

# Big Ideas

## for Small Congregations



a friendly guide for leaders

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looking for a little extra money. You would pay them differently, probably anywhere from fifty to one hundred and twenty-five dollars per service, depending on the economics of your area.

If you want to add a choir or two, a variety of musical instruments, and some time learning new hymns, you may want to expand the musician/accompanist position to music director. This person would take greater responsibility for guiding the musical life of your congregation, would work closely with your minister and worship associates, and might get involved with interfaith musical events in your community. As with other positions, create a job description and evaluation process, and pay a livable wage. Give your music director a line item for membership in the Unitarian Universalist Musician's Network and the cost of a conference or workshop every year.

## **Minister**

At some point in the life of every small congregation, the question is asked: should we have a minister? If so, part-time or full-time? Consulting or called? What would a minister do? Why should we have one? Why *shouldn't* we have one?

Just like there are many types of small congregations, there are also many types of ministers. If your congregation wants a minister to serve you in a professional capacity, there are many things to look at to help ensure a good fit all the way around.

### *Pros and cons*

Some small congregations have always had a minister, and can't imagine being without one. It's part of their identity; it's part of their history. Other small congregations may have had a minister some times, and other times been without—by choice or necessity. Still others may have started as a fellowship without ever wanting a minister, but the group may have grown enough that people start asking—should we?

A minister is a specially trained professional who can offer your congregation skills that you may not have within your ranks. A minister is educated in worship and preaching, group dynamics, pastoral counseling, volunteer support, religious exploration, and leadership, among other things. A minister can be the glue that holds a congregation together. A minister can provide a single face to the larger community. A minister can assist at the critical times of life that call for rites of passage—child dedications, weddings or civil unions, and memorial services. A

minister can be a spiritual leader—the person who prods and pokes at assumptions, behaviors, and attitudes to help guide the congregation to a deeper and richer place.

Not every minister is gifted in all these areas. Ministers are individuals, and one who is a dynamic preacher may have few pastoral care skills. The quiet one in the pulpit may be the person you would most want at your bedside. The one who seems to have the relationship and group dynamic skills down pat may be uncomfortable around children. The social action firebrand may forget to write newsletter columns.

It is important for your congregation to decide what skills are most important to you in a minister—after all, it's a big investment in terms of time and money, and most small congregations can't afford a full-time minister. The minister and congregation have a give-and-take relationship, and it's important to be upfront from the beginning. If you are choosing a part-time minister, it is especially important to be clear about what it is that you want him to do for you.

A minister can be a wonderful addition to a happy, healthy small congregation. A minister can help you deepen the good work you're already doing. A minister can bring a new perspective to your community. But ministers come and go—the congregation itself is the one that lasts. Take time with this decision, and you'll be sure to have a relationship with your minister that is strong and healthy.

#### *What do you need?*

It is helpful to survey your congregation to find out what they want from a minister. This can be done through a questionnaire, group discussion, or one on one meetings.

Here are some things to discuss:

- ✦ Preaching and worship. Some congregations want the same minister in the pulpit three Sundays out of four; others like a diversity of speakers and only want the minister to preach once or twice a month. Obviously you're going to want a minister to lead worship some of the time—the question is, how much?
- ✦ Pastoral care. Depending on your congregation's demographics, folks may want a minister to call on for pastoral care. An older congregation may have more needs in this area, but a younger one may as well. The stresses and strains of young families can be just as rough as life for folks entering their final years.

- ✚ Religious exploration. Some congregations value a strong Religious Exploration program for their children. Adult RE is important to others. A minister can help start a program, support a volunteer or paid RE coordinator, spend time with the kids, or lead adult classes.
- ✚ Leadership development. A minister can attend governing board meetings and give advice regarding governance structure, bylaws, staffing, and other nuts and bolts of running an organization. You may already have organizational development folks in your congregation who can do this. Whether you need a minister's help Centering your congregation depends on how well your organization is run.
- ✚ Mission and community outreach. A minister can be the liberal religious voice in your larger community. A minister can attend interfaith clergy meetings, volunteer to be a hospital chaplain, or get involved in community organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, the homeless shelter, or the food shelf. A congregation member can also be chosen to take on this role.
- ✚ Growth and membership outreach. A minister can help your congregation grow by ensuring quality worship, programs, and follow-up with visitors. A minister can give advice about advertising or other ways to become more visible. A minister can lead New UU classes for potential members. You don't necessarily need a minister to do these things, but someone should.
- ✚ Spiritual leadership. A minister, traditionally, is the spiritual leader of the congregation—the person who reminds everyone that this is a religious community, not a social club, political party, or nonprofit social change organization. A minister gently—and not so gently—pokes and prods and lifts up the message that we are together to create beloved community. Is your group ready for this?

