

Ministerial Search Committee Report
2015 Annual Meeting
Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua

As you well know, on May 10 the church voted unanimously (168 to 0) to call the Reverend Allison Palm to be our next settled minister. Allison said she accepted our call 100%. She will join us officially on August 1, although I suspect her heart is already with us. Words can't begin to express the energy and joy we all felt that day. For the search committee, that Sunday will forever be burned into our souls, a highlight of our lives.

Following such a vivid event that we all remember, a rerun of the second year of search seems anticlimactic. Nonetheless, in the interest of leaving an archive, let's recap this past year's process.

The Second Year of Search

After a restful summer, the search committee held two listening sessions last fall to gauge how congregational views had shifted since our cottage meetings and congregational survey the prior year. In one meeting, we spoke with new members and friends, asking their perceptions of the church and our hospitality. We were gratified by the positive feedback. The second session, attended largely by leaders and longer term members, surveyed how congregants' views had changed during the interim. With this group we detected a definite broadening of theological comfort and more willingness to see the church change. We realized that some of the responses we heard the first year reflected fear of uncertainty and change. We also solicited feedback from Janet Newman, our interim minister, since she had a fresh perspective of the congregation. Fortunately, her views were consistent with our own.

Using these inputs and judging the progress of various church initiatives begun during Olivia's tenure (e.g., the covenant of right relationships), we updated our congregational record (CR) and search website. The CR became available for interested ministers to review on December 1. We released the website in early January as we began conversations with ministers.

Ministers had the full month of December to review our CR and determine interest. On the afternoon of Friday, January 2, we first saw the names of the ministers who were interested in serving our congregation. In our first year of search, 22 ministers expressed interest, this year, 21.

Each minister prepares a ministerial record (MR), