Our Ministerial Future – Models of Ministry

In late January and February, members of First Unitarian Universalist Church participated in three Sunday afternoon workshops in which Rev. Stefan Jonasson presented five models of ministry and their respective merits for congregants to consider as options for their future ministry.

Settled Ministry – This is the standard model of ministry in our tradition. The minister is called by the congregation following a comprehensive search process that involves identification of a search committee, congregational discernment, a survey of members, the committee's review of applicants, identification of two to four pre-candidates, and the eventual presentation of a single candidate to the congregation for consideration during a candidating week. Most settled ministers today expect to follow some sort of transitional minister, such as an interim minister or developmental minister, but some congregations still move from one settled minister to the next. Rev. Susan Van Dreser, Rev. Millie Rochester, and Rev. Meghann Robern were all full-time settled ministers. Settled ministers may be full-time or part-time, although most settled ministers are full-time and it is almost always difficult for a geographically isolated congregation (i.e., from UU population centres) such as Winnipeg to secure a part-time minister. The duration of a settled ministry can range from three to 30 years (and longer!), but a typical settled ministry in a congregation of our size lasts between seven and 12 years.

Contract Ministry – This model of ministry involves one or more ministers contracted for an identified term and specific responsibilities. Contract ministers are generally hired by the board rather than called by the congregation, although it's not uncommon for the board to consult with the congregation and even invite their approval of contract ministers. Most contract ministers are retained on a part-time basis, usually by congregations with fewer than 125 members, although there are some full-time ministers in such positions. It's possible for a congregation to have more than one contract minister at the same time, although this is uncommon. Rev. Stefan Jonasson is a part-time contract minister whose position is styled "consulting minister." Contract ministry is generally unstable as a long-term model, especially outside of UU population centres where the supply of potential ministers in minimal to non-existent. (Some people refer to contract ministry as "gig ministry," but most ministers are resistant to this language since it implies a casual relationship.) Contracts

may be finite or open-ended and contract ministers may be full-time or part-time, although most contract ministers are part-time. Some contract ministries may evolve into called ministries after careful discernment.

Interim Ministry – This is a form of transitional ministry in between settled ministers. Interim ministers serve the general ministerial needs of a congregation while helping its members engage in system-wide reflection on their past and thoughtful consideration of their future, linking congregations with outside resources. Interim ministries are one or two years in length, although two-year ministries have become increasingly common. Rev. Nicoline Guerrier, Rev. Fran Dearman, and Rev. Wendy Jerome were interim ministers. They are almost always full-time. Interim ministers are not available for permanent call by the congregation.

Developmental Ministry – The target congregations for developmental ministry are those with repeated short ministries or recurring conflicts. A cooperative program, it is a specialized form of contract ministry that is only offered to congregations on the initiative of the UUA Transitions Director and CUC Congregational Services Staff. Once an eligible congregation is approved, congregations are expected (in collaboration with UUA/CUC staff) to identify two or three core issues to focus on and the Transitions Office will identify a suitable minister with the relevant experience and skills. This ministry is generally full-time. The contract period typically runs from three to five years, but may be extended beyond that. Developmental ministers are not available for permanent call by the congregation.

Yoked Ministry – Yoked ministry (sometimes called shared ministry or “circuit riding”) involves two or more congregations sharing a minister together. Most yoked ministries involve congregations that are geographically close to one another – that is, within about an hour’s drive, door to door. There are few success stories about yoked ministries among UUs at a greater distance than this, and most experiments have been short-lived. Long-distance yoked ministries have mostly been employed as a stopgap measure, often when one (or more) of the partner congregations is in decline, which means that the congregation-to-congregation relationship may be unequal. Distance, travel time, and ministerial housing are critical considerations in this model, and ministers’ stamina will tend to flag over time. Congregational relationships may further complicate matters. Satellite models seem to work better, although, once again, there are few success stories among Unitarian Universalists.