

The Third Client *by Rabbi Michael Remson*

Clergy have two clients. The first is God, served by following our scriptures, our religious traditions and our values. The second is a congregation, with its members, its leaders and its culture.

As interim and transitional clergy, however, we have a third client -- the next settled clergy, the person who will succeed us. Among other things, the interim clergy's task is to create an environment in which our successors will be well chosen, warmly welcomed, and able to establish long and satisfying covenantal relationships with their new congregations.

The process taught by the Interim Ministry Network works toward these goals. The self-study and the attention given to its results help the congregation select a person who shares their vision for the future and has the attributes they define. Understanding the history of a congregation helps the members grieve for their former pastor, and prepares them for the inevitable changes ahead. When a congregation understands that the initial euphoria a new spiritual leader brings will always be followed by a degree of disillusionment, that knowledge sustains their relationship until it becomes stronger. Returning authority to the laity and encouraging the congregation to connect with its denomination and its local community help both build a healthier environment for the new clergy.

Still, there are other things we can do for our third clients:

1. Not saddle them with unreasonable expectations.

When Andy Brown was about to become the Interim Pastor of First Church he noticed that the young pastor who was leaving always wore dark suits and white shirts. This was in an era of blue shirts and navy blazers, so Andy commented on it. The departing pastor said that some of the older members told him blue shirts and sport jackets were not appropriate for the Pastor of First Church. Andy favored blue and striped dress shirts, and often wore sport shirts and sweaters to his office. When he mentioned this to his wife, she asked if he was going to order a supply of white shirts. "After all," she said, "that isn't a fight worth having." "Actually, it is," said Andy. "If I only wear dark suits and white shirts, the next pastor will just be stuck with one more unreasonable expectation." Andy was right. Interim clergy have a unique opportunity to wean congregations from their unreasonable expectations.

2. Provide calm leadership.

Within his first week at First Church an elderly man, a fourth generation descendent of two of the Church's founders, commented on Andy's clothing. "My goodness," the man said, "You certainly don't look like a minister." Andy had decided not to be drawn into an argument, but to respond with humor. "Don't you think so?" he asked. Then he joked "My wife says I look like every minister in my family. But of course, I'm the only minister in my family."

The man did not laugh, but said, "The Pastor at First Church should dress like a minister." "Well, I appreciate the comment," said Andy sincerely, "and I'll give it some thought."

When Andy continued to dress casually a couple of people complained to the officers of the congregation. Others, however, said that it was refreshing to see a pastor who didn't look so

stuff. When Andy remained calm, the lay leaders also remained calm, and in a few weeks the issue disappeared.

Throughout his year at First Church Andy's calm leadership markedly reduced the level of anxiety, and he bequeathed to his successor a much healthier congregation.

3. Consult with your successor.

After Beth Johnson had been Interim Minister at Community Church for a few months, the Director of Religious Education began to consult her about the curriculum. The former pastor had little interest in education, and whatever the DRE wanted to do was fine. Unfortunately, when the DRE asked for advice, the former pastor simply replied, "I don't know anything about education. That's your area."

Beth also lacked educational expertise, but she recognized that the curriculum needed substantial revision. She began to work on it with the DRE and Community Church's Education Committee. In February the next settled pastor was named and scheduled to come to Community on July 1. From that time on, the pastor-select received copies of all the curriculum changes, and was encouraged to offer comments.

By including him in the process, the Education Committee knew that he would not undo their work, and he arrived having already established a good relationship with the Education Committee and the DRE.

Once the new clergy have been named, including them in planning and decision-making can do a great deal to facilitate and a seamless transition.

4. Prepare the congregation for change.

When Nancy Stein became the Interim Rabbi of Temple Beth El, the worship patterns had not changed in many years. She succeeded David Golden who had founded the congregation nearly 20 years earlier. David was a superb preacher, but he did not like changes in liturgy. Worship at Beth El was comfortable for members, but it did not challenge them, and Nancy was concerned that if she left it as it was, the next settled rabbi would be unable to make any changes without a major battle.

Nancy consulted the Worship Committee, and then she began to introduce new music and additional readings. She also changed some of the Temple's old practices. She varied the liturgy from week to week. One week it would be as it had been, and the next week it would be substantially different. Nancy did not expect that her changes would become a permanent part of Beth El's worship patterns. Rather, she wanted to get the congregation used to change.

At first there was some grumbling. The board and the worship committee listened to the complaints, but remained calm and encouraged Nancy to continue her innovations. At the end of her interim year, the congregation was proud of its expanding repertoire. More important, Beth El's new settled rabbi was able to introduce liturgical changes with very few complaints.

The interim year is an excellent opportunity for a congregation to experiment. That experimentation will make it easier for the next clergy to innovate.

5. Be in touch with those who are unhappy.

As people began to grumble about Nancy's liturgical innovations, she did not ignore them. She was, at first, uncomfortable contacting them, but she knew it had to be done. One by one, she met with those who were unhappy. When they found excuses to not meet with her, she tried again.

At each meeting she chatted warmly with the complainers, and then said "I know you're unhappy with worship, and I'd be grateful if you'd tell me about it." She listened carefully, sometimes taking notes. Occasionally someone had a good suggestion, for which she offered thanks and agreed to try the idea. She never argued or apologized for the changes, nor did she say that she would undo them.

The congregation was able to move ahead with its innovations, and the anger was defused. Over time, her willingness to meet with those who were upset lowered the level of anxiety throughout the congregation.

6. Facilitate grieving.

Nancy realized that much of the resistance to change was a form of grief for her predecessor. After her visitors were finished talking about the worship services, Nancy said, "I know you are fond of Rabbi Golden. I hear wonderful things about him, but we only met two or three times. Won't you please tell me about him?" She let her visitors talk, stopping them to ask questions.

When they finished, she said, "I can see why you were so fond of David. He will always have a special place in your heart, and I don't want to change that."

By allowing these expressions of grief and anger, the emotions began to dissipate, and by the end of her interim year Temple Beth El was ready to welcome a new rabbi.

Our task as interim clergy is not simply to "hold down the fort" or to give a congregation a year of respite. The next settled clergy is our third client, after God and the congregation. There is much we can do to facilitate our successor's acceptance by the congregation.

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