

Introducing Five Focus Points for Moving Through Transition in a Congregation

Rev. Cheryl Mayes

We've all heard the saying that the one thing we can all count on in life is change. We may even nod our heads wisely in agreement. What doesn't necessarily get mentioned is how we are to navigate these changes in our lives in a way that leads us forward in a positive, healthy direction.

This is true for individuals as well as for congregations. How can we as consultants and ministers in the field help our congregations to successfully navigate transitions? In some ways, congregations are always in a process of transition. There are changes in key leadership positions every time Board members are elected; new members arrive and beloved older members make their transitions; a workable space for worship and learning must be found or created and then maintained; and attendance and finances continually fluctuate. All of these are the kind of normal, everyday changes that provide our spiritual communities with plenty of "growth opportunities."

There is another transition that is so profound for congregations that a whole ministry of training Transitional Ministers has arisen to assist congregations through this change. We're talking about the time of transition that begins when a minister leaves, for whatever reason. What now? Congregants often figure they'll just put together a church profile and get a new minister as soon as possible. However, experiences across different denominations (including Unity) reveal that this may not be the most effective way forward. The Center for Congregational Health has found that a congregation that pays attention to the following Five Focus Points has a better chance of successfully navigating the transition period between when a minister leaves to when a new minister is joyfully welcomed.

Here are the **Five Focus Points**:

Heritage: *reviewing how the congregation has been shaped and formed.*

The present moment was built upon the past. When we pay attention to a congregation's heritage, we get to encourage people to tell and hear all the stories about the congregation's past – the challenges and triumphs, the beloved saints and those who were a little harder to love – all are part of discovering what we are bringing with us on this journey of transition. The key question for this Focus Point is "Who are we and how did we get here?"

Leadership: *reviewing the membership needs and its ways of organizing and developing new and effective leadership.*

When a key leader such as the minister leaves, a congregation has an opportunity to take a fresh look at what kind of leadership is needed now. New leaders within the congregation may step forward, while those who have been at it for a while may step back, re-commit, or find new ways of sharing their gifts and leadership. The question here is "What gifts are present among us and how can we call them forth for the common good?"

Mission: *defining and redefining sense of purpose and direction.*

This Focus Point goes deeper into the “Who are we?” question. The focus on Mission is about clarifying a faith community’s identity and core values. What is truly important to us? What is it we want to happen by coming together week after week? This is a time for developing mission and vision statements that honestly reflect the purpose of the congregation. The key questions are “What is ours to do? What is our divine calling as a community?”

Connections: *discovering all the relationships a faith community builds outside of itself.*

Congregations can sometimes get very pleased and excited about how connected they are to one another. This Focus Point, however, has to do with how connected the congregation is to the world outside its doors. What value might they find in connecting more intentionally with their Unity Region and with Unity Worldwide Ministries? How are they interacting in the neighborhood around their own spiritual community, with communities of other faith traditions, and with concerns of the wider community? This time of transition is a great time to look at what is already being done and consider new ways of building bridges of understanding and compassion in the world. The key question here is “How can we be fully present to the community beyond our doors?”

Future: *developing congregational and ministerial profiles.*

Having done its work of focusing on the first four Focus Points, a congregation is now ready to seek a new minister to join them in living their mission. They know who they are and what they feel called by God to do together. They know what kind of leadership is most effective and how their own leadership can complement that of a new minister. They can now put forth this question: “Who will we invite to walk with us into our future?”

Following is one of six Sunday talks that illustrate how these Five Focus Points might be shared with a congregation entering into the transition of their minister leaving. These talks can be used as written, but are really meant to spark your own imagination in finding sacred stories and current illustrations that bring forth the value of each Focus Point. Enjoy!

Grounded in Faith

(An introductory Talk on Transition as a Process)

It is a great privilege to be here with you in this sacred moment of transition. Why do I call it a sacred moment? In Celtic spirituality, the places and times that are “between” are filled with holiness. The space where the rocky shore meets the sea, where the sky meets the earth, where one season leads into the next – these were all especially God-filled. And you are in one of those between places, too. Your minister has left and the new minister is still just a positive intention in your minds – a sacred time of transition, in between time.

I love the scripture about faith in Hebrews 11:1 – ***“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.”*** You can’t see right now where this process of transition you are just beginning will lead. By faith, we walk into the unknown, trusting that all is well.

A while back, my fiancé, Jackson, and I drove over to the Seattle area to attend a couple of events. We stayed in motel nearby – nothing fancy but nice enough. At least we thought it was until I went looking for ice to put on Jackson’s sore knee. The welcome book in our room said there was an ice machine on the 3rd floor. Wonderful – we were on the 3rd floor! But when I went up and down the hall, there was no ice machine to be found. I called the desk. “Oh, there’s one on the 1st and the 4th floor.” OK, fine. I walked up to the 4th floor. Sure enough, there was an ice machine. Unfortunately, it was not producing any ice. I decided to take the elevator down to the first floor.

My mistake. I got on the elevator on the 4th floor with another gentleman already on board. We pushed the button to go to the first floor. No response. After a couple minutes of pushing the button, we decided to at least try to go one floor down. It seems he had originally gotten on at the 3rd floor with the intention of going to the front desk when suddenly the door had opened on Floor Four and I’d gotten on. So we pushed the button for Floor 3 – and it worked! We went down one floor. Yea!

Unfortunately, the door to the elevator would not open. Hmm... We pushed every button on that panel (except the red emergency one – what if it set off a siren. Yikes!). Not only would the door not open, all the lights on the panel then went out. Now we are asking one another, “What do they do in the movies when this happens?” We opened a door on the panel and found a phone. We pushed “O” for operator and were encouraged that it rang. And rang. And rang... No answer.

