

Interim Minister Progress Report

When I arrived at First Parish in October I spent time interviewing lay leaders of the congregation and staff. What emerged were a number of concerns that I believed pointed toward a conclusion. First the concerns:

- 1.) 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.
- 2.) First Parish was experiencing more than ordinary lay leadership “burnout.”
- 3.) Members of the Standing Committee had received a report from the outgoing minister that said that it was difficult to “staff” the various committees of the congregation. There was some resistance to volunteering.
- 4.) Members of the Standing Committee reported that too many decisions came to the Standing Committee. Many of these referrals involved committees seeking permission to perform functions that were part of their mandates. Many of these referrals involved committees asking the Standing Committee to solve some problem in their work. Some of the referrals involved conflicts, indicating that the Standing Committee was being seen as dispute court.
- 5.) My interviews also indicated that 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.

Staff experienced themselves being regarded as servants rather than as servant leaders. The staff found that work came to them planned by some committee without input by the staff and they pointed out that this led to them as being reactive rather than being proactive.

Pastoral to Program Shift.

These concerns led to this conclusion. First Parish had become too large to function as a pastoral-size church (a congregation that is centered around a minister.) Looking at the record and subsequent interviews revealed that the congregation reached this “too large” stage decades ago. But it had never adapted its way of operating to a program-sized congregation. (A program-sized congregation, sometimes called a multi-celled congregation, has multiple activities (programs) through which members participate and find community with each other. These multiple activities (programs) find coherence because they are all united in trying to realize a common mission.

Most notably its governance structure had evolved decades ago, and it was no longer appropriate to the size, or the mission, vision, and program initiatives that First Parish had been making in the last decades. How and who were responsible for making what kinds of decisions needed to clarified. Decisions about vision, mission, and how to realize that mission belonged to the whole congregation and to its elected Standing Committee. But too much of its time was taken up in conflicts and solving problems of committees. Standing Committee needed to delegate the day-to-day decisions about building, vendor procurement, supervision of support staff, and for the supporting the many ministries of First Parish to the staff team led by the minister. This delegation of responsibility would be guided by clear policies that mandated what would be

done, and how. Then the Standing Committee needed to monitor the work of the minister and the professional staff.

Clear delegation would allow the Standing Committee to partner with the minister and professional staff to do long-range planning and visioning, so that First Parish would 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.

Many congregations fail to make the pastoral to program shift, and the “200 member plateau” is a well established symptom of being “stuck.” It takes intention and commitment by both the elected leadership and the staff to lead the congregation to a new culture of shared ministry and shared governance. Without intention and commitment human communities like living organisms tend to “snap back” to their old and familiar way of coping.

Because of this requirement for a clear understanding by the Standing Committee and the staff of their roles in maintaining the status quo, and because of the requirement to have a clarity about the adaptive change we were embarking on, we have spent considerable time this year in studying and finding solutions that move us forward. Both the Standing Committee and the Staff Team have read Dan Hotchkiss, Governance and Ministry; Rethinking Board Leadership and discussed the implications of this approach.

We took these steps toward clarifying Governance and Ministry:

1.) The Standing Committee hosted a conversation with congregational leaders in January to share their thinking, asking what would be the role of the next

settled minister in enabling the shared ministries of the congregation and how could the Standing Committee do more visioning and planning and less micro-management.

2.) The Standing Committee held three “Congregational Conversations” in preparation for the search that helped the congregation to join in the articulation of their expectations for the next settled minister as team leader who could help develop the ministries at First Parish, ministries which would allow more and more members “find a place” within the shared ministry of First Parish.

3.) The Standing Committee has appointed a Task Force on Governance that will work to help the Standing Committee develop a vision of governance and some initial policies.

4.) The Staff has become a team. By discussing together their work in supporting and resourcing the many ministries of First Parish, they have learned that together they are creative and proactive religious professionals and have developed a practice that reflects that understanding.

5.) The Staff has aided the Standing Committee by helping to give proactive leadership and coherent reporting on personnel and finances. The Staff is now involved in working with the Standing Committee on a Vision of Ministry so that the Standing Committee’s goals and the Staff Team’s goals for 2016-2017 will be both congruent and shared.

Much work needs remains to be done, but with a clear vision and a successful search for settled minister I am confident that First Parish will complete the turn toward a program-sized church, with a empowered shared ministry guided by mission, and governed by proactive and intentional process.