YOUR NEXT MINISTER: SOME THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

A sermon preached by the Reverend John Nichols to The First Parish of Wayland on February 10, 2013

Many years ago on a Saturday afternoon, I was walking through the Wellesley Hills parish hall and on my way home. We were hosting a youth con and so kids were scattered around the room in small conversation groups. Suddenly one young man, a member of my congregation, appeared at my side to ask me a question. As was his style it was posed in a semi-humorous way, but although I did not learn it until later, it contained a serious purpose. I was tired. I wanted to get home, and so I kind of tossed his question aside with what I thought was an equivalently humorous response. I thought no more of it.

Twenty five years later, when I began serving the First Unitarian Church in Providence, R.I. I met that young man, now married and a father. I wondered why he looked like a thunder cloud every time we were in proximity, and then one Sunday he asked for an appointment. We made one. He came into my office and told me he had borne a grudge against me for thirty years. It had been eating at him, until he heard something in a sermon I had given that previous Sunday that convinced him I could understand why he had been upset. His question back then had been serious, but I had not taken it so. We're friends now. I dedicated his daughter in Providence and occasionally receive semi-humorous, semi ironic messages from him. But for me it remains an object lesson.

Every parish minister today is a walking projection screen. Focused upon us are the hopes, wishes and dreams of many members of the congregations we serve: their visions of an ideal preacher, pastor or prophet; their hopes for a mother, father, lover, friend, and confidant. We, of course, often cannot know what is projected onto us until we find it out usually too late.

Along these lines, nearly every congregation that is looking for a minister this year is looking for a community builder, someone who will help them build here in their church the loving, forgiving, indulging, creative, redemptive community that has eluded humankind for generations. This too is projected onto the new minister, and so he/she goes forward carrying the weight of very high expectations.

Today we hope much from our ministers, but until recently, most people expected little of those who climbed into these high pulpits every Sunday. In the Nineteenth century, if a family had several sons they sent the most ambitious sons into the family business and the son who got stepped on by every other member of the family was encouraged to train for the ministry. Consequently if that young man did one thing in ministry very well, his parishioners were delighted. They expected their parson to be an unworldly sort of fellow. They suspected that was why he had chosen the profession of minister.

For example, William Ellery Channing gave great sermons but you had to strain to hear them, for he was not a strong preacher. And those who tried to get to know him often found that the closer they got to him the more uncomfortable he become. Channing, who spoke so feelingly about love and fellowship, was actually uncomfortable outside of a small circle of his closest friends.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's minister, Barzilai Frost, was a beloved and dedicated pastor, but he had no gift for preaching. His dreadful sermons caused Emerson to comment that while listening to one sermon his mind wandered and he gazed out the window at newly falling snow. The snowstorm, he recalled, was real. The preacher was not. Despite earning Emerson's obvious contempt, Barzillai Frost was greatly revered by his parishioners as a pastor, because he took care of them. In those days if you could do one thing well you were a success in the ministry.

Today, our expectations for both congregations and ministers are so much higher than they ever have been. We come to church seeking a caring community, because our world is so rushed and pulled apart by competing pressures that a dreadful impersonality creeps into the places where we live and work.

We come to church hoping to find support for our individual journeys because, unlike generations before us, we are still convinced that our inner lives should be better. We come to church now looking for the prophetic voice that takes on oppressions, which were not even recognized as oppressions until very recently.

We want so much more out of life than generations before us ever dreamed of wanting, and I think it's possible that Unitarian Universalist congregations want even more than most. We build ourselves up with great hopes and with great potential for disappointment. This is a sermon on some things you should know and talk about in order to avoid that disappointment so that you can have a satisfying and fruitful relationship with your next minister.

PART II

When a UU congregation goes in search of a new minister, its search committee creates a profile of the person they seek and that profile goes onto a UUA website where any minister can read it. To register an interest a minister just clicks on the congregational profile and his/her name will be sent there. I call this time the fishing season, because the line of every congregation goes into the water at the same time, and everyone waits for nibbles. And the fish are biting every October and November.

Periodically I go to that UUA website and I read the profiles from some other congregations who also have their lines in the water. The profiles I read are amazingly consistent in what they want.

