

Interim Minister Final Report

I began my work as your Interim Minister in October of 2015.

During that time the congregation of First Parish engaged in a successful search process and your new Lead Minister, Adam Dyer will be arriving in time for opening Sunday in September. The lay leadership is taking proactive steps preparing to welcome him to the congregation and to the Cambridge community. The new minister will need time and support during the first year in order to get oriented. Adam's priority next year is getting to know you and getting to know the challenges that this community is experiencing.

Your process for the search was well thought out. First Parish prepared for the search with discussions beginning six months before a search committee was chosen. The search committee was broadly representative of the congregation, and the nominees for the committee were diligently vetted and asked to participate in the preliminary conversations. Soon after being chosen and charged the search committee was clear as to their mission and maintained good working relations with the congregation. A good Congregational Record was prepared.

The minister who was presented to the congregation was the minister that most met the congregation's Vision of Ministry.

Goals of transition.

There was general agreement when I began at First Parish of the need to "maintain momentum" especially around its anti-racist, and anti-oppressive transformation work. This work was enabling multigenerational and inclusive community.

When I arrived I spent time interviewing lay leaders of the congregation and staff. I asked questions and these questions provoked discussion. In time we began to define some areas needing work.

As I have reported before "First Parish had been on a size plateau for decades. Hovering between 180 and 240 members, First Parish did not seem to be able "to hold" on to its membership. People joined but only those who found "a place" in the congregation's committee structures seemed to stay. Church dynamics students call this growth by adoption."

Long time members reported more than ordinary lay leadership “burnout.” The departing minister reported that it was difficult to recruit people for the all of the existing committees. There was some resistance to volunteering.

There was concern that many ministry decisions were micromanaged. Committees doing ministry work sought permission to perform functions that were part of their mandates and committees would ask the Standing Committee to solve some problem in their work.

As I reported last year, the staff experienced themselves as bypassed and under-utilized as problem solvers. Members of the staff did not experience themselves as being treated as religious professionals, capable of planning initiatives and coordinating the many ministries of the congregation.

Work has been done.

After much discussion the Standing Committee concluded that the governance structure, that had evolved decades ago, was no longer appropriate to First Parish. During the last calendar year, the Board has revised its policies clarifying expectations and streamlined its procedures. While there is work still to be done to live into your vision of governance, remarkable work has been done by your Board, and by its governance committee.

The Board is already learning the processes by which they can engage the congregation and the minister and professional staff in long-range planning and visioning. With planning and thoughtful resourcing of that plan First Parish will be able to move in an intentional way toward realizing its mission. Clear delegation would allow us to use the full resources offered by our professional staff, whose capacity to aid in planning had not been enabled and encouraged in the past.

With intention and commitment First Parish can now begin to make a clear plan to break through the 200 member plateau and really live into its mission. We are taking steps that we hope will improve the new member integration and longtime membership retention. The Rev. Danielle DiBona will continue next year to build a pastoral care team, develop small groups ministry (which are off and running and expanding) and proactively integrating this work with the Life Span Religious Education. She will be assisted by a Sunday Membership Staff member who will work on welcoming, hospitality and new comer integration.

I reported last year that the staff had become a team. During this past year the staff has helped to support lay leadership and resource the many ministries of First Parish. The mutual planning work has deepened, and their collaboration with the Board's planning around finances has become more long reaching.

Highlights for me.

1. First Parish has a long and commendable history relative to what Unitarian Universalists call "the Environment." The degradation of the Earth and dangers posed by climate change have been addressed over the years by many services, forums and actions. Today on a world scale and especially in North America indigenous resistance to attacks on the land has added a depth and energy to work to reverse the violence being inflicted on the Earth. The congregation hosted Chief Arvol Lookinghorse during his visit to Massachusetts in October. I hope that the work that we have done these past two years has contributed to grounding this work spiritually, and helped the congregation to see themselves as rooted as creatures of the earth and sky.
2. I have been a Unitarian Universalist all my life. That gives me a deep appreciation for the intergenerational character of our congregations. I believe people of all ages benefit from being in worship together. Mandy and I hope that our collaborative and proactive approach toward intergenerational services has made a difference in the experience of the intergenerational aspect of our service.

I am confident that First Parish has made a good and productive transition, and the congregation is in a good place ready to begin to engage in ministry beyond its walls engaging the wider community. No transition is ever "complete" and work begun will continue into the future. It is also true that no transition is ever going to go exactly as it was initially planned. New possibilities open up mid-stream, and some good ideas and intentions never get concretized. Nevertheless the interim process is coming to a good conclusion, and you are ready to embrace your future with Adam Dyer.