

Good Boundaries Make for Good Religious Education Transitions

By Karen Lee Scrivo

I came into interim religious education work by chance. As an elementary Montessori teacher between jobs in the middle of the school year, I had the good fortune of having some time before moving on to my next assignment. Rather than immediately looking for another teaching post, I reflected on my past working life as a teacher and former journalist and looked for the times that I truly felt alive.

To my surprise, I found myself coming back to my work as a religious educator in my small home congregation in Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC. It was there that I learned about Unitarian Universalism alongside the middle and high school youth with whom I spent time each Sunday.

We learned about the Seven Principles and our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors. We struggled to put into words what we believed and to find ways to make a difference in the world. We visited other houses of worship, often finding common ground in our beliefs and ways to respectfully disagree. We learned about spiritual practices, trying yoga, journaling, meditating and walking the labyrinth. I co-led Our Whole Lives, helping them write their credos for the Coming of Age service and brainstorming for the annual teen service; I watched with pride when they bridged into adulthood.

All of this work was unpaid except for the one year I served as acting director of religious education during the DRE's sabbatical.

That convinced me to look for a job as a religious educator. Early on, I saw an ad for an interim DRE at a nearby congregation. Perfect, I thought - and applied. I had a good interview with the minister and search team, but the job went to an experienced interim religious educator.

A couple days later, I got an email from the minister asking if she could give my name to a ministerial colleague whose growing medium-sized congregation was also looking for an interim Director of Religious Education. "Sure," I said, and a couple of days later I met with that congregation's minister and a member of the search team. This time, there was a match. I started the job a month later and soon headed to Boston for the Unitarian Universalist Association's Interim Religious Education training, which was still fairly new.

I immediately loved the work, which calls for a big picture perspective, family systems thinking and adaptive leadership. I've served as an interim religious educator in four congregations, which ranged from medium to large in size and were situated in suburban to urban areas.

While each congregation is unique and faces its own challenges during religious leadership transitions, they also share some similarities.

The Work of the Interim

Many religious educators find themselves doing interim work regardless of their actual job descriptions or title. Even under the best circumstances – a trained and experienced interim working with a committed and healthy congregation – interim work is rarely completed in two years. More work is always needed. In part this is because those doing interim work must juggle helping the congregation work through a major transition and the regular time-consuming duties involved with overseeing and coordinating programming for children, youth and sometimes adults too.

The job of an interim religious educator is to hold a mirror to the congregation so it can get a clearer reflection of its current religious education program and of the program's place in the congregation. As a result, the congregation can better assess the program in light of its present needs – which often have substantially changed since the last time it hired a religious educator.

Critically assessing its religious education program gives a congregation a better sense of who and what is needed in its next religious educator. It's difficult for the congregation's leadership to do this work successfully without input from a religious educator who's not part of the current system, or one from outside who has a vested interest in the outcome – such as an acting director of religious education - who can later apply for the permanent position.

One of the most important skills that a trained interim religious educator brings is a less-anxious presence that remains calm, connected and stays the course in the face of the inevitable congregational anxiety that arises during transitions. As Rev. Peter Steinke and other congregational systems theorists remind us: what determines how successfully a congregation navigates transitions and challenges is how its leadership responds to anxiety or the number of stressors generating anxiety.

Changes in congregational leadership such as the departure of a religious educator tend to generate high anxiety. And high anxiety tends to lead to conflict. It's important during such changes for congregational leaders to be responsive and not reactive – something interim religious educators are trained to do. *(For a short summary of systems theory, see Peter Steinke's "Congregations as Emotional Systems": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40ft_Oj5QK4)*

As part of their work, interim religious educators ask probing and often difficult questions and reflect back to the congregation what they hear as well as what they observe in the congregation's actions.

Interim religious educators also solicit and value multiple views of the congregation's past and present as well as its future hopes and dreams. They gather and analyze feedback, look at the congregation as a dynamic system, offer best

practices and alternative approaches, help the congregation articulate its religious education vision and clarify its priorities and model good boundaries.

The details of interim assignments may vary but religious educators serving congregations during these transitions address the same five developmental tasks. This is true regardless of whether they are called 'interim' or not.

