3,200 members, Plymouth draws an average of about 800 persons to its three weekend worship services and 850 persons are involved in its Christian education program for children and adults. Its Chancel Choir tours internationally and its youth music program is extensive in scope. Plymouth participates in the Lilly Endowment's Transition to Ministry program for recent seminary graduates. Among the many programs the church sponsors are a coffee shop, a Homeless Assistance Team and

Thanksgiving at Plymouth Church



a variety of programs for personal support. Plymouth has been an Open and Affirming congregation since 1993 and the Plymouth GLBT community plays an active role in the life of the congregation and the wider community. Ministries are enhanced by the Plymouth Foundation, an endowment of about \$4 million.

Pastoral Ministry Transition at First-Plymouth

Otis Young turned 65 in 1996 but had no desire to retire from full-time ministry. Things were going well at First-Plymouth and Young had considerable energy for the job. “Otis never talked much about retirement,” recalls one close colleague. People would ask him about his thinking and he would respond, “I don’t know.” Once you say you are retiring you become a lame duck. I’m not giving that card away.”

The same colleague says that Young was starting to court potential candidates at about age 60. “He brought some potential ministers to town to preach. Afterwards, Otis would ask everyone: ‘What do you think?’ He got staff reactions, then moved on. This was all done very informally. Otis was searching all along and probably stayed on longer than he expected. He was able to reassure the church’s leaders that he wouldn’t leave us in the lurch.” One of those leaders recalls that after Young turned 70, the uncertainty about his plans began to affect the church’s planning, especially regarding personnel. Two members approached Young with their concerns and Young announced shortly after that he would be retiring when an appropriate successor was found.

As an observer of church life in various settings, Young had become convinced that the traditional pattern of calling an interim minister between settled pastors was not always appropriate in large congregations. He told a reporter shortly before his retirement that “An interim is hard on a church, and we wanted to avoid that. We wanted to keep the momentum going.” Young proposed that First-Plymouth begin an open-ended search for his successor and compared his plan to a relay race: “Before

you pass the baton, the other person runs alongside you to catch up with your speed. Then you hand it over.”

The search committee chair looked back on the search with the benefit of five years of hindsight.

“First-Plymouth knew that retirement was coming and people were concerned. Many Protestant congregations were declining. There was a lot of fear about what would happen when he left. So we made a plan. The search committee would present one person and Otis would stay on for [a] period of time. We knew it was different. You would need strong personalities on both sides – the outgoing minister and the new minister – and you would need flexibility. There was some discussion. Traditionally a minister moves away after they retire but Otis would stay. Otis made it seem like this was obviously the choice for us. We trusted his belief it would work. There was no real opposition. We held focus groups and developed criteria for the new senior minister.

Roddy Dunkerson was at the time the relatively new Conference Minister for Nebraska. He had known Otis Young for many years. “Otis had thought about transition for a long time. He wanted to get it right. He didn’t like what often happened in the interim time as churches shift from a focus on ministry and mission to a focus on themselves.” Young planned the transition to take place shortly after the new Conference Minister was in place and engaged him right away. Dunkerson got lots of response from colleagues for allowing the process to go forward. Some Conference Ministry colleagues objected very strongly, feeling that Young would have too much control. Others raised concern that church would have too much autonomy in the search. Young was convinced that Dunkerson should play a serious role in the search and he met regularly with the committee and assisted in recruiting candidates. The search committee chair cites him as an important facilitator of the search process.

A WEEK AT PLYMOUTH (excerpts)

Special Events Calendar

Thursday October 24, 7-8 a.m.

WISE (Women in Spiritual Exploration)

Gallery Exhibit

Ceramics by Lori Bonze

Saturday, October 26

Plymouth Grounds Open House

6:30-8:30 p.m.