They want everything. They want a great preacher. They want a person of solid intellect, considerable passion and commensurate speaking ability. But this person must

be comfortable speaking to and satisfying a congregation of humanists, pagans, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Christians, Sikhs, Druids as well as those who have no use for religion but attend for the coffee. .

They want a dedicated and caring pastor, who has solid administrative skills. They want a spiritual guide who will also understand fund raising and help them increase their annual budget. They want a team builder who will be able to resolve staff conflicts by getting every staff member to agree and get along most of the time.

They want a harmonizer, a builder of community who is still able to lead in those new directions that will "grow" the church, but not at the expense of anyone who wants the minister's attention. They want a social activist who can represent the congregation to the community but only on those issues around which everyone in the congregation already agrees. They want someone who absolutely adores little children and teenagers and retired folks. (In fact, one congregation put it almost exactly that way.)

Of the profiles I look at all of the congregations want and believe they should have all of those qualities in their next minister and several warn that should they call a minister claiming to have such a package of qualities, and then discover that they were wrong; the disillusionment will be great and terrible to behold.

Now this is the point at which we all nod sagely and reflect that we would never expect a minister to be all things to all people, and that we have to expect that our minister can get only so many things done in a week. We do believe that, but do we really feel that way. When the minister upsets us or people we care about do we – at that moment -- really remind ourselves that we were not looking for someone who would please everyone?

My first point is that you will never find a minister who can fit even fifty per cent of that profile. God or Nature – take your pick – does not distribute equal helpings of those prime ministerial qualities to any one individual. The minister who moves smoothly through crowds and loves being constantly with people will probably not be the preacher who will bring fresh provocative ideas to a congregation. They're two different personalities. They have different, almost opposite gifts, and those gifts do not reside together as strengths in most individuals.

The dedicated pastor everyone wants will very likely not pay the same attention to staff issues or team building that she pays to visits and hospital calls. The social activist may be drawn away from working with young children or reaching out to teenagers by his commitments to leading change in the community. The collaborative facilitator that so impresses the congregation at first may turn out to be not quite the leader it needs. And the energetic leader to whom everyone was initially drawn may be more of a powerhouse than the congregation bargained for.

Every congregation wants and believes they deserve to have something they imagine is "the complete ministerial package". Some parishioners tell me "Well we had

that complete package once in Reverend X, and we just want another Reverend X." Frequently, in many situations, I knew Reverend X and strongly suspect that his or her memory has become idealized even in a short passage of time since his/her departure.

The idea of a complete package is an illusion. Everything we know about the development of personality reflects that having some qualities as strengths precludes having other qualities as strengths. Good ministers learn to maximize what they do well, compensate for what they do not do as well, and the congregation learns to fill in those areas where the minister alone cannot meet every conceivable need. That's why good ministers are successful. They have the help of the congregation to compensate for what they do not do well.

So here is the first of the things you need to know. The complete ministerial package is an illusion. It doesn't exist in anyone. What a congregation needs to do is determine where it most needs strengths in a minister. Then it needs to find that minister or ministers who have those strengths, call one of them, and then figure out how the members can fill in the rest.

My second point is that of course you will want to see a perfect fit between new minister and this congregation from day one, but it will not happen on that day or even shortly afterward.

Your next minister will seem at first like an outsider, and it will take some time for this new minister to find a firm footing, to move confidently through his/her work: to conduct an unfamiliar worship service, to be a strong voice in committee meetings and parish politics, to negotiate the coffee hour effectively, even to be completely effective at the bedside of a gravely ill parishioner who he has never met before in his life.

Will everyone recognize that the new ministers requires some time to get into step with the congregation and that the congregation will need that time to adjust to its new minister? I can already predict that some people won't have that much patience. They'll say to you, "Oh it's all different. I'm not coming back." And my best advice to you is let them go. Remember also that the need for adjustment is a two way street. Your new minister will bring new ideas, new energies, and a completely new style. The adjustment of a minister and congregation is organic, not mechanical. It grows.

Let me just briefly summarize. You will not get all of the requisite ministerial qualities in one person, and that does not mean you have a defective minister. It does mean that there is plenty of room for the ministry of the congregation to take hold and do very exciting work. You will not get someone who will be a perfect fit. You will not get someone you will fall in love with right away nor will you find someone who will be able to love you right away. It takes time.