These tasks include focus on the congregation's:

- Heritage (Coming to Terms with the Congregation's History)
- Mission (Evolving a Unique Religious Education Program Identity)
- Leadership (Leadership Changes During the Interim Period)
- Connection (Renewing Associational Linkages)
- Future (Commitment to Future Program Vitality)

These tasks don't necessarily occur in order and often overlap. Congregations vary in which task they find the most challenging. And regardless, work on any and all of the tasks is not neatly wrapped up at the end of one or two years. For a more detailed description of the Interim Developmental Tasks: The Work of the Congregation, click here: [Developmental Tasks for Interim Period](#)

It's Often About Boundaries

Throughout my 15 years as a volunteer and professional religious educator, I have talked with many interims, settled and novice religious educators about the challenges of serving congregations in transition.

Many of the major problems they encounter -- regardless of the size or location of the congregation -- stem from fuzzy religious education boundaries. Generally they tend to involve questions about roles, responsibilities, and the position into which they have been hired - which may not clearly identify all the work the congregation needs to do in a time of change.

In exploring these challenges, I've provided some examples drawn from my own and my colleagues' experiences. I've omitted the names and locations and changed any identifying details to protect the privacy of individuals and congregations involved.

One of the advantages of being an interim religious educator in a congregation is that when members start griping about the religious education program or the religious educator, it's easier to see that it's not really about you, since you either just got there or have only been there a short time.

Roles-Wearing Different Hats

Many boundary problems occur when the congregation's religious education program is equated with the former religious educator. Members may become

reluctant to consider any changes to the program for fear of being seen disloyal to the former leader.

Often boundary issues emerge when the former religious educator is a member of the congregation and chooses to remain active. Things can get further complicated if the outgoing religious educator has family members active in the RE program. Sometimes, problems arise when the former religious educator and interim religious educator fail to agree upon the former's relationship to the congregation during the interim period. Having the conversations necessary to clearly delineate the relationship of the former and interim leaders - as well as relation to congregants and other staff members - is critically important during a time of transition.

In one congregation, the former religious educator of more than 14 years continued to socialize with members of the congregation and was critical of changes proposed by the interim. The interim addressed this with the former staffer, who attributed it to merely bumping into people at the store. A month later, after the unexpected death of a Coming of Age leader, the former religious educator - unbeknown to the interim -- recruited a replacement leader. Even the threat of a mediated conversation with a good officer didn't deter the past religious educator's involvement and made the ongoing interim work a lot more difficult than necessary. Thankfully, the congregation's minister supported and worked with the interim to mitigate the situation.

In another scenario, a religious educator left a congregation after 12 years, when the RE program grew beyond the DRE's ability to manage it. By the time the interim arrived, one of the ministers in the congregation's multi-minister team decided to retire at the end of the church year. The congregation then hired the former religious educator as membership coordinator. The former DRE, who had strong opinions about the interim DRE's work, openly shared them with congregation members. This undermined the interim work and cost the congregation more than a year of lost time during which a small band of members orchestrated dissent.

In another congregation, the interim religious educator - who had been there about three months - discovered by chance that the former religious educator would have a major role in the upcoming ordination of a former staff member. The former religious educator had discussed attending the service with the minister but not with the interim religious educator. After the ordination, the interim learned that the former religious educator - while in town -- stayed with a current staff member who opposed much of the interim religious educator's work.

Sometimes, the challenging behavior comes from the former religious educator's family members - who have remained active in the congregation. In one case, the retired religious educator and the interim agreed that the former religious educator (also a church member) would take a year break from the congregation to provide space for the interim process. However, the former religious educator's spouse

complained loudly and often about the partner being “banished” from the congregation. After discussing it, the minister and interim religious educator decided the retired religious educator could return after a four-month hiatus, with the understanding of no leadership role or involvement in religious education programs. The retired religious educator abided by the conditions and supported the interim process.

Time and Space Are What We Make of It

Boundary issues can also come from differing views of required hours, program priorities, volunteer hours, leaving space for the interim religious educator and the transition process, celebrating special occasions, and saying goodbye.

In one congregation, the part-time religious educator (also a congregation member) offered an adult religious education class even though the DRE’s position was limited to children and youth programming. The religious educator, whose work routinely ran over the allotted 30 hours per week, said she offered the class “ as a member not as staff.”

A similar explanation was given by a former full-time religious educator elsewhere, who dyed hundred of eggs for the annual Easter egg hunt and created all the lesson plans, activities and crafts for the congregation’s summer RE program when no one responded to the Religious Education Committee’s call for volunteers. The desire to help one’s congregation has to be balanced against the need for the best possible transition for the congregation.

