

When Ministers Call 911

The phone number of the placement office or its equivalent is the minister's emergency hotline. If my experience as ministerial settlement director for the Unitarian Universalist Association is any indication, most clergy who serve congregations call to discuss a move at least twice from every post.

The first of these predictable SOS calls tends to happen after a pastor has been at a congregation for about three years. Usually it is prompted by a group in the congregation that is criticizing the new pastor for not being the old pastor. Sometimes it's the opposite: the new pastor is too *much* like the old one. (The "old pastor" may be the immediate predecessor or a long-term pastor from some years ago. Occasionally the missed ideal is a former pastor's spouse or the "fellowship" years before the congregation could afford a pastor. Usually it is not hard to tell who or what your real "predecessor" is.) I call this third-year turning point the Crisis of Identity.

The second call—which usually comes around the sixth or seventh year—is different. The small group who wish the minister were someone else is usually still there and still complaining, but if the ministry has lasted this long it is because the minister no longer frets about them. The agenda for this second call revolves around the minister's vocation. "We've built the building, grown a bit, and solved some of the major problems. If I stay, I'd like us to deepen our spiritual life and get engaged with the community. But I'm not sure the congregation wants to move in that direction. The group that led the building drive wants to go right ahead with the new wing. I think we need to shift our emphasis from bricks and mortar to a more elaborate program. But I'm having trouble shifting gears. I'm not sure I am the leader they need." Some people call this the Seven-Year Itch; I call it the Crisis of Vocation.

Most ministers who make it past the seven-year point can stay on long term if they want to and their system permits it. Occasionally, a minister falls under heavy pressure to move on after 10 or even 20 years. This can be extremely frightening, as it arouses fears including aging and death. I call it the Crisis of Survival.

At each of these three crisis points, the congregation has feelings that mirror those of the pastor. It can be helpful to acknowledge that while every situation is unique, it is normal and expected that at certain points in every ministry, both minister and congregation consider separation. With an understanding of the deeper forces at play, each of the crises can be positive, whether the minister remains or not.

Crisis of Identity: Year Three

The Crisis of Identity has its beginnings in the ministerial search itself. When a congregation enters a transition between clergy, it faces questions of vocation it can usually avoid. During any ministry, certain questions are settled temporarily. "I'd like to see more lay participation in our worship, but we all know Dr. Jones won't allow it." "I am uncomfortable with Pastor Nelson's politics, but he was so kind when my mother died, I overlook it." "Our associate pastor really should be paid more relative to Reverend Channing, but I don't see how we can afford to do it."

When an established minister departs, all of the compromises that sustained his or her ministry are up for grabs. Postponed wishes suddenly become urgent needs. A congregation in the ministerial search process is like a healthy person with an itch: it is unconscious of the health, but intensely conscious of the itch. When the search process is used to scratch an itch, the result can be a classic flip-flop: the search committee's top priority is to find someone who is strong where the previous minister was perceived to be weak. The areas in which the departing pastor was considered strong are simply taken for granted.

The trouble with this pattern is that congregations are more likely to be organized around their ministers' strengths than around their weaknesses. A congregation that has had a strong preacher, but has grown inured to a cool personality and indifferent pastoring, may be delighted for a time to receive a warm but inarticulate new minister. After about three years, though, a congregation gathered to hear great ideas is going to be impatient with "stickles

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and goo," however pleased they may be with the hospital visits.

In a variation on this theme, some congregations so revere their departing pastor that the top priority is to find a clone (younger, but just as mature). The predecessor's weaknesses are ignored. People will forgive the sainted Dr. Smith's familiar sexist language, for example, but let the new young pastor say the same words and he or she may learn the power of pent-up frustration!

For a ministerial search committee, the lesson in these observations is to become aware of the real needs of the congregation, as distinguished from its wishes. At the beginning of a year-long search, most of what committee members say about the congregation's future will really be reactions to its past.

Some committees try to squelch this kind of talk, and prematurely enforce a future-orientation. This is probably unwise. The committee, like the congregation, needs to climb through grief and recollection to a vantage point where they can glimpse the future. With luck, the search committee will move to this point faster than the congregation, but there are no shortcuts! It is important to sort through the members' feelings about the past minister until the committee as a whole achieves a balanced view, and can see both the strong and the weak points of the previous minister.

