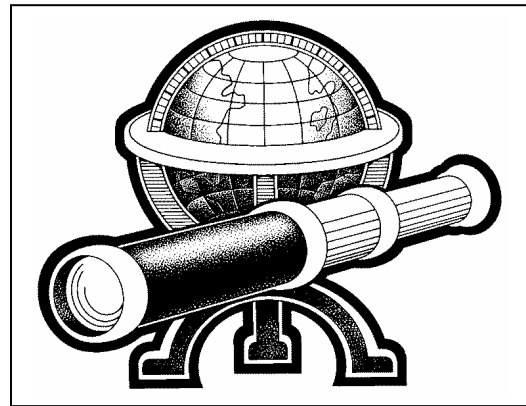




HOW TO DETERMINE IF THE MINISTER SHOULD STAY[†]

Many Unity ministry bylaws include provisions for dealing with the release of the minister. Most require contact with the President & CEO of the Association or the engagement of Association assistance to occur prior to termination of the minister. There is a great need to prepare the minister, board, and the congregation if this question becomes an issue.



When there is conflict or interpersonal difficulty between the minister and the board, and when these tensions place the minister's tenure in jeopardy, assistance and support from the Association of Unity Churches should be immediately sought. The peacemaking services of the Association of Unity Churches (Ministry for Peacemaking) are intended to assist Unity leaders and church communities in identifying the interpersonal, organizational, and systemic issues underlying conflicts and disputes. Once issues are identified, our focus is on healing and reconciliation as the precursor to problem solving. We do not affix blame, nor do we evaluate ministerial or board competence. Our services are voluntary and non-punitive. We help spiritual communities and their leaders work together in good faith to embrace conflicts as a means of discovering the missing links in their own intention to create authentic community.

[†] Adapted from *Intervening in a Church Fight: A Manual for Internal Consultants*, by George Parsons, by permission of the Alban Institute, Inc., 7315 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 1250W, Bethesda, Maryland, 20814-3211. Copyright © 1989. All rights reserved.

While a church's bylaws may require the ministry to seek assistance from the Association of Unity Churches prior to considering the dismissal of the minister, *this does not necessarily mean an engagement of the peacemaking processes*. The Director of Peacemaking Services determines whether or not an on-site mediation or peacemaking process would benefit all concerned.

At higher levels of conflict, disputants are actively and forcefully defending their positions. Such rigid defensiveness creates the perception that "someone is to blame." An easy remedy is to be rid of the guilty party. When the minister is blamed for the difficulties facing the ministry, the conflict turns away from the issues and toward the struggle and strategy of releasing the minister. This is likely to cause the minister to intensify defensive behaviors resulting in a power struggle of community-wide proportions.

The fundamental questions the peace worker must explore are "Can these people live and be in ministry together productively?" "Can these people forgive and get on with the business of ministry?" "Do these people love, respect, and value each other?", "Are they meeting each other's appropriate needs?" If not, "Do they possess the willingness to support one another as each gain the resources and skill necessary to overcome their shortcomings?"

According to the Alban Institute, in congregations where the minister's leadership was questioned by some of the members, concerns had to do with these issues:

- The quality of the minister's interpersonal relationships (especially relating to how people were able to be close and feel connected to the minister)
- Values conflict between the minister and some of the members (usually these were about social action, liturgy, theology, or the minister's life style)
- The minister's administrative skills
- The amount of work performed by the minister

- The quality of the minister's Sunday talks, teaching, and commitment to serve in ministry

While these issues are signs that there are questions relating to the competence of the minister, other factors are likely to be equally present and worthy of consideration:

- Factions in the congregation which have been fighting for many years before the minister was hired
- Strong authoritative lay persons in the role of matriarch or patriarch in conflict with the minister
- A history of conflict with previous ministers
- Unwillingness or inability on the part of congregation members to identify problems early and to help the minister work them through.
- A miscellany of structural and interpersonal dynamics that seem to enhance lay/clergy conflict but cannot be attributed to any person or group.
- Frustration, economic decline resulting in shrinking membership or finances, negative consciousness.

Of course, if the minister has violated the Minister's Code of Ethics or the norms of the community at large, if there are blatant violations of professional ethics such as disclosing confidences, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct, or chemical dependency, then there is obviously cause for immediate corrective action or termination.

George Parsons uses the term "revocability" to define the direction of the process in determining the tenure of the minister. A revocable situation is one where the minister and lay people are able to recall, rescind, or take back their name-calling, bickering, animosity, and fighting. An irrevocable situation is one in which the antagonists are so committed to their anger and purpose that they

can't or won't take back what they have been saying or doing. The peace worker may have the opportunity to work with these people. If given a chance, people will often retract statements if they can do so with dignity.

