

My name is Rita Petteys, and I have been a UU since the mid 90s, having been a member of Paint Creek Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Rochester, MI, until I moved back to Grand Rapids in 2003, where I found All Souls Community Church. My part in this service is to provide first-person experiences of interim ministry.

As we have seen from the video shown during today's service, a congregation's experience with interim ministry is composed of many parts, including reflection, healing and grieving, identifying and addressing congregational and organizational strengths and weaknesses, and preparing a congregation for a new, settled minister. Congregants may take part in one, many, or none of these aspects of interim ministry and transitional time. Some may feel deep grief at the current minister's departure, while others may not. Some congregants may not see the need for a time or place of healing relationships related to the congregation, and some may see this time as essential to addressing actual or perceived wrongs. While an interim minister works with the congregation on this essential work of congregational growth, one thing that needs to be stressed: Interim Ministers also provide the work of being a congregational minister as an integral part of the their ministry.

Paint Creek is a UU congregation that was established in the early 1990s by the UUA. At the point where I had joined the congregation, its founding minister had been called by the congregation for approximately 5 years. My husband and I were married by this minister, and she performed many of the rites of passage for congregation members: child dedications, memorial services, coming of age rituals, and weddings, among others.

Paint Creek is a congregation similar to ASCC in many ways. It was a congregation without a permanent home, renting space at the American Legion Hall in downtown Rochester, MI. Like All Souls, it had been established for 8 years with one minister who had served the congregation since its founding. And like All Souls, the founding minister announced eight years into her service at the congregation that she was leaving.

In January 2001, she announced that she had accepted a call from a congregation in the suburbs of New York City, and that June 2001 would be the end of her service, when her contract ended.

This news was bittersweet. The congregation rejoiced with the departing minister at the expansion of her ministry, as her new congregation was much larger. But we were sad for ourselves. I was then expecting my son, Neil, and had looked forward to the minister who had married my husband and I performing our child's dedication service.

Despite the sadness, the congregation prepared for the minister's departure, making plans for parties, and arranging meetings to work on the congregation's movement to the future.

The congregation's Board of Trustees convened a search committee, and also put together a team for searching for an interim minister. During the spring and summer, this team met and interviewed interim ministerial candidates, and presented the congregation with their choice in late Spring. The Rev. Lisa Presley, now the Heartland District Executive, was contracted by Paint Creek for interim ministry, and she started in late-August 2001.

Lisa's presence and participation in congregational life was many things. As a interim, she had specific tasks to engage the congregation on – reviewing the congregational history, helping the congregation recognize strengths, addressing areas the congregation agreed needed shoring up. This all happened in the context of congregational gatherings, soup potlucks after services, and evening meetings, where everyone was invited to participate and share their experiences and feelings.

The congregation worked with Lisa to address the areas that needed to be strengthened and expand areas that were working well. Some of the plans were direct and specific: for example, implementing recommended changes to the By-Laws which would address procedural sticking points and membership processes. Some of the plans were open-ended and long-term: develop new methods for welcome new members, work on using technology to simplify administrative duties.

The Interim Minister provided all areas of ministry that the congregation needed, beyond scheduling and facilitating meetings to help us reflect and look forward. The scope of her ministry extended to pastoral care, providing excellent Sunday services, rites of passage, and participating in congregational life.

September 11, 2001, an important date in the ASCC history, was a few short weeks after her arrival. In response to the country's confusion and mourning, she arranged services of prayer and meditation for the congregation and community, encouraging us to contemplate and discuss the events that had shaken us all.

One week following September 11, my son Neil was born. The Interim Minister was one of the first members of the congregation to call to arrange a visit to check in on us. I remember her visit vividly, her calming presence amidst the confusion of new motherhood and I cherish the Christmas ornament she gave us as a gift for the upcoming holidays – Baby’s First Christmas.

The Interim Minister also performed the Sunday services. One of the first services she preached was about transition, mentioning the movie “Paddle to the Sea”, based on the book of the same name, with its ubiquitous toy boat floating down the St. Lawrence Seaway, with interludes, both long and brief, along the way. Each time the boat was stuck, it was returned to its path by someone nudging it along after making their mark on the boat. The metaphor was subtle, and the comparison has stuck with me for the past 9 years.

Other services included a sermon on Veteran’s Day 2001, as the US was working on going to war, about the experiences of soldiers returning from the Vietnam War. It was a moving and tearful sermon, not only for the minister, but for the congregation, with veterans in attendance weeping at the acknowledgement of their service. The sermons were topical, helping us reflect on ourselves and our community as we took the steps toward readying ourselves for a new ministerial candidate. *There is a quote that Brent Smith has used to describe , but also contained part of the Interim Minister’s life “...The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, ? life passed through the fire of thought.”*

So far, I have only dealt with the concrete aspects of my experiences with interim ministry. Now I will tell you about the emotional aspects.

of it. One of the most vivid emotions I remember is that of hope. Lisa's presence was settling in a time when many felt ungrounded – not knowing what was next for the small congregation that seemed to be facing the challenges similar to many congregations, such as finances, location, and the role in the community.

Her calm and confident demeanor took the edge off an unsettling time. Whether it was a gentle and non-judgmental question of “why” we were doing things in a certain way, or providing us with resources or perspectives for a different path, we felt that Lisa had our best interests at heart.

Another emotion I remember is warmth. We were genuinely glad to welcome our Interim Minister, and she enthusiastically participated in congregational life, becoming part of our congregation's events and history. She is the minister who dedicated my son Neil on Mother's Day 2002, a very special day for us as a family.

Overall, the experience with an Interim Minister was amazing. When Lisa left Paint Creek prior to the called minister's arrival, we were a sad congregation once again at the departure of someone so dear, but a congregation with a renewed sense of hope, direction, and deep gratitude for the minister who helped us transition to the place we wanted and needed to be. Her name was written on our boat as we continued the journey, the walk, together.