

## **Calling a Minister: the Role of the Search Committee**

compiled by Church President Nancy Belt from *Settlement Handbook for Ministers and Congregations*  
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“No choice is more important to the future of a Unitarian Universalist congregation than its call of a minister . . . Crucial to the quality of the outcome is the quality of the ministerial search committee . . . This group must invest hundreds of hours in getting to know each other, the congregation, and their ministerial prospects well, so they can make the best choice not for themselves as individuals but for all . . .

“Search committees do not simply choose among ministers; they engage with ministers in thoughtful, mutual exploration. For ministry to be effective, both the congregation and the minister must sense a “call,” a felt conviction that this match is right for both . . .

*“If a new called ministry is to be successful, plenty of time must be allocated both to the congregation’s transition and to the search process.* After a minister’s departure, some congregations may indeed be ready to move right into the search for a new minister, able, with the guidance of an effective interim minister, to make the turn from the previous relationship to a new one within one year. Other congregations, however, may have faced a variety of challenges, requiring a mature consideration of the identity and direction of the congregation, and making it advisable to extend the interim period before going into search. An extended period of transition is often advisable. Congregations planning an interim period of longer than a year should defer selecting a search committee until eighteen months or so before expecting the minister’s arrival . . .

“The congregation’s bylaws may specify how to select a ministerial search committee. If not, one good way is to have a nominating committee (regular or special) propose a single slate of seven to be elected by the congregation. A single slate ensures a representative committee.

“However chosen, all members of the search committee should be:

- Known and respected by others in the congregation
- More strongly committed to the congregation as a whole than to any subgroup
- Well informed about the demands and time requirements of search committee membership. Members should promise to attend every meeting, and to give about 250–400 hours over the coming year
- Balanced by sex, age, interests, and tenure of membership to reflect the diversity of the congregation. Major areas of church life such as

- religious education, social action, property management, finance, and music should be represented by participants, not partisans
- Balanced by attributes: organizational ability, broad theological awareness, computer skills
  - Not paid members of the church staff, except for a senior minister who will be supervising the minister to be called
  - Pledged to conduct a search that is fair and nondiscriminatory with respect to race, color, disability, sex, sexual orientation, age, and national origin
  - Committed to maintain confidentiality and to seek consensus
  - Capable of both self-assertion and compromise
  - Not prone to extreme reactions to ministers. The previous ministers' strongest supporters or opponents are rarely the best choice
  - Well suited to teamwork: a search committee is no place for Lone Rangers!

“It is easier to achieve these goals by active recruiting than by passively accepting volunteers. A seat on the committee is not the way to get a newcomer more involved, or to appease a chronic malcontent. Alternate and ex-officio membership are discouraged; each search committee member should participate fully. If one or two members must resign after the committee has begun it is usually best not to replace them. During the search, members should be released from other major duties in the congregation. One member (normally the chair) should be assigned as a board liaison, but should not be a board member . . .

“The essence of the interim year is transition, and with transition comes change. It is crucial to the success of the next called ministry that the ministerial search committee represent the congregation as it is becoming rather than the congregation as it was. Thus the importance to the search committee of the interim minister's insight into the congregation, and of full and ongoing communication between the committee and the interim minister . . .”

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