For the new minister, the lesson is ironic: (1) Probably you were chosen partly because your areas of strength appeared to match your predecessor's weaknesses. (2) The chances are good that you are weakest and least interested in areas of ministry where he or she was strong. (3) The church's real needs from its minister are probably greatest where the previous minister was strongest.

Therefore, to succeed, a new pastor probably needs to work hardest in some of the areas of ministry he or she likes least. Especially in the first couple of years, you will receive the most praise for doing exactly what will do you the most harm, namely spending time being different from your predecessor, i.e., scratching people's itches.

If you are lucky (or unlucky) enough to follow the sainted Dr. Smith, the rare minister of whom no one can speak ill, the challenges are different. In this case, you need to do all you can to inherit Dr. Smith's laurels, while preparing for the day someone discovers you are neither a clone nor even Dr. Smith's firstborn. Strong and consistent backing from Dr. Smith helps, as does real ability in what Dr. Smith did best. Most of all, it is essential that no one hear a word of criticism from you about your predecessor. This is a good rule in any case, but especially where he or she is frequently confused with God!

The third year is ordinarily when these issues first come to a head. No doubt there often is, as ministerial folklore has it, a "honeymoon" of one year and then a year of polite cooperation. By the third year of most ministries, the gloves are off. Successfully traversing this first crisis means the pastor and congregation both need to be serious about discerning the established role of the minister, and either changing it or filling it. To change the pastor's role is a major undertaking and requires conscious commitment from at least a loyal core among the lay leaders. Usually the pastor who is recognized as adequately competent in the predecessor's area of greatest strength will earn the right to stay on, and will eventually get credit for his or her own gifts.

Crisis of Vocation: Year Seven

A ministry that makes it to the seventh year has weathered the initial tests. The congregation has accepted that the new minister is not the sainted Dr. Smith, nor is he or she responsible for salving all the wounds inflicted by less-than-perfect clergy of the past. At this point, ministers who call the placement office are more apt to raise questions of their own. "When I came to Old First Church," said one pastor, "my job was to be a healer. They had had enough pain during my predecessor's ministry. They chose me because I was a caring minister, a pastor. Around the third year there was some criticism of my preaching: that had been my predecessor's strong suit, and I am the first to admit it isn't mine. But that died down, and now I think I could stay longer if I wanted to. At this point, though, I wonder if I'm what they need. It's time they got more active in the community, built an addition to the building, and increased the small-group programming for adults. I could do it, but I'm finding it hard to get my heart into the task."

A similar sense of poor fit is sometimes expressed by lay leaders. "Bill has had a fine ministry in Mudville. He is an outstanding preacher; he's known and respected in the community, and the congregation has grown. Now we have a staff of seven people and we see 500 adults and 400 children on a Sunday. Our biggest problem is the staff. We've lost eight good staff members in four years, and in the exit interviews six of them said they were fed up with Bill's supervision. He sits in his office with his door closed, or he's out at meetings. We've encouraged him to get some training in staff management or let us hire a church administrator, but Bill doesn't want to change things. I suspect it might be easier for him and easier for us if he moved on."

By the seventh year, both minister and lay leaders can be more objective about the current situation. Most of the overreaction to the previous pastor has worn off, and usually some of the important goals

have been achieved. At this point clergy look around them and say, "Does this setting offer me the opportunity to be the minister I want to be? Am I neglecting pieces of myself in order to adapt to what is needed here?" Just as important, the congregation's long-term mission and identity come into focus, raising the question of whether this is the right minister to lead them where they need to go next.

To move successfully through this turning point into a long-term ministry, the minister must reconcile the congregation's long-term vision with his or her own. This usually means letting go of certain cherished tasks in order to make room for new priorities. It is also likely to involve sharing power in a new way. These changes can be frightening for both minister and congregation; even opening such fundamental matters for discussion may seem to risk a loss of power on both sides.