C.W. Hobbs Bluegrass Band

Free-will offering supports salaries for Ruby Van Meter student baristas during the summer school break

Sunday, October 27

Transition From Prison Mentor Panel Discussion

10:10 a.m., Greenwood Room

Liberation Theology for Liberal Protestants

12:30-1:30 p.m., Burling Room

Young had been building a list of names of potential successors for some time. A search committee member says, “He wanted to look outside those who were already circulating profiles to someone who was happy where they are and not looking to escape. He also didn’t want us to limit ourselves to the United Church of Christ.” In the words of another committee member: “Otis was going to find us somebody. We were ready. The council had gone through a significant strategic planning process prior to this time and we had lots of conversation about the future. Otis played a major role in this process. He was a good consensus builder, a strong administrator, though somewhat laissez faire. Sometimes he would let things fester for a long time. Most people didn’t know that Otis was running the process. If someone had challenged it, we would have pulled back.”

One member recalls that the search committee was “hand-selected by Otis” and that he attended all of its meetings and helped screen resumes. He and the committee were wary of people serving in small churches. The committee began its work by identifying what success would look like. They agreed that Otis would help mentor the new minister and help shore up relationships with major donors. The search would put a lot of emphasis on candidates’ theology and philosophy of ministry. They were looking for people who were well read and possessing an “attitude of abundance.” A positive stance on women and gays in leadership was “a big piece.”



Otis Young

The committee of ten included strong community leaders and some corporate leaders. Most members were very involved in the congregation but a few were not. Two persons recall that “Otis Young drove the search process as CEO. The search committee helped him with it.” Jim Keck explains that “process frustrated Otis. You get people coming to do church (mission, worship), not to do the mechanics, which he could do better. As leaders on the council he wanted people who didn’t want to run things. In a sense he was a true benevolent dictator. He was willing to make mistakes but he ‘went to sorry’ quicker than anyone I’ve ever met.”

Keck – whose father, Bob Keck, was Young’s contemporary and had led workshops at First-Plymouth – was on Young’s list. Jim had enjoyed some success in pastorates in California and Massachusetts and was senior minister at the Congregational Church of San Mateo, California, which had experienced significant new growth and completed a successful capital campaign.

Keck recalls being approached by Young and Conference Minister Roddy Dunkerson over a period of a couple of years with what he describes as a “soft sell”: “Hey, would you be interested?” Keck was not interested in moving. In 2005 Young called again: “Just come with me to a football game to see what you are saying no to.” Keck agreed to visit. When he arrived in Lincoln he was greeted by the whole search committee. He was “taken by the allure of a beautiful church and blown away by the spiritual life of the church.” There was no official interview, but “lots of talk time.” Keck recalls “It was a recruitment visit more than an interview.”

The search committee chair says that “Jim knew fully well we were intending to court him. We were confident. We felt once he met us he would be won over.” One person close to the process recalled that audiotapes of Jim’s preaching were a major factor in his selection. Another committee member who heads a talent assessment company agreed to perform a leadership assessment on First-Plymouth’s candidates and reported that Keck’s results were “amazing.” The search committee visited with Keck in San Mateo and recommended that he be called as First-Plymouth’s new senior minister.

Keck was chosen by the committee and the congregation as First-Plymouth’s senior minister-elect on December 28, 2005. He began his work at First-Plymouth in May 2006. Originally, Young had envisioned an overlap of a year or two but he decided to step down as senior minister in October 2006, giving the two leaders a formal overlap of about six months. He stayed on as a paid consultant to the new senior minister until his death in 2012. Keck says,

“Otis told me that ‘once your contract is signed, you’re my boss.’ We became such buddies that he never ended up leaving. He did classes and weddings and was here every single morning until he died.”

When Keck arrived, he became the sole face of First-Plymouth on TV. This sent a strong message. On Keck’s first Sunday, Young put a CEO hat on Jim, sending a clear signal he was now in charge. From the first day Keck was lodged in the senior minister’s office and Young moved to a small office in the church’s educational wing.

Keck says that Young understood that symbols count and knew how to defer in an affable way. “It was a joy to be alongside someone who could pass on little tidy pieces of culture.”