By this time, we have been in this elevator for over 15 minutes. My elevator friend gets out his cell phone. Brilliant! I’ve left mine in the room. He gets the front desk by finding the number on my key card. They assure us they will get right on it to get us out. Hmm...

By this time I’m thinking Jackson might be wondering what happened to me. My elevator companion offers to let me use his phone to call him. Of course, I don’t know Jackson’s actual number. My phone knows his number. So we call the front desk again and ask them to call my room and let Jackson know I’m stuck on the elevator and will get there as soon as I can. This of course, freaks Jackson out. The front desk doesn’t give him much specific hope for when they’ll have the elevator running again. He walks down the hall to the elevator, not sure what he can do other than maybe yell encouragement to

me. As he steps up to the elevator, the door just opens. None of the three of us had pushed any buttons. It just opened, and Ed, my new elevator friend, and I stepped out with immense appreciation for open doors and the wide expanse of a motel hallway. Jackson and I shared a big hug, and then he went and got his own ice...

[Note about this story: The speaker is invited to share a story of one's own about a time of not moving forward as one expected to. Another metaphor I originally thought of using was that of a labyrinth. Remembering the first time I stepped onto an 11-circuit labyrinth, how surprised I was when I thought I was almost at the center and then suddenly found myself clear out at the edge. The title of the talk could be "Another Turn on the Path."]

I tell you this story because it seems like a metaphor in some ways of what happens to us when we find ourselves in times of transition. We think we've got a great, easy plan for moving on and getting where we want to go. Then Life intervenes. Sometimes like Ed, we find ourselves going the opposite direction from where we want to go. Or maybe we even find ourselves going nowhere at all – seemingly stuck in time and space – waiting, waiting, and then waiting some more. Will we ever get where we want to be?

A wise philosopher by the name of Lao Tzu once said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." So, what are some first steps that can help this spiritual community to move gracefully through this in-between time, this time of transition? Recently I learned about **five focus points** that can help you along your way. I will simply mention them now – we'll learn more about each one in the weeks to come. Each focus point has a question that goes with it.

1. **Heritage:** Who are we and how did we get here?
2. **Leadership:** What gifts are present among us and how can we call them forth for the common good?
3. **Mission:** What is ours to do? Or, another way of saying it is, What is our divine calling as a community?
4. **Connections:** How can we be fully present to the community beyond our doors?
5. **Future:** "Who will we invite to walk with us into our future?"

As you can see, there will be plenty to keep us busy over the next weeks and months. I know some of you might want to go straight to #5. Let's get a new minister as quickly as possible. You might do that. But there are gifts and learnings you would miss if you do. Looking back at my elevator experience, let's do a metaphysical interpretation of it. It seems to me to reveal three things for us to embrace in this time between.

The first is to embrace the **waiting**. If we think about it, waiting happened a lot to our ancestors in the faith. Remember the metaphysical meaning of forty? Noah and his family waited 40 days and 40 nights for the rain to stop, and then they waited some more before they could get off that ark onto dry land. Moses and the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for how long? If you look on a map, it didn't need to take that long. What's that forty years about? Then, we remember that Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days before he began his ministry. Were Ed and I in the elevator 40 minutes? I'm

not sure, but I wouldn't be surprised. The number forty means "It takes as long as it takes." For what? For transformation to happen.

We can gnash our teeth, wring our hands, get upset, or remember, as Psalm 46 reminds us, to "Be still and know..." To know what? That God is always present, no matter how long it takes.

Another thing you can embrace in this in between time is the satisfying experience of **collaborating**. Ed and I collaborated quite a bit in that elevator. We brainstormed what to do. I shared the phone number on my key card so he could use his cell phone to call the desk. Then he shared his phone again to have the desk call Jackson. We both stayed calm.

As your Board and I met together yesterday, it was already evident that they are ready to support one another in getting things done that used to be done by your minister. They will need all of to collaborate with them, too. If you feel tempted to step back until a new minister arrives, I invite you instead to think of ways you can step in and help this community to thrive during this sacred time of transition. Embrace the opportunity to brainstorm, share, and simply be with one another.

Finally, as you move through this time, remember the power of appreciating as you go. Thank God. Thank your leaders – the Board and others who are in leadership roles. Thank one another often for the faith and generosity of spirit that is among you. When Ed and I saw each other the next morning at breakfast, he said he'd told his wife how glad he was that neither of us panicked. He appreciated that. So did I.

Beloveds, you are all about to step over a threshold to a new way of being. You've got this! How do I know this? Because you are one with the One Presence and Power of the universe, God the Good. You are grounded in faith. Even though you aren't sure where you'll be next month and beyond, you can trust the outcome.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Our own co-founder Charles Fillmore called faith "the perceiving power of the mind; spiritual assurance." With faith, we can perceive divine Presence and Power at work in and among us, even when nothing seems to be happening – even when all the buttons on the elevator panel have stopped working and we feel like we may be stuck forever...

You've got this! And I am excited for all of you!

Rev. Cheryl Mayes is an experienced Minister with a demonstrated history of working in the religious institutions industry. Skilled in Theology, Discipleship, Pastoral Counseling, Spiritual Direction, and Pastoral Care. Strong community and social services professional with a Spiritual Education and Enrichment (SEE) focused in Unity Principles from Unity Institute, Unity Village, Lee's Summit, MO.

Note: More of Cheryl Mayes article on the five Focus Points will appear in the IMN Friday newsletter in the near future.