A well-planned sabbatical can help both minister and congregation to break cleanly from old patterns. In advance of the sabbatical, it can be helpful to engage an outside consultant to assist in looking at which features of the current way of working satisfy the needs of minister and congregation, and which do not. A mutual agreement to shift responsibility and emphasis can then lead to an appropriate plan for sabbatical activities. Of course, sabbaticals are also often followed by conflict and the minister's departure. This risk is inherent in the act of opening long-settled issues for discussion and debate. But that is not an argument against sabbaticals. Bringing dissatisfaction to the surface to be dealt with one way or another is the important business of the period around the seventh year.

Crisis of Survival: Ten Years or More

Most ministers who pass the crisis of vocation in the seventh year can stay on longer if they wish. In a few particularly painful cases, though, a minister comes under attack after remaining for ten years or more. The content of the complaints varies, but as a rule they arise from no new event or development. These ministers are in trouble for flaws, weaknesses, and deficiencies that they have had all along. It is more difficult to find the common threads in these crises than in the predictable ones early in a ministry. In many cases, a style of ministry or theological position that was once popular has gone out of style.

In other cases aging seems to have made ministers "themselves, only more so," exacerbating flaws that once had been mild irritations. Sometimes the pastor has gone through a midlife transition that has left him or her less ambitious and eager to please. Some long-term ministers simply get bored, begin to take their congregations for granted, and coast through the few years that remain until retirement.

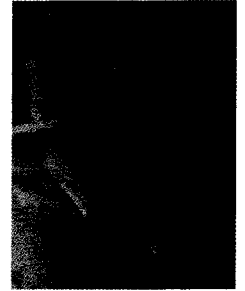
On the congregation's side, resentment can brew against the power that naturally accrues to a long-term minister. In a long-term ministry, ideas and proposals can be stillborn because "Pastor Jones would not approve." This process of self-censorship can be so automatic that the minister may not even know the ideas have been voiced. It is important for aging ministers not to dig their heels in against new ideas, even when these appear (perhaps with good reason) to be foolish, passing fads. It is not necessary to jump onto every bandwagon that comes down from headquarters or up from the youth group, but it is more appropriate for an older minister to enjoy and celebrate the endless creativity of God's people than to play the ancient prophet and curmudgeon.

A key factor, as in all conflicts, is the minister's own reaction. Neither a flaccid nor a rigid stance, neither surrender nor counterattack, is most successful. Unfortunately, long-term ministers often identify so completely with their role that strong criticism feels like a survival threat. Often the minister is at or beyond midlife, when mortality becomes a personal issue. Like any threatened organism, the minister may cling to the familiar and attack whatever and whoever threatens it.

Despite this natural anxiety, it is essential for the minister to acknowledge the right of his or her critics to their unhappiness, and to assert both willingness to change and a realistic sense of identity. Gently but firmly, the minister must respond to personal attacks by asking questions about mission. "Aside from changing ministers, how could the church meet your needs better?" "You've raised good questions about my ability to serve young couples. I must admit, I have some doubts about myself in this regard. Help me out: what would this congregation look like if it served young couples well?"

Without abdicating leadership or responsibility, a long-term minister must set the congregation at a distance from the pastor's own functioning, even though accomplishing this goal runs strongly against the habits of both congregation and minister.

At whatever stage of ministry, the 911 call is a chance to reflect on a particular ministerial call from the perspective of eternity. "I don't have to stay here," can be a wonderfully liberating thought. Feeling stuck does not inspire effective ministry. At the same time, it is a temptation to say too quickly, "I have done all that I can do here. It's time to move on," shake the dust off one's feet, and stalk off feeling wounded. Long-term ministry is valuable to congregations for all kinds of reasons—not the least of which is that it teaches the skills for long-term relationships. Those skills—which include compromise, collaboration, flexibility, and forgiveness—are always in demand. ✚



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The Cat in the Transom

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Sitting in the transom window was a kitten, wailing. Students crowded outside the locked dorm room, eyes fixed upward on the kitten, Midnight, who was clinging to the top of the door frame. A young woman on a chair tried to lift him, but the half-open transom was too low. She tried to lower him, but his claws clutched too tight to the wood. The residents of the locked room could not be found, nor could the keys. Students offered learned observations about cat psychology, made arguments and counterarguments, but none could say what to do about the cat.

