

“First Reading”—Roger Gilles

For our first “reading,” we’d like to share with you our reading of the ministerial search. We do not yet have a candidate for you. We have full confidence that we *will* settle a full-time minister here at All Souls, but not this year. We have worked very hard on your behalf: we’ve met about 30 times over the past ten months, we’ve conducted 15 cottage meetings and interviews with you, we’ve surveyed the congregation, we’ve prepared a Congregational Record and a Congregational Packet, we’ve received applications and reviewed Ministerial Packets, and we’ve interviewed potential candidates. Our conclusion after all of that is that we are not quite ready to settle a minister. Let me explain why.

Clearly, ministerial searches involve applicants, on the one hand, and churches, on the other hand. We’ve learned a lot about what applicants look for in a church. They look for a healthy membership and a good location. They look for a decent salary and benefits for their family. And, because nearly all ministerial vacancies involve a former minister, applicants look for a church that has made the transition from its previous minister and is ready for a new one.

Last June, when we began our work, we knew we were a relatively small church in a state with a relatively poor economy, but we also knew that we were an *interesting* church in a part of Michigan that, while struggling, has fared better than other parts of the state. In conversations with our applicants and with the BCT sermon and workshop leaders who visited us in January, we’ve learned that people around the country don’t know much about our church or about west Michigan, and we believe that this lack of awareness is one significant challenge we face as we look to settle a minister.

Last June, we also knew that the salary we could offer was on the low end of the UUA’s recommended range, and that our inability to guarantee a benefits package would be a strike against us. So that’s another challenge.

What we didn’t know last June was the extent to which ministerial applicants look for churches that have gone through the “interim” process as they move from one minister to the next. We

learned this, in part, from the UUA Transitions director himself. At the UUA Transitions website, each congregation is listed in certain ways to help applicants sort through their best options. Our congregation is identified as a small congregation in Michigan with a relatively low salary, no benefits package, and no interim minister. We learned that all of these factors are important and shape the way potential applicants view us.

Still, we did get applicants, and we moved forward. We received four applicants. Without going into full detail, I'll say that we had an interesting range of applicants. Two were women and two were men; two were young and two were not so young. Their theologies varied, as did their sermon styles. They had very different strengths. After talking with us, two decided to withdraw their names from consideration, and two still have their names on our list of interested ministers. We learned a lot from talking with them. We learned a lot from their questions. And in that process, we came to the realization that we in fact are not quite ready to settle a minister. We decided that we need at least a year, and very likely two years, with an interim minister before we are ready to call our first minister.

As I said, our applicants asked a lot of questions, and gradually we realized that these questions all had a lot to do with our need to “process” our relationship with Brent Smith, our soon-to-be former minister. Brent has been with us for eight years; that's a long-time minister. Naturally our applicants asked directly about our relationship with Brent—how we feel about his leaving, and so on. They also asked about our relationship with Fountain Street. They asked us about our rather complex and ambitious church structure, and our impressive (and overwhelming) number of committees and boards. And as we talked, and then as we talked among ourselves, we began to realize just how much our church really is a reflection of Brent and his influence on us. That's not a bad thing, but it's a thing. Think about it: our name, our vision, our mission, our covenant. Our liturgy. Our worship calendar. Our structure. Our relationship to Fountain Street and other liberal churches in the area. Our sense of ourselves in the West Michigan community. Brent's influence is everywhere. Our conclusion was that we really do need to reflect on all of this and decide exactly who and what *we* are—separate from Brent. It may well be that, two years from now, we are very much the same as we are now—same vision, same mission, same covenant,

same liturgy, and so on—but we need that to reflect *us*, and not Brent. And our ministerial applicants need to know that.

That's where an interim minister comes in. Today, we'd like to share with you exactly what an interim minister is and what one can help us accomplish. Briefly, let me say that an interim minister is not only for churches in trouble. They are in fact very common for churches like us, healthy churches in transition. They are not fill-ins, and they are not part-timers. They are fully qualified ministers who have been specifically trained to lead congregations through this period of transition and discernment. An interim minister can help us, first of all, celebrate our years with Brent and come to terms with his significant legacy. But they can also help us take an honest look at ourselves and recommit to those aspects of our church that we want and love the most. And they can help us open ourselves up to new possibilities—new ways of experiencing a minister, new ways of organizing a service, new ways of organizing the work of the church. Again, we may not decide to change. But we do need to consider the *possibility* of change.

After ten months, we are convinced that, once we go through that interim process, we will be in a much better position to attract applicants. It would be nice to get more than four. But we will also be much more *ready* for the range of applicants we are likely to receive. We, the members of the search committee, are committed to this process, and, with your support, we intend to see it through. The search is not over. It is ongoing. We are learning, and we are preparing. That is what today's service is about.

Today we are going to show you a video prepared by the UUA about the interim opportunity. We're also going to share with you the positive experiences several members of All Souls have had with interim ministers at other churches. We'll also map out the process that our church will follow to hire an interim minister. Most of all, we want to express to you our excitement about this opportunity and what it will do for our church. We want to express to you our confidence that this search process *will* be successful. And we want to ask for your help in making this interim period as productive and helpful as it can possibly be. That's what today's service is about.