

Summary Reflections of Board and Executive Team meeting with Rev. David Pyle

The Board and ET met with Reverend David Pyle, Regional Lead for Mid-America Region for approx. 2 hours on July 25, 2022. This document is a combination of notes from 2 attendees, and edited for some clarity. This document includes interpretation of the meeting and is not a formal report from Rev. Pyle.

Background Info:

- Mid-America Region is part of the UUA structure, although separate, and staff is part of UUA .
- All regions have “congregational life consultants” (CLCs) that function as primary point person between congregation/fellowship/community and UUA
 - o Most regions’ CLCs are dedicated to particular geographic chunk within the region.
 - o David is in charge of the Mid-America CLC; he rearranged the CLCs to be based on congregation size rather than location (hereafter congregation is “cong”).
- Mid-America Region has 187 congregations/fellowships/communities, of which 13 are considered large
 - o In Region parlance, “large” = 400+ members
 - o In UUA parlance, “large” = 500+ *and* >\$1mil budget
 - o He didn’t explain why the difference
- In large congregations, Regional Staff have learned that the primary relationship is between CLC and senior ministers
 - o Consequently, he was in regular contact with Rob/Janne and Kathy.
 - o Regrets that he was never able to build in-person relationship with Rob/Janne, much due to pandemic.
 - o David moved to this position in mid-2019; but he’s been in UUA staff for about a decade all told.
 - o Rob & Janne (in particular Rob) were extremely clear that *they* were the mediators between regional staff and Unity, not CLC directly with the Board.
 - o David wants CLC to be in relationship with Cong/fellowship/community and BoT– CLC is “long-term relationship” holder between cong and UUA
 - Extremely difficult for direct relationship in large cong b/c his face is just one of many that come and go
 - Potential that BoT at Unity can exist in quasi-relationship w/ him as CLC
 - CLC is desired to function as operator on switchboard, directing concerns/questions from cong to relevant person w/in UUA so cong folks don’t have to learn the [bureaucracy/complexity of] UUA
 - David is also in contact with 8 of the 9 MST members at Unity during his visit
 - 7 agreed to meet in person while he was in MN
 - 1 agreeing only to email contact.
- UUA Transitions Office manages the Transitions Process
 - o Keith Kron is head / top minister w/in Trans. Office, normally functions as support person to the ministers in search
 - o Christine Purcell is in charge of overseeing all congs in search, functions primarily as the point person for congs seeking support
 - o Noted – that wasn’t our experience. MST did have some communications with both Christine and Keith
 - Keith stepped into be Unity’s primary contact b/c of the unusual circumstances of our search and the prominence of Unity among UUA congs

- MSR role, that Unity used, is being phased out and the work of the MSRs will largely be done by Christine Purcell instead.
- Rob wanted succession model with no interim in which Rob & Janne wanted a hand in choosing the successor versus the Search model where the Team selects and presents a candidate. (Note: Rob did not have a hand in choosing Rev Hurt or Rev Hannah)
 - David thinks the reason behind Rob's desire was to continue the momentum that Rob/Janne's ministry had built, wanting to keep that momentum going rather than have it hard stop w/ transition.
 - MST didn't have time to build connections with UUA and/or make calls for support at times b/c compressed timeline.
 - MST had time crunch to meet all deadlines
 - MST did use services but not as much as was available and often used
- Ministerial Settlement Coach / Ministerial Search Representative (MSR, aka Jen Crow) –this role is being phasing out the model of having long-term regional based MSRs that are steeped in transition from outside UUA structure. We can still request an MSR from Transitions office in future search, or have Christine Purcell as Transaction Staff serve that role. Janne was the MSR for the District for many years.
 - MSR primarily does retreat for MST and provides ongoing support (relatively large ask for a person)
 - Next time around, BoT will choose whether to use MSR outside UUA or Christine Purcell from Trans. Office
 - Christine's position developed to have a person oversee the whole Transition process across the denomination, as historically there were ministers in search who were gaming the system.
 - "gaming the system" defined as a minister would have some not-so-nice reason to be leaving cong in one region and would search on the opposite side of the country where scuttlebutt didn't reach those congs, and minister could find new position without having to deal with baggage of previous call.
 - Christine aids in suggesting updates to search process annually
- Not calling a minister and % of affirmative vote
 - In 10 years, he's seen 5 no calls, 1 year was 3 no calls
 - UUMA (Ministers Association) has written guidelines in the covenant to which all ministers joining UUMA agree
 - 90% approval in search votes comes from those guidelines
 - Many congs have bylaws written before UUMA's covenantal guidelines were established with voting thresholds to call a minister much lower than 90% (unity is 75%). Still ultimately Minister's decisions to not accept a call is vote is less than 90% but above church 75%.
 - Reason is so the minister can start off a called ministry on a good foot without much resistance.
 - Approval doesn't equal 100% which allows for dissenters
 - Ministers can take votes with less than 90% approval but will likely have to do some explaining to their colleagues – UUMA covenant guidelines are guidelines but are also covenantal.
 - Congregations need education on this point and the disconnect between Unity's 75% threshold and Minister threshold of 90+%
- David is really excited for Kathleen to join us