I was coming home to Tank Hall from an evening at the college library. Tank was a Victorian house built for the children of missionaries serving overseas. The woodwork was elaborate, the doorknobs low. Over every dormitory door was a transom window, one of which had become a trap for our adopted kitten, Midnight.

After the crowd had stood immobile for a while, Peter Shaheen, student president of Tank, did something that lastingly divided the dorm residents. Peter stood up on the chair, put his hand on the cat's body, and pushed it into the locked room. We heard a thump, then silence. The crisis was over. The silence meant that the cat's sufferings were over, but we weren't sure how—some assumed it must have landed safely; others pictured gruesome forms of sudden death.

As it turned out, of course, the cat was fine; it was the dorm community that had been fractured. Some

saw Peter's deed as an act of courageous leadership. Most regarded him suspiciously from that day on. Some, who had never liked him, now knew why: he had proved capable of cruel decisiveness. While the rest of us debated, Peter made a unilateral decision and then carried it out.

My point is not that Peter was correct or wise in his decision—such acts of leadership are often morally ambiguous. What is important is that the leader take a firm, self-defining position and remain in dialogue with the community. Democracy happens in response to such leadership, not the other way around. Until a leader takes a position, the community itself is caught like the cat, unable to move.

Peter had broken two unspoken rules, rules also found in many congregations. The first rule could be stated this way: nice people will do almost anything to avoid making a decision. The second rule is that we'd rather talk than act. A leader must break both of these rules, and be forgiven by at least some followers for doing so.

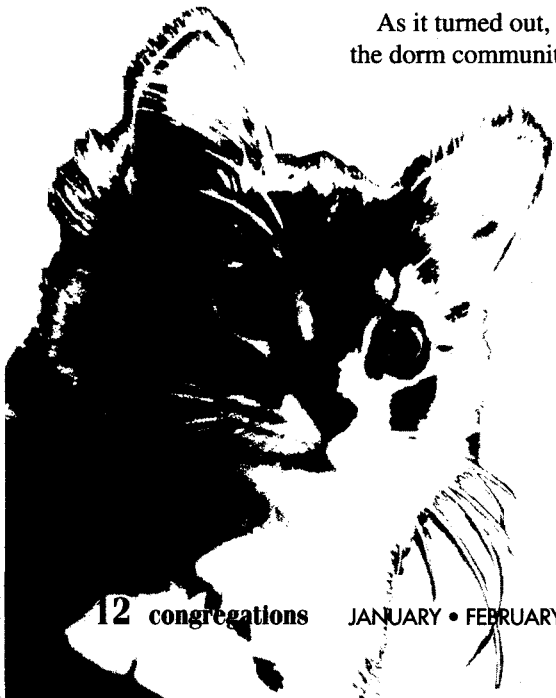
The rules are never stated openly. Congregations say instead, "Our first objective is to be a caring community." Or: "We make decisions by consensus." Or: "We care more about the process than about the product." The result, too often, is a congregational culture in which leaders are not encouraged to take strong positions or take action.

When the cat is in the transom, good people care about the cat's distress, but not enough to increase it even briefly in order to improve the situation.

A sociologist appearing from another planet at a meeting of a mainline church or a Reform Jewish temple might suppose that it was more important to use sensitive language than to say anything. The visitor would hear much gratitude to people who have done again what has been done before, and little talk of mission or God's call.

Is "Nice" a Goal?

Is this form of paralysis more common in liberal than conservative congregations? A core insight of religious liberalism is that the gulf between God and humanity, while great, is not insurpassable. God's demands, liberals believe, are reasonable and com-



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prehensible. Liberals do not scour the scriptures for obscure commandments, nor apply even the Top Ten in literal or dogmatic fashion. Instead we speak of "principles," "values," "lifestyles." In place of church discipline, liberals have "congregational culture." When the human sphere and the divine are brought closer together—as in the minds of liberals—a hazard is that "nice" becomes the highest goal.