Young helped Keck get to know the Lincoln community and performed the handoff. Together they had cocktails with players on various issues, made office visits and golfed with church leaders and donors. For the first six months they alternated preaching responsibilities, with Keck doing all TV services. Young tried to get Keck off to a good start; Keck tried to make Young’s leaving as positive as possible.



Jim Keck

Observers note that the transition appears to have gone smoothly, in part because of the character of the two senior

ministers. In the words of one leader, Young was very clear when people approached him with a question: “You have to go through Jim on that.” Another recalls that after his retirement “Otis and Rowena sat in same pew each week, but he did not hold court. He wouldn’t allow people to gather around as if he were still the minister.” One lay leader attributes the smooth transition to the character of the two people: “Otis took some time off, and then was around as a consultant and sounding board. Jim was confident enough to give Otis space to do weddings and funerals. It worked amazingly well. Otis’s greatest gift to this church was Jim Keck.”

Pastoral Transition at Plymouth

After 15 years at Plymouth Congregational UCC, James Gilliom announced that he would be retiring from his position as senior minister after Easter 1994. He had talked with church leaders about his dream of doing this for several years and made the public announcement about fifteen months in advance. Gilliom had consulted with veteran church consultant Lyle Schaller, who knew the church.

The church launched a search in accordance with its by-laws. Former Iowa Conference Minister Don Gall recalls conversations with Gilliom about trying a different search model. “He had thought it through,” says Gall. “The church had momentum and clarity of purpose and he didn’t want it to tread water through an interim period. It would be better to move ahead and plan for some overlap between the two senior ministers. He decided, and then brought the board along.” He remembers Gilliom as “self-confident, in command, with no great ego. He was committed to a seamless transition and clear about his own role.” Gall agreed to help find candidates who could fit that model.

A Plymouth staff member followed the process closely. “Jim worked for five years toward the transition. He didn’t want the church to lose momentum. Lyle Schaller had helped him build a vision for

Plymouth. [Church consultant] Jim Bidle wrote a vision statement for the church that was included in the ‘Bidle Report.’ We wanted to expand staff with new positions in spiritual growth and young adults.

I don’t remember anyone arguing for an alternative process. The conference was comfortable with it as well.”

The search committee chair recalls that “the idea of succession without an interim was all Jim Gilliom’s idea. “He laid the groundwork very carefully and convinced us that the church was healthy and strong and that this way of transitioning would be a blip in its history that could be smoother than if we went the interim route. Jim had a lot of faith in the proposed process and the church drew from his sense of confidence.”

In Gilliom’s plan the outgoing minister would help credential the successor. By all accounts the church took pride in doing this differently. Conducting a successful transition became the congregation’s goal.

In most other respects the search proceeded in typical UCC fashion. The search committee of twelve members was representative of the congregation and worked with the assistance of the UCC Conference staff. Gilliom was not involved in the search, though he was available to talk with individual candidates.

The search committee actively pursued prospective candidates. Ruhe remembers that his first contact with Plymouth was with the committee chair, who told him, “We don’t want to be coy about this. We are very interested in you.” Ruhe had been at First Central Congregational UCC in Omaha for 18 years, first as associate minister and then as senior minister. He was happy there and not looking for a new position. He had not been fond of the large church pastors he had met and enjoyed a smaller congregation.



First-Plymouth Church

“Why would I want to do that? Why display my zits on a big screen? I was of the school that felt that after a long, successful pastorate you need an interim for grieving, etc.”

During the call Ruhe said it looked to him as if the church was “setting itself up for an unintentional interim.” He expressed doubts about the process. The committee chair recalls Ruhe asking him, “Does the term ‘sacrificial lamb’ mean anything to you?” After a call from Conference Minister Don Gall he updated and submitted his church profile. The committee chair asked Gilliom to call Ruhe to talk about the search process. In a long conversation, Gilliom made it clear he was not involved in the search: “This call is an exception.” The conversation went well, but Ruhe describes himself as “still skeptical, but seducible.”