- Kathleen will be walking us through the process of moving from co-sr ministers to senior/associate ministry in a longer format than Kathy could
- David encourages us to frame narrative to the congregation about what happened, especially difficult when MST did not have consensus
 - And cong doesn't sound like we were ready for call
 - We had unclear direction of what Unity wants – there was a disconnect between what was understood as wanted and what was actually wanted
 - Unity's grief work got really complicated during search
 - MST had difficulties reaching out for support and didn't have clear uniform idea of how to make decisions
- David has been reading eblasts and newsletters from Unity and all UUA staff in relation to Unity's transition process were very aware of concerns regarding 1 year interim but found communicating these concerns in all possible ways resulted in MST possibly pulling back from seeking UUA support.
- David ascertained that MST got idea that young, moldable, energized, anti-racist minister was the goal but congregation ended up wanting gravitas that no minister with only 5 years after seminary will provide
- Lack of trust between Unity and UUA has history, and then exacerbated by Rob's last 2.5 years on UUA board – those were “hard”, leaving Rob w/ less trust, and Mid-America / UUA do not have close working relationship w/ Unity as they do with other congs
 - That distant relationship is pattern at Unity over 100+ years history
- Extra-large congs (750+ members) often don't need direct support from UUA until something doesn't track positively.
 - When something goes off the rails, that's when EX LG congs turn to UUA but they don't have relationship w/ region or UUA
 - Currently 8 of the 13 large congs in Mid-America Region are in transition and 2 more just finished search this spring = unprecedented amount of transition at our size of congregation
- Especially long-tenured ministerial leadership with strong authority, backlash can center on MST or Board or finance team (heads-up).
- Large congregations with long tenure need more interim time, in his experience, and 1 yr was a challenge. Fact of 1 year interim after long tenure likely a factor there were less applicants.
- There's education that needs to happen at the congregational level
 - Why only one candidate allowed (so we're not pitting candidate x against candidate y)
 - Interim minister and/or cong leaders are the ones to move congregation through the education
- What is happening with Ministerial pool:
 - Ministerial shrinkage:
 - 1 generation of ministers came in together in the 1980s and are retiring together now (Boomers)
 - Typically, normal retirement means many folks move to interim work or transition ministry work or other contract ministry but, current Boomer retirement is that folks really retire and leave ministry, like Rob and Janne did. (covid burnout a large reason for the really retire). Leads to thinner pool for all positions.
 - Many ministers going on sabbatical to relieve covid burnout

- Sabbaticals are longer now than before – seeing 3-5 years sabbaticals (not paid) rather than 6 months (paid) to reinvent ministry. These can be self-elected sabbaticals to step away from ministry for a period of time.
 - UUA taught ministers to leave when hitting walls rather than renewing ministry
 - Ministers who joined UUA in the '80s learned and lived out renewing ministry, ergo long tenures like the Eller-Isaacs
 - Consequence is more congs in search as ministers leave existing posts to deal with burn out or retire
 - Least experienced ministers go to the most-challenging congs
 - Consequence is ~30% of new ministers leave ministry altogether
 - Most-challenging congs defined as rural, small congs without budget to actually cover their needs
 - Great Resignation UUA style – work life balance being questioned, especially at large and extra large congs
- Of 2022 applicant pool, roughly 30% deemed invalid by Transitions office for one reason or another
 - 3-4 years ago, Unity would have pulled 20-30 applicants – we got 10.
 - Only one other cong in search last year pulled more applicants – they pulled 11.
 - In interim, it's worse; 22 congs didn't get interims.
- In all, more work is intentionally required by congregations to envision search and ministerial presence.
- MST Info: Normal to have 5-7 folks on MST (Last Unity MST was 7 folks total that brought Rob/Janne). 9 member MST is large and encourages us to reconsider size.
 - Group dynamics around active consensus and the work required means 7 is the sweet spot for Unity.
 - Normal to have full year of cottage meetings wherein cong processes transition and provides info to MST to establish what cong is looking for in next ministry (that can happen with longer Interim)
 - Staff and ET can participate and serve on MST. Consider this issue for next search.
 - Our MST got sense they had to be island-unto-themselves and David said this does not have to be so. This understanding resulted in BoT/MST communication gap
 - Monthly reports to BoT from MST on progress through process is fairly common and should be for next MST
 - Confidentiality is about the candidate and precandidates. Not about anything else.
- Settlement Handbook is reference doc on UUA.org
- What from the Handbook would be helpful in educating the congregation?
- Question discussed relating to who had final authority to pause the search process when enough concerns warranted that?
 - David and Laura Park operated in same consulting space for years, so this is an discussion they've had many times
 - Three levels of governance:
 - Level 1: Congregational Polity – Board as the typical body determined by the congregation. But MST can also be chosen and accountable to cong.
 - Level 2: Policy Governance – the congs Board has final authority, with MST making final ministerial recommendation to the Board.

- Level 3: Executive Leadership- ET creates all needed bodies, with authority over all ministries
- Complicated to answer based on Unity's governance and formation of MST.
- At Unity, the MST is formed by both cong and board, with accountability to both, complicating the question of final authority without it being in bylaws. He suggests our bylaws should have explicit clarity on relationship between the two and authority.

Overall, David thinks Unity has the capacity, resources, and commitment to come through this w/o development ministry, ergo his suggestion that we move through 2 year interim into sr/associate ministry.