Many small congregations, because of past history, few resources, or a host of other reasons, expect that a minister will do things like pick up the mail, check the phone messages, turn the heat on for meetings and worship, create and copy the order of service, and bake cookies for social hour. These are not jobs for the minister. These are jobs for volunteers or a paid coordinator.

Ministers spend at least three years getting a master's degree and have continuing education beyond that. Many ministers have doctoral degrees. They are professionals. It is generally a waste of your money to have your minister's time taken up with clerical and housekeeping activities. If you find that these tasks are not being done in a timely and appropriate manner, consider hiring a part-time coordinator

or administrator. Small congregation volunteers often get burned out or put the church's needs at the end of their priority list, after family and career. Don't expect your minister to be the church secretary. It's important to get these small, important things taken care of before you bring a new minister in.

### *Choosing a minister*

The process for choosing a minister can seem long, complicated, and convoluted. That's the gift—and the curse—of congregational polity that calls for congregations to choose their own minister and not have one appointed by a denominational body. You will receive help from the denomination, of course, but the process and final decision is yours alone.

First, decide if you want a part-time or full-time minister. Keep in mind that you need at least one hundred and twenty-five active, pledging members to be able to afford a full-time minister. Even though you may want a full-time minister, you will be doing yourselves—and the minister—a disservice if you hire someone full-time and can't keep paying her salary. Don't count on hiring the minister full-time with hopes that he will bring in so many new members that you will have the extra income needed to cover his salary. This is too much stress on both the minister and congregation (unless you are very close to one hundred and twenty-five members). It's better to start at some amount of part-time, and increase the minister's time and compensation as there are more members and money.

\* A part-time minister can be engaged in a variety of different ways.

- ✚ You can have a *consulting minister*, who comes in for very specific duties and is there to help you vision your future and move in that direction. You may want the minister to come one Sunday or one weekend a month to lead worship, attend the board meeting, and provide pastoral care. You may want the minister to lead worship three times a month and do pastoral care, but not attend board meetings or have anything to do with the organizational infrastructure of the congregation. You may feel that you can handle worship well, but you have so many children that you want the minister to come in to run the Religious Exploration program. It's up to your congregation.
- ✚ You can have a *called minister*, which generally needs to be at least a half-time position. A called minister is not hired for specific duties, but to be The Minister and provide the full range of ministry services, depending on what percentage of full-time you hire her for. A part-time minister will obviously provide

fewer services than a full-time minister because he will have less time to devote to your congregation. This is more a covenantal relationship than a contractual relationship (as a consulting minister usually is). It's not that you can't be specific with your called minister about what you want her to do, but a called minister usually has a deeper, more long-term relationship with the congregation.

✦ You can have a *yoked ministry*, which means that you and another congregation or congregations choose to share a minister. This can work in the right circumstances. You need to be very clear about what you need the minister to do, and so do the other congregations you work with. You also need to choose a minister who is up for the challenge of serving more than one congregation at a time, and is willing to travel and be creative. All of the congregations involved need to have an excellent working relationship to avoid the jealousy that can arise. (Whose minister is he, anyway?)

Contact your District staff when you have decided to look for a minister. They will guide you through the process or refer you to the best person to help.

There are as many different ministers out there as there are congregations. Finding a good match is a challenge. Many ministers are bound by geography and financial realities. Many congregations would prefer to have their minister live in town and not commute in from a distance. The reality is that your congregation may have to compromise.

To start the search process, form a Search Committee. This is a group of five to seven people—chosen by a vote of the congregation—who will do the work of sorting through your congregation's wishes, the candidates' strengths and weaknesses, the interviews, and the financial conversations, and present a final candidate who will be approved (or not) by another vote of the membership.

Sounds simple? It's not. The Search Committee needs to be a highly dedicated group who represents the diversity of your congregation in age, gender, race, sexual orientation, and theological viewpoint. Your congregation needs to fully trust this group, and the group needs to fully trust one another. This is not a committee made up of troublemakers or complainers, but of people who understand the dynamics of working together for the benefit of the entire congregation. Take your time with this decision and choose the right people. The search will often take about a year.

The first job of the Search Committee is to survey your congregation and find out what people want in a minister. You can use the previous survey that helped you

to decide if ministry can be done in written up to you. Ask people them, what isn't, what congregation fully so congregation to pot drive yourselves crazy

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