It is likely that other underlying issues particular to parties involved fuel intense animosity. It is not the role of peace workers to conduct therapy. However, tactful persuasion on the part of the peace worker to help the antagonists to own and take responsibility for their issues may help them shift in their position. Without the willingness of the individual to heal and get past the issues, any shift in their position will be short-lived.

There are five criteria that relate to the minister's relationship with the community. They form the questions that must be answered by those deciding the fate of the relationship. They are:

- Mutuality
- Shared identity between the minister and the majority of the congregation
- Willingness to function non-belligerently
- Support by more than 60 - 70% of the active members
- Competency

MUTUALITY:

The likelihood of the minister being released is greatest within the first twelve months. In all probability, this is because of the lack of mutuality between the minister and others. Mutuality means a state of cooperativeness and empathy based on a history of communication, understanding, sharing, and giving between people. While mutuality tends to develop over time, in some cases, it does not. In instances where friendships have not been created or when trust has not been built into relationships, the onset of conflict makes the relationship tenuous at best. When the history of the relationship is lacking in a positive bond between the minister and the congregation, there is little hope for good feelings in the future.

SHARED IDENTITY:

This characteristic of an individual or a group answers the question, "Who am I (are we)?" For the minister and the church it is best linked to the shared vision. "Are we going on the same journey? Do our goals overlap?" It is also linked to ideology. "Do the minister and the congregation possess common values and attitudes?" In many congregations, race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class will have a great deal to do with identity. In others, the existence of identifying characteristics is not negative at all, but works to integrate the community instead. The issue of shared identity comes into play when there is a large gap between what the congregation needs in a spiritual leader and what the minister is capable of or willing to model.

WILLINGNESS TO FUNCTION NON-BELLIGERENTLY:

Surprisingly, this is an issue within Unity churches. Individuals, including the minister, may lack the ability to relate without belligerence, deception, anger, and/or blaming. When one or more of the factions, or the minister, is unwilling to function non-belligerently in the congregation, it is unlikely that they can all remain in the same organization. If belligerence of the minister is the major problem, then serious consideration must be given to the decision to release the minister. However, if there is a lay group (either a minority or majority) which continues to be disruptive, it makes sense for the members to ask the belligerent parties to leave rather than forcing the minister to leave.

SUPPORT BY MORE THAN 60 - 70% OF THE ACTIVE MEMBERS:

When the minister does not have the backing of 60 to 70% of the active members of the church, it is unlikely there is the political support necessary to continue in the leadership role of the organization. When controversy arises regarding the possible dismissal of the minister, careful attention must be given to determine if the organization can be served by its present leader(s). Without a significant and powerful vote of confidence

by those who actively participate and support the church, the minister faces a losing battle.

A critical issue in determining whether the support exists to maintain the current leadership is how the board and the minister obtain the data to make this decision. The tendency will be for those in charge to estimate or guess at this question based upon their position within the issue. Systematic information gathering that may include a membership meeting helps to bring credibility to this process.

Not only is the size of the opposition a consideration, but their placement is also a significant factor. Key leaders, long-time active members (Congregation B), and persons who contribute large amounts of time and money to the organization have the ability to influence others within the organization.

This is especially true in family and pastoral ministries (up to 150 active members). While these groups may be in the minority, their influence must be factored into the decision process. An example of this point is when the minister has the support of the general congregation, but not of those who have underwritten the mortgage of the church. Faced with the possibility of losing the church building to foreclosure by those who hold the keys makes the issue more than just a popularity contest. As a general rule, the opposition that is represented by this inner circle of influence increases the percentage of those in the membership who support the dismissal of the minister.

COMPETENCY OF THE MINISTER:

Concerns about the minister's competence arise for many reasons, some quite removed from the issue of competency itself. However, the minister's ability to function in a



professional manner is fundamental to a viable organization. While the minister's job is varied and complex, there are a number of professional and interpersonal skills required in order to do the job satisfactorily: public speaking, teaching classes, counseling, and administration are some of the professional skills required. The ability to relate to people in ways that are not aggressive or too passive, to support even those with whom there is disagreement, and to think clearly and rationally in most situations is among the interpersonal skills needed.

Sometimes competence can be improved through training and counseling by outside sources. If this is possible, it should be attempted. The peace worker can provide information to assist in evaluating competence and recommend training helpful to the minister. However, most people find it difficult to change, grow, or develop in situations of high conflict and stress. If stress is high in the organization and the minister is unable to develop or redevelop competencies needed, termination is the appropriate decision.

