

Always Changing: The Developmental Tasks of the Congregation by Kim Mason

Having served in the field of religious education for fifteen years, I have had many conversations with colleagues about the benefits of interim work during congregational transitions. However, interim religious education continues to be a field that both needs more trained professionals and that more congregations need education. I have talked to congregations that didn't want to hire an interim because they felt a permanent hire would be stabilizing and others that tried to hire an interim and couldn't find one available, or that wanted to take the position. While Interim Religious Education training may seem like a specialized field for a certain kind of professional, the skills of interim work are applicable even when you are serving in a permanent position.

My first position as a Director of Religious Education was as an Interim. After wrapping up those two years, the ensuing two positions I took were permanent, yet I found the skills I learned as an Interim to be invaluable in both congregations. The second congregation I served did not have an interim period before my hire and so some of those interim tasks fell to me to complete in my tenure. The third congregation I served had a one-year interim prior to my arrival who did great work, however, some tasks remained and fell to me to complete.

The developmental tasks of the interim period are designed to move a congregation through a specific period of transition. What I have learned in working in multiple congregations is that at any given point, one or all of those tasks may be revisited during a Religious Educator's tenure. It's also important to note that for a variety of reasons, many congregations do not have an interim period between religious educators, thus leaving many of the interim tasks to be done by the new religious educator.

Let's take a look at some of the tasks and how they are applicable to the permanent religious educator.

HERITAGE (Coming to Terms with History): When coming into a congregation as permanent staff, even after a professional interim, there is always going to be a history of the program that remains. The congregation will have stories about the traditions of the program, the big accomplishments, and even the messy problems. The benefit of having an interim is to afford congregants an opportunity to process their emotions around these stories. However, sometimes a story lingers, even after an interim period. I once worked in a congregation that had a year-long interim prior to my hire. Within my first month I was told the story of a very painful incident around welcoming special needs children and youth. Not only was there still a lot of emotion around this story, but the congregation believed that it wasn't very good at working with children and youth who had special needs. It took years of intentional work to both repair some of the damage from this event and help the congregation

build the confidence to truly welcome children and youth with special needs. My interim training around processing the heritage of a program prepared me for that work.

It's also important to recognize that whether or not there has been an interim process, each congregation has a culture. Interim work is intentional about identifying the culture and helping congregants reflect on what is useful about that culture as well as what about it is holding the congregation back from achieving its stated goals. This kind of specific analysis and reflection can change dramatically wherever you are in your tenure with a congregation.

MISSION & CORE VALUES (Discovering a New Identity): The work in this task is at the heart of all programs in any congregation you serve. If you were hired without a prior interim period, then revisiting the mission and core values of the RE program will be critical to putting yourself, the committees, staff, and the congregation on the same page. The benefit to working in a congregation after a professional interim is that there will be a lot of clarity around mission and core values. However, the skills that are acquired in this area will be useful anywhere – even outside of congregational work. Any time there is a significant change in an organization, it's a good idea to revisit the mission statement. Significant changes can include adding or removing a session of RE, a change in ministerial staff, a significant change in staff hours for RE, or a building move or major renovation. It's also a good idea to revisit the mission and core values any time the congregation goes through a major strategic visioning or long-range planning process.

It's possible that at some point the mission statement you've been working with will need to be discarded, or the committee you work with will become unclear about the core values that guide the RE program. Guiding a congregation through a process of identifying core values and crafting a mission statement is a skill you can use with any organization. It is particularly valuable in religious education as congregational life has many competing values. Having a deep understanding of the mission and core values of your program will assist you and your committee in targeting your efforts and saying no (or yes!) to the many ideas, requests, and projects that come your way.

LEADERSHIP (Shifts of Power/Leadership Changes): This area may seem superfluous to permanent hires, but I urge you to reconsider for a couple reasons. If you were hired without an interim process, having an intentional conversation with the committee you work with about their expectations of your work time is critical. Clarity around which things the committee is responsible for will prevent frustration later. Even following an interim period, conversations around leadership are important. If there are staffing changes in a program, either adding or removing staff, or changing paid hours, you'll need to talk about responsibilities. I've also found that what a committee expected changed depending on the membership of a committee. I once worked in a congregation that had a very strong Holiday event team that oversaw recruiting volunteers, planning decorations and coordinating

supplies. When two members ended their tenure on the committee, two new members were recruited with very different skills. Holiday events changed both in how they happened, and whose responsibility they were – which required a conversation with the committee around leadership expectations.

This is an area where it is also important to look at the systems and structures that exist in your congregation. An interim may have identified systems that existed, whether they were healthy or perhaps, where there were areas for improvement. However, if there are unhealthy systems in your congregation it can take years to change them, and that work will belong to the incoming permanent hire. If you were hired without an interim period, having the skills to assess the health of congregational systems is a valuable tool.

CONNECTIONS (Rethinking Denominational Linkages): This task is a bit of a misnomer. To say that making denominational connections is something that can be checked off as “done,” is an inaccurate representation of the work in this area. Connections are critical to the interim process as the congregation will soon be in search. However, once the search is completed, with or without an interim period, the congregation and its new hire should maintain and strengthen those connections. Denominational connections are valuable in this work as our UU congregations are often isolated and our connections are also our support network. If you can create those connections locally with other faith traditions it will help you in your work. It’s also important because remaining connected to colleagues within and without Unitarian Universalism will keep you abreast of trends and innovations.

I also invite you to look at the connections within the congregation. Even if a prior interim helped the congregation to break down its internal silos, it will be your task to keep the channels of communication open. Anytime there is significant change in leadership you will need to rebuild those connections. I worked in a congregation where the Religious Educator was only expected to attend specifically religious education related committee meetings. When I arrived I began attending the regular program council meetings and discovered that this was where the program calendar was worked out. If social justice was planning a large event, I could learn about it in advance and build on it with a related RE event. It also allowed all the committees to identify potential conflicts and to negotiate timing before events were even announced. This made for a much more congenial and collaborative relationship between the RE program and other program areas of the congregation. It is important to remember that building and maintaining connections is ongoing work.

FUTURE (Commitment to New Leadership and to a New Future): This area is one that congregations often find challenging. If you were hired after an interim, the committee you work with may feel like they have done their job by getting you hired and settled. In early conversations with the congregation I served post-interim, I asked about their vision for the program. They literally said to me, “Well, isn’t that what we hired you for?” Without the benefit of an interim, it’s easy to come to a congregation that has been so focused on the day to day functioning of the program

that they may not have felt they had the time to think about the future. Whether there was an interim process or not, you want the congregation to own their vision for the future of the RE program. Serving as the Religious Educator in a congregation, you are the professional, but you work as part of a team of volunteers. A vision that is shared by the leadership, paid and volunteer, means a core that is committed to carrying out that future. You cannot do it alone, thus making this task another ongoing one, no matter your tenure.

This task is also one that asks you to be intentional about transitions; to recognize the signs of burnout and to understand that cycles of leadership growth get put on hold during a conflict or major transition. It is not just the transition of a new Religious Educator or a new Minister that can cause this. A major conflict, a building-related project or a trauma will impact your membership growth and your leadership pipeline. Interim training can help you understand how to respond to these types of situations and build a resilient membership.

This chapter has offered some insight into both the work of interim religious education as well as the benefits it can bring to your work, whether permanent or temporary. It's easy to say that interim training will make you more valuable and more marketable. However I would also say that interim training will make you better at your job and it will make your program stronger. I invite you to consider learning more about this work as you commit to building healthy and vibrant Unitarian Universalist congregations.