

UCC leaders, pastors examine new methods for pastoral transitions

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Written by Anthony Moujaes

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What started as a casual conversation between longtime United Church of Christ church leaders bloomed into a more formal discussion on exploring alternative models for pastoral transitions in the denomination.

The more formal brainstorming session, a two-day gathering last week in Boston, brought together more than two dozen of the best minds from across the life of the church to begin exploring different models for pastoral transition, particularly in larger membership churches.



The Rev. Holly MillerShank, team leader for the UCC's Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization Ministry Team is hopeful that new models can facilitate smoother transitions between a retiring pastor and newly-called pastor in UCC congregations to help keep alive energy, momentum and vitality in the church.

The May 21-22 session in Boston stemmed from a casual lunch conversation two years ago between the Rev. Jill Edens, senior co-minister of United Church of Chapel Hill (N.C.) and the Rev. Martin Copenhaver, then-senior minister at Wellesley Village Church, UCC, in Massachusetts and now president of the UCC's Andover Newton Theological School in Boston.

"Jill and Martin are long-tenure pastors who have been eager to explore new ways of talking about succession planning in the church," said the Rev. J. Bennett Guess, executive minister of UCC Local Church Ministries. "As pastors of larger, strategic-sized congregations, they feel it's essential that pastors play a role in helping their churches prepare for the time when they will no longer be there, even if that moment is years away, and that's typically, perhaps even unwisely, not been the UCC's way of doing things. They and others think the time has come for us to take a second, third and fourth look at that."

Edens said she and Copenhaver approached the issue of pastoral transitions when they grew concerned about ministries around them that floundered in times of transition and never recovered.

"We were also aware that church leaders didn't have a safe space for this discussion," Edens said. "This was confirmed at our meeting last week as pastor after pastor asked that their presence at the meeting be kept in strict confidence. Many of us, including Martin and I, are not planning to retire anytime soon, but we want to get the succession planning discussion out of the closet at a time when 1,400 of the 3,000 UCC ministers who participate in the Pension Boards could retire in the next five years. This is a sea change for any organization."

While participants paid their own way to attend, the UCC's Pension Boards offered financial support and hosted the gathering.

"We were glad to have the support of PBUC as we sought to convene discussion partners around this topic and are encouraged by the enthusiasm that was expressed by attendees," Edens said.

Under the guidance of Susan Beaumont, a consultant who has written extensively on large church dynamics, the UCC pastors talked with each other and five denominational leaders about their experiences serving more-complex organizational systems, Guess said. Conversations focused on large-church governance, the current method in pastoral transitions, intentional interim ministry, and possible designs for transitions in specific contexts.

"It is now widely understood that there is no longer just one right way, but perhaps many right ways, if approached creatively and adaptively," Guess said.

MillerShank shares that sentiment. "We know a one-sized fits all model doesn't work. We need to create ways local church and conference staff can discern the appropriate healthy model for pastoral transition," she said.

"All of us were clear that interim ministry is a good model that can work effectively in many settings, but we also concur that there might be other models that can work just as well, or better, in different contexts," Guess said.

The group discussed case studies, including examples of more-recent senior minister transitions at First-Plymouth UCC in Lincoln, Neb., and Plymouth UCC in Des Moines, two large congregations where different transition processes were designed, and with apparent success. In those instances, a newly-called minister worked closely with the existing minister for a one-year period to ensure a smooth transition.

MillerShank said that while there are multiple models for ministerial transition beyond interim ministry, they aren't as widely known, so exploring and sharing in the topic will "make it known we embrace a variety of models."

The group dialogue will be explored further during the first week of December, when a diverse network of leaders will gather for "Authorizing Ministry for the 21st Century" or "AM 21", a biennial conference for national, conference and association staff working to ministerial authorization, transitions and search processes.

The Habakkuk Group, a diverse team of 17-members that writes the vision of authorized ministry for the UCC, could also explore looking critically and creatively at the role of authorized ministry in the UCC for the 21st century.

The Habakkuk Group, meeting for the first time in June, will begin a three-year process of examining the overall landscape of the UCC's Manual on Ministry, including its role, function, gifts and flaws, MillerShank said.

SECTION MENU

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