And now I have two questions for you to think about. How much of a leader do you want? Do you want a minister who is significantly out in front of the congregation

with new ideas and new directions? Do you want to be challenged in that way? Or do you want someone who works behind the scenes building consensus until there is clearly no significant opposition to a new direction. Let me remind you that leaders have a tendency to want to change things, and I haven't noticed that change is high on your list of favorite values.

I have to tell you that the research on congregations of this size suggests that they do need a minister who is visionary, who has hopes and dreams and a direction in which she or he is prepared to lead. That sounds fine in principle but it does create friction. Do you want your minister a little bit ahead of the pack, creating friction but possibly in the interests of building a more vital role for the First Parish of Wayland? Or do you want your next minister building only upon the foundation of what nearly everyone now believes? I cannot answer that question for you, but it will be a major issue for your next minister.

My second question is do you really want your next minister to have definable beliefs? Do you want your next minister to have beliefs with edges, with limits, beliefs that mean one thing and not everything? Many congregations don't. From reading the profiles posted on the UUA website I have decided that most search committees believe there is a generic Unitarian Universalist theology which is a little bit humanist, a little bit Buddhist, a little bit Hindu, a little bit Jewish, a little bit pagan, a little bit feminist, a little bit Christian at Christmas, a little bit Druid and a lot of political and cultural liberalism. It's a little bit of everything but not enough of anything to offend.

There are some ministers who come close to preaching sermons that employ just this polyglot of beliefs, but I think they leave some people wishing their minister had offered more clarity as to what their particular version of "good news" really is.

What happens when a minister lays out a specific definable belief? Some people will agree. Some people will disagree. Can you stand to disagree with your minister without losing faith in him or her? Can you make the tension that real diversity creates work for you?

I think some of us hope to find some friction against which we can begin to clarify our own ideas and commitments. And I think ministers are supposed to offer that friction sometimes. So, I hope you will welcome those areas in which your next minister clearly stands out from the crowd, because he or she has a point of view that is independent even from most people in the congregation. Welcome those discussions as an opportunity to get to know your minister better and as a chance to get to know yourself better by entering into the dialogue.

Finally, I meet twice a year, every year with 18 UU ministers, who formed a study group 37 years ago. They are, by any criteria, experienced successful ministers. Some of you know and respect them as I do. As I looked around our circle I realized that half of the ministers there had been fired once in their careers. They were not fired because they were incompetent at ministry. In each instance they were fired because ten to fifteen

members of a congregation they served dedicated themselves to forcing the current minister out. Each believes he or she could have won a congregational vote, but 10-15 determined people can make a ministry unsustainable for everyone.

I realized that little failures and some big ones are built in to every modern ministry. I'm talking about: the sermon that didn't gel on Saturday night or on Sunday morning either; the snap judgment that opened up an unexpected can of worms; words said in pastoral counseling that were misunderstood and felt to be deeply wounding; thoughts spoken in a moment of fatigue or distraction that alienated a powerful supporter; a hospital visit to a critical ill parishioner that was missed because it came at the end of a busy week.

In addition there is the inevitable failure to be what individuals really want you to be: the projection of someone's mother, father, former pastor or former lover; the projection of someone's idea of a perfect healer, pastor, preacher, prophet or community builder; the projection of someone's idea of the perfect Unitarian Universalist.

We ask our ministers to embody the highest ideals we can imagine, and while we claim we know that nobody is perfect, and we understand that everyone makes mistakes, we really don't want our ministers to walk over our illusions and projections by making those mistakes. And so failure is inevitable. I'm aware that failures happen in everyone's life, but I believe our hopes for modern professional ministry are so far off the charts that ministers will fail them routinely. And since ministers have also bought into those hopes at some level they will be just as disappointed in themselves as their parishioners sometimes are in them. Thus, the modern professional ministry is made possible only by strong lay members, who able to be critical when necessary while remaining supportive of their minister as a person with strengths and weaknesses.

Whatever names are on the list that you will get next November I know that Peter Pan's name will not be there. There is no magical ministerial pixie dust that can take you to "Never Never Land" or make First Parish the institution it wants to be without a great deal of hard work on everyone's part. It will be all of you, working together in ministry, along with your very flawed and wonderful new religious leader.