A frequent result is an awfully nice congregation with little sense of what to do other than maintain itself. Even social outreach takes on a sort of "we do" quality: we do the soup kitchen on the third Thursday, we sell food coupons for the AIDS shelter, and so on. These efforts are laudable, but because they are routine they often lack for volunteers and do not infuse the congregation with enthusiasm or a sense of accomplishment.

Substantial change requires a break from the "nice" ethic. In the words of the civil rights hymn,

It isn't nice to block the doorway
It isn't nice to go to jail
There are nicer ways to do it
But the nice ways always fail.

The ethic of "nice" puts harmony and smooth relationships above mission, problem solving, and doing one's duty. Some level of comity is obviously needed in society; but so is a sense of purpose. It is necessary to break eggs in order to make an omelet.

The wish to be "nice" can have serious consequences. About ten years ago, I was interviewed to be minister of a congregation that included a convicted child molester. This man, recently released from prison, had taken to roaming the halls while children were in Sunday School. It is a measure of how quickly attitudes have changed that the "tough" question from the search committee was, "Do you think we should tell him he has to stay away from the children?" My emphatic "yes" was greeted with relief. Even in the most immobilized community a leader who will push the cat out of the transom will be followed, if not always emulated or appreciated.

One seeming way out of liberal paralysis may be a return to the ethics of divine command. Liberal ministers annually preach a Missions Sermon; rabbis recur to Jewish Survival and related themes. But such relapses into traditional authority look out of place in liberal congregations. It is as though suddenly the Pentateuchal Purity Codes were dusted off one Sabbath only to be forgotten with relief the next.

Prophetic Leadership

Religious liberalism has resources of its own for getting cats off transoms, and does not need modes

of thinking foreign to itself. Crucial to the liberal mode of thinking is the possibility that one individual is right while a crowd of any size is wrong. Peter Shaheen demonstrated the importance of prophetic leadership. He took a stand and acted on it. As a democratic leader he had to expect criticism, and he got it. His action raised anxiety in the whole group, including himself. Peter took action and was willing to accept the consequences. By passing this test without counterattacking against critics or withdrawing from the group, he gained in authority, though not everyone agreed with what he did.

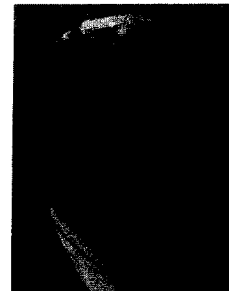
This kind of leadership—prophetic and connected, unilateral and accountable—is in the best tradition of religious liberalism. Leaders are not infallible—without accountability. Leaders may prey on base fears and prejudices, and lead their people to destruction. But communities without leadership are little better. Preferring peace to justice, an unled people prefers suffering (of others) over the anxiety and conflict that accompany effective action. The victims of a democratically sustained "system" are like the scared kitten in the transom window. Without leadership the people hesitate.

Leaders in the liberal traditions know that God is not separated from humanity by an impassable gulf of understanding. Both leaders and followers can know and understand God's will; indeed our efforts to discern the good are in a sense part of God, as are our efforts to attain it. We can and should envision our own goals and missions. Remembering the fallibility of our finite point of view, we can pursue with passion the vision of the right as we are given it. Like Peter Shaheen, we can assess the situation, take stock of our knowledge and experience, and choose a course. Like him, we can be tough enough to act, though others will oppose and disapprove.

It is our best virtues that prevent liberal religious leaders from behaving with this kind of toughness. Our respect for democracy causes us to hesitate when we should lead. Our yearning to be loved causes us to consult when we should act. Our knowledge of the relativity of knowledge saps our courage when it's time to make a choice.

No wonder that we sometimes envy those for whom certainty is possible, mission is a given, and the right direction seems so easy to discern. To lead a congregation that would easily support strong leadership seems like a dream! Leadership can be a lonely task in liberal communities.

It certainly was lonely for Peter Shaheen. When he pushed that cat into the abyss, he set himself apart from the community. He was a leader. We knew it, and were not sure we liked it. But we did have some idea what a leader could be good for. It seems followers always do. ✚



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