Even when an interim follows a religious educator who wasn’t a member, many interims say they often found that former religious educators were working well beyond their allotted hours. Sometimes, the former religious educator stepped in when others – paid staff or volunteers – didn’t do their job or no longer supported a long-standing or cherished activity or program. Other times, former religious educators failed to delegate RE tasks and chose to do everything themselves - leaving the specific requirements of the job unclear..

Whose Job is it Anyway?

Sometimes, it’s unclear exactly what is expected of the religious educator due to vague and constantly changing job descriptions often rely on the preferences or skills of the current occupant of the DRE’s office. And too frequently, the dedicated DRE over-functions to ‘fill the void’ which - although a labor of love - can paint an unrealistic picture of what the congregation’s needs are for the position they are trying to fill.

In several congregations, when longtime DREs left, interim religious educators were surprised to find themselves in charge of the annual congregational retreat at a nearby park including booking the site, publicizing the event, and arranging all the programming. It turns out that the former DREs in these congregations were also members and regularly volunteered to take on this additional work. No wonder

congregants just thought it was something that all DREs would do. Another congregation's decision to expand the current religious educator's responsibilities to include overseeing programming for adults as well as children and youth, it was met with resistance. The longtime religious educator simply continued to focus solely on children and youth, before retiring a couple years later. So it was left to the interim to begin that transition.

Many interims have also been asked to arrange and/or provide childcare for every non-RE congregational event because their predecessors had done so since they were in charge of children. Many of the interims experienced pushback when they suggested hiring a child care coordinator or having those organizing the events arrange for childcare by contacting already vetted childcare providers. On the other hand, one of the DRE's interests is in proper safety procedures, and sometimes such responsibilities fall on the interim's shoulders because the prior procedures have not met safe congregation standards.

Helpful Guidelines for Establishing Boundaries

Boundary problems often arise when religious educators fail to follow what Unitarian Universalist Association's Professional Development Office call the "three C's for a good parting": Closure, Celebration and Covenant. (See: "From Starting to Parting": https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/from_starting_to_parting_-_january_2016.pdf)

Closure involves good leave-taking that acknowledges the end of the professional relationship between the outgoing religious educator and the congregation. This should at least include some ritual during worship which marks the end of the relationship, and a newsletter article by the religious educator with highlights from their time on staff.

Celebration honors the departing religious educator through a special event that gives everyone a chance to say "thank you" and "goodbye."

Covenant spells out the nature and limits of any ongoing relationship of the interim with the congregation, the successor and/or the congregational leadership. It details understandings and expectations and sets appropriate boundaries.

The Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) Code of Professional Practices also outlines the expectations for a departing religious educator. These guidelines can provide the starting point for a covenant between the interim and the outgoing religious educator. (See the "Colleagues" section in https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/from_starting_to_parting_-_january_2016.pdf)

The guidelines call for supporting the new religious educator by "leaving room for them to establish their own identity and leadership." This includes refraining for two years from accepting or volunteering for any roles in the RE program or serving

on any “policy-making bodies” such as the Board of Trustees, Religious Education, Finance, Personnel committees.

It also means directing members with concerns or questions about the religious education program to speak to the current religious educator or appropriate person. And not discussing church/congregational matters on social media with congregants from a former congregation for the two-year period. While these stipulations make sense in theory, when emotions come into play (as in a member of the staff, departing service, who is also a member of the congregation) behaviors become more challenging.

Even voluntary resignations can create complications. The departing religious educator might be leaving behind a wake of unresolved conflicts or departing under strained circumstances. An outgoing religious educator may still have family members involved in the congregation or may still be a member as well. A covenant can help, along with seeking guidance from a LREDA Good Officer and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation’s regional staff.

A congregation can also improve the chances of achieving a successful RE leadership transition for staff and congregation while maintaining focus on the importance and nature of the interim work. By then hiring a trained and experienced interim religious educator, the congregation is able to take deliberate steps for making a healthy transition and learning from its past. The Guild of Interim Religious Educators, LREDA and the UUA regional staff can all provide information and assistance in these areas.

Through each step of transition, strong support and collaboration from the minister, staff, and congregational leaders is essential. Congregations should also consider sending their leadership teams to UUA Regional programs on Healthy Congregations or other training opportunities that provide awareness of family systems and leadership tools to effectively deal with change and the anxiety it brings. The goal, in navigating these changes and boundaries, is to identify some of the common ‘fuzzy’ boundary issues that can stand in the way of a robust and successful interim period and help to build in the change of a successful new chapter for the life of the congregation, its leaders and its members.