

## The Interim Interview: First Encounters

by Michele Grove

The Art of Interviewing - Much More Than an Informational Meeting

After several initial conversations with congregations seeking an interim religious educator, I noticed an interesting pattern. The following fictional conversation represents many first conversations that interim religious educators have had with prospective congregations.

*"Hello, this is Rev. Parrish speaking."*

*"Good morning Rev. Parrish, my name is Michele. Do you have a few moments to talk about your congregation's job posting for an interim religious educator? I am an interim religious educator and am interested in learning more about the position."*

*"Sure. Thank you for your interest. What questions do you have?"*

*"Can you give me a summary of this position? As the senior minister, how do you envision an interim religious educator working in the life of the congregation and the staff team?"*

*"Well, I am not sure quite yet. We are advertising for an interim or an acting religious educator and want to keep our options open because we are unsure if we will be able to find an interim religious educator."*

*"If you can hire a trained interim religious educator, how do you envision the interim work unfolding in your congregation?"*

*"We had a wonderful director for our religious education program for many years. She left this position to take another position in another city. Right now, it is our hope that we can hire an interim who can keep the religious education program running while we figure out what to do next... "*

In general, religious educators encounter interesting dynamics in the hiring process, but the interim religious educator routinely encounters additional hurdles because this unique professional is still largely unknown and sometimes, misunderstood.

Interim religious education is a specialized form of transitional ministry launched by a small group of Unitarian Universalist religious professionals who recognized a need for trained leaders to help congregations navigate through a transition. In 2005, this group held the first training and organized standards for interim religious education profession. Many congregations and their leaders do not fully understand the value of interim religious education and the special qualities a trained interim religious educator can bring to a congregation in transition. And many congregations are understandably hesitant to look solely at hiring an interim religious educator because they are unsure they will be able to fill such a specialized position. Every interim should be ready to provide some basic education about the unique field of interim religious education.

It is important for an interim to be able to assess the emotional temperature of an organization in a transition. There may be anxiety and conflict in the congregation's system. The congregation may be grieving the departure of a beloved religious educator. They may be uncertain about what the future will hold. It is also possible that there was conflict around the departure of the previous religious educator. Even though the religious educator is gone, the conflict and the issues embedded in the conflict remain. All of these emotions and anxieties are present in the interim religious education process. This can create both a unique and unpredictable experience.

Interim religious education blends together the work of the professional interim religious educator and the work of the congregation. A fine balance exists between the professional's guidance and the congregation's willingness to invest the time and energy to delve into deep discernment of core values, dreams for the future and the resources available. Because of this, interim religious educators are wise to view their first encounter with a congregation as the place where interim work begins. Yes, let that sink in: interim religious education work begins the moment the interim religious educator reaches out and asks the church's first contact: "I would like to know more about the religious education position you are advertising...."

This essay will look at the necessity and challenges of engaging in interim work during the interview and hiring process. It will demonstrate the importance of entering the hiring and interview process with interim lenses and outline the process in which an interim religious educator engages to establish a healthy relationship for all involved. Even though this essay is written for the religious educator, it will be a valuable resource for congregations who are interested in exploring interim religious education. Each listed point is an excellent point for a congregation to consider.

Here are some important points for an interim religious educator to keep in mind while interviewing with a potential congregation:

**JOB DESCRIPTION.** Does the congregation have a good job description for an interim religious educator? Have they taken an old job description and added the word "interim" before the words "director of religious education"? Have they done some discernment to make the interim process a priority? In other words, in the course of an interview, I would strive to find out if the congregation is willing to put some much-loved programming on the back burner long enough to focus on the interim work that will build a stronger identity and vision for the future.

**READINESS FOR TRANSITION WORK.** Does this congregation have a basic understanding of interim religious education and are they ready to dig deep into the work -- or do they just want a professional placeholder? Assuming that a congregation understands interim work might set up the interim religious educator for a big surprise, and the congregation for significant disappointment or confusion. I want to know if the goal of entering an interim religious education process is the goal of a select few or if this wish is held by the congregation. Is the congregation ready to engage in interim work or will I be surprised to find that the positive words of minister and search committee are not held by the whole? This is where research with former leaders of the congregation or conversations with our faith tradition's regional staff can be helpful.

**CONFLICT, PAST AND CURRENT.** I want to know about the past and current conflict that has plagued the congregation. It is not important to go into detail about conflict, but a summary of the backstory, so that I can begin to frame a vision of the environment in which I am entering, is key. An initial

understanding of past and present conflict also helps me to know if there will be enough time to accomplish what is outlined in the job description. If the conflict is deep, denied and/or entrenched, then some elements of the job description may need to be set aside so that there is time to attend to the conflict which will definitely take professional and congregational energy.

**EMOTIONAL READINESS.** What is the emotion of the congregation? Are they excited for the future? Are they anxious about change? Are they grieving a deep loss? Understanding the emotion of the search committee and then digging a bit deeper to understand the emotion of the congregation will enable you to prepare to be present in the best way to benefit the congregation.

**FAIR COMPENSATION.** Fair compensation is still an important conversation. It is important for one to be able to value oneself as an interim religious educator and to set a precedent for what is fair for the settled religious educators that will be hired in the future. When I demand a good and fair compensation package, it is for me and for all of those who follow me - and for the health and vitality of the congregation as well.

**SAFETY.** Understanding the safe congregation policies currently in place is a good thing to know before you take a job. It is helpful to learn what work the congregation has done in this important area of ministry and with what tone the congregation has embraced safety.

**TRANSITION TEAM:** Is there room for a transition team who can work with the interim religious educator and the congregation to engage in this healthy (and dare I say, exciting) work? Hopefully the answer is yes, -- because this will definitely model a willingness to engage in the interim religious education process. And then, it is important to discuss how the members of this transition team are to be selected: there are many models for identifying members of such a team, and the current congregational context and overall health will help to determine the best method for going forward. I find the process most effective when the incoming interim religious educator is a part of the selection process with the minister, board, and other key religious education leaders.

**BRINGING SELF.** There are other questions I bring to the interview based on my vocational core values. Every religious educator has core values that guide their work. For instance, I will not be able to enter into a healthy interview process if I am not clear on my core beliefs, ethics, vocational goals and boundaries. It is important to understand what I value most in my calling and in my faith. Valuing myself is an important part of that process. What do I wish to gain? What am I willing to do and what am I not willing to engage in?

This essay is not designed to encourage religious educators to only take interim positions with congregations who rank strong in all the above points. Every congregation will meet these standards in different ways. The important thing is to be an informed and prepared interim religious educator. If you decide to enter a congregation where most the members are not excited about the interim process, be prepared. Enter with a plan to motivate and engage. The idea is not to find a utopian congregation; the idea is to use your interim skills to understand as much as possible, and as early as the first contact.

Interim work is short-term and there is little time to readjust to surprises. Don't get me wrong: there will be surprises! Use the interview process to be as informed as possible. This advance interim work will pay off immeasurably when you enter your new congregation.

Interim work is the work of the congregation -- and a good interim leader will nurture, listen, challenge, hold, nudge and support a congregation as it does the hard work of transitioning. As the interim religious educator journeys through the many layers of the interview process, interim work will be ongoing. It is best if the religious educator is ready to embrace and engage it from the very beginning.