The search committee continued its active pursuit of Ruhe and others. Committee representatives made four visits to hear him preach in Omaha. Don Gall concluded that Ruhe had the right skills and self-confidence. “I cajoled him and almost had to break his arm to get him to update his profile. He finally agreed. I became convinced that David possessed the right qualities for that setting. Once convinced, I became totally enamored with the idea and told him, ‘This is a kairos moment. Plymouth needs someone like you and you can do it.’”

The primary interview was a 90-minute telephone conversation. Two final candidates were brought to Des Moines. Ruhe remembers that visit as an extended chemistry test.”

In Ruhe's mind, the committee was pretty clear what it was looking for in a candidate.

"First, a strong preacher. A commitment to the church's Open and Affirming stance was also important. They were looking for a "thought leader" in the community – for Jim on his best day, on steroids. He had established a collegial environment with the staff and the church appreciated that. Jim Lenhart had been Herr Pastor; Jim Gilliom was a breath of fresh air. They emphasized egalitarian values. And they knew that a large church is different; they really wanted an experienced head of staff."



James Gilliom

Shortly after the visit, Ruhe received a call from the committee chair telling him he was their choice. The congregation affirmed the committee's choice in early December and Ruhe returned to Des Moines in January to meet with the staff. He began receiving correspondence and "being lobbied" almost immediately. Gilliom's plan had been for six months of overlap but this was not to be. Ruhe moved to Des Moines in mid-March for a one-month overlap. "I sat in the pews for a month. Jim was absolutely organized. We worked through about twenty files together and he introduced me to some of the key players in Des Moines and the congregation."

One church leader feels the short period of overlap was about right: "It

ended up being pretty good. David seemed uncomfortable being alongside Jim. It was hard for him as they were plowing virgin ground. Looking back I think it may have been hard for him; he seemed reticent making joint appearances. He tried to be part of the word work." Ruhe found this to be an awkward time for him: "After my selection, Jim piled it on. 'This is the best choice in all of Christendom.' I found it unnerving. I prefer to sneak up on people. As a candidate, Jim made me look like God's younger sibling. So I tried to lower expectations. I am no Jim Gilliom. I am David Ruhe."

Gilliom made it clear that in retirement he would no longer perform pastoral functions for Plymouth members. "Because I cannot perform pastoral services for everyone," he told the congregation, "I will not perform pastoral services for anyone." One member remembers the symbolic impact the transition in leadership resonated for a long time. "When David came, Jim went away and stayed away. He told us that on the day David became our senior minister he would refuse to do our funerals 'unless it is the next day or two.'"

The Sunday after Easter 1994 was Gilliom's final day in the worship life of Plymouth Church. Conference Minister Don Gall preached and at a point during the service Gilliom removed his stole and



David Ruhe

placed it on Ruhe's shoulders. "By passing along the stole, he in effect anointed me. I never had a service of installation because I had already been installed."

A few days later, after a concert in Gilliom's honor, Jim and Donna Gilliom left town for their new home in Michigan. Ruhe remembers that "they walked across the street to a packed car and drove away." Gilliom returned a year later for a celebration of a book of his Plymouth sermons, and in 2003 for the building dedication, which was the culmination of visions born in his pastorate. He was back again in 2007 for the church's 150th anniversary. He died in July 2012.

Another Transition at Plymouth

In 2012, Ruhe announced that he would be retiring from Plymouth in December 2014. Like Gilliom, he worried about losing momentum. Ruhe says he worries about "putting the clutch in for too long. A place like this can't afford to coast. When you have genuine momentum, why risk it?" He worked for five years with Susan Beaumont, an Alban Institute consultant, to prepare for the transition.

Once again Plymouth followed its by-laws and brought together a representative search committee that met weekly to design a process that would gain the confidence of the congregation. One complication is that this time Plymouth had an internal candidate, Matt Mardis-LeCroy. The process included two phases, one to decide whether the internal candidate would be the senior minister-elect and a second, if necessary, to proceed with a nation-wide search. The process used is a model of transparency with regular updates on the church's website: http://www.plymouthchurch.com/home/sr_minister_transition.php.

Ruhe played an active role in designing the transition process but has been careful not to involve himself in the search process, which has used Iowa Conference Minister Rich Pleva as its facilitator.

In September 2013, the search committee voted unanimously to recommend that Mardis-LeCroy become

the senior minister-elect and on October 20, the congregation voted to call him as Plymouth's next senior minister.

Lessons from Two Pastoral Transitions

The pastoral transitions at First-Plymouth and Plymouth had several features in common. Both senior ministers had been in their positions for a number of years and were retiring. The congregations were large and thriving, with strong lay leadership. The senior ministers were the primary architects of the transition plan, but both drew on outside consultants as they shaped the plan and invested a great deal of time in building congregational support for an alternative model. Both had the support of their UCC Conference Ministers, who were active in the search process. The search committees understood their role as recruiters and not merely as profile readers.

Finally, while neither church used an interim minister both churches were sensitive to what needs to happen during an interim period: coming to terms with the history of the congregation; discovering a new identity; managing necessary changes in lay leadership and on the staff team; renewing denominational linkages; gaining commitment to new directions in ministry^{viii}.

There were also some important differences. The two outgoing ministers had different leadership styles. While both were theologically and organizationally astute, Otis Young was far more comfortable than James Gilliom in a "Chief Executive Officer" role. Gilliom was by all accounts a strong and decisive leader but his style was lower key. Both churches had a strong sense of purpose and direction, but First-Plymouth tended to assign more responsibility for future planning to its senior minister while Plymouth is sometimes described as "obsessed with process."

Perhaps the greatest difference has to do with the role of the retiring pastors. While both transition plans included some overlap between the outgoing and incoming ministers, Gilliom was planning to leave the state and to make a clean break with

Plymouth Church. Young planned to stay in Lincoln and remain active at First-Plymouth.

Persons involved in the transitions at First-Plymouth and Plymouth have thought a lot about the process of pastoral transition. All are convinced that the decision not to call an interim minister was the right choice for their church. A Plymouth leader is "a huge believer in this pattern. It takes tremendous advance planning to achieve buy-in from the congregation. It takes meetings in which people are encouraged to express their opinions. You need to take polls, have all the facts in hand. You cannot over-plan or get too many involved."

Jim Keck says he was not romantic about this at all. "I would have had no interest in this job unless I liked this guy [Otis Young] a lot. It was obvious to me he loved the church and loved the work. I had to want to work with him. I was lucky. You couldn't plan this. Fortunately, he was of the disposition he was. Fortunately, the love of pastors is not a zero-sum game. You can't hoard the beloved-ness."

David Ruhe feels much the same way: "I moved from being skeptical to becoming an advocate. The prevailing wisdom has changed regarding the necessity of the interim period." He emphasizes the vulnerability of the new pastor in a large congregation: "It was way harder

than anybody knew. You can't come in with revolutionary changes. My style is evolutionary. I like to live with things for a period until I really understand it. I don't have to do it my way. In so many situations it felt as if I were in a play but I was the only one who didn't have a script. You are moving into someone else's fully-furnished house without permission to change the sock drawer."

The Conference Ministers who worked with the two congregations feel the model worked but are cautious in recommending it to other churches. Iowa's Don Gall thinks, "It takes particular kind of people in the retiring senior and incoming minister. Not just anyone could do that. The personalities of those two will make it or break it. And the congregation has to be fairly conflict-free and non-factionalized with a vision that draws them forward. The transition needs to facilitate that vision rather than develop it. Not every search is suited for no-interim model." Gall looks to the Conference to help a church discern its readiness for an alternative model.

Roddy Dunkerson of Nebraska feels it is hard to talk about this form of transition apart from the people involved. Other Conferences have called him to learn about First-Plymouth's process. "I try to emphasize the particularities," he says. "Each case will be different. There is no



Plymouth's Educational Wing

single template to follow absolutely. You have to sort out the ability of the people involved to make it work. Can these people do it? And you have to figure out Conference's role. Are you an intruder or an integral part of the process?"

A former Plymouth staff member says that two things need to be present. First, "the pillars need to be strong. You can't make this work when you have termites. And the minister needs to be retiring, not moving on to another position."

First-Plymouth's search committee chair feels that "This model is not for everybody. It can work if the congregation and the retiring minister are willing to make it work. But it is risky." Her Des Moines counterpart agrees. "It really depends on the maturity of outgoing and incoming ministers. I'm glad that we could be encouraged to innovate and to do it successfully. Churches need to take risks and we had the sense were doing that. This is true of our current search process as well. The UCC is an appropriate place for this sort of succession plan. It gives me reason to love the UCC. We can be entrepreneurial."

A Concluding Word

First-Plymouth and Plymouth crafted transition plans that served them well on the retirements of Otis Young and James Gilliom. Both churches remain strong.

Even critics of interim ministry acknowledge that some churches need time between pastorates to discern their next steps prior to calling a new settled pastor. This is most clearly the case after an extended period of conflict or following an ineffective or troubled ministry. For healthy larger congregations with an effective retiring leader, the alternative approach of the sort outlined here may make sense.

Alban's Susan Beaumont has written a "white paper"^{ix} that does an excellent job outlining times when alternatives to the interim model are appropriate. Her paper focuses on characteristics of the outgoing pastor. I would add a couple of points to her excellent paper.

In the cases discussed here we have seen two congregations with an unusual degree of self-consciousness of their current needs and future direction. One of the tasks of an interim minister is to help the congregation understand its culture, community, resources and processes. First-Plymouth and Plymouth see these as ongoing responsibilities and they expect their senior ministers to play an active role in this process. Over the years, their ministers have welcomed this assignment and they have done it well.

A danger in larger churches is assuming that because the congregation has many members and has been able to attract "successful" ministers, it must by definition be healthy and prepared to make a good choice of a future pastor. These two churches were careful to have their assumptions tested through the use of outside resources (the two Conference Ministers, and consultants Lyle Schaller, James Bidle and Susan Beaumont).

First-Plymouth was unusual in the way Jim Keck and Otis Young were able to maintain a positive relationship following the end of Young's service as senior minister. Close observers attribute this to the personalities of the two ministers. I would also note that they took important structural and symbolic steps to help make this work. Young's move to a smaller office in an isolated location, his refusing to be seen as the face of First-Plymouth on television, his insistence that Keck was his boss, and his resistance to groups gathering around him in public, helped establish his new role in the congregation.

NOTES

- i. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004.
- ii. I was asked to conduct this study by the Pension Boards-UCC in the summer of 2013. I became familiar with the two churches during my work as research director of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries and have known all four of the senior ministers. For this study I conducted telephone interviews with Jim Keck and David Ruhe, the two Conference Ministers involved with the searches, the search committee chairs, four additional church committee members, a staff member of each church and the consultant working with Plymouth Church on its 2013 search.
- iii. http://journalstar.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/otis-young-delivers-last-sermon-as-first-plymouth-senior-minister/article_6c2f3b94-41f7-5e7f-910e-600b6acbadfe.html. Accessed October 26, 2013.
- iv. http://www.firstplymouth.org/Pages/about_index.html Accessed October 26, 2013.
- v. <http://www.firstplymouth.org/pdf/2012annualreport.pdf> Accessed October 25, 2013.
- vi. http://www.plymouthchurch.com/about_us/what_we_believe.php Accessed October 25, 2013.
- vii. http://www.plymouthchurch.com/uploads/sermons/sermon12-02-07_.pdf Accessed October 25, 2013.
- viii. Roger Nicholson, "Temporary Shepherds: a Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry" (Alban Institute, 1998), 6-12. Taken from Susan Beaumont, "The Interim Time Period in the Large Congregation" (Alban Institute, n.d.)
- ix. Susan Beaumont, "The Interim Time Period in the Large Congregation" (Alban Institute, n.d.)



Partners in Ministry Since 1914

475 Riverside Drive, Room 1020

New York, NY 10115-0059

1.800.642.6543 | www.pbucc.org | info@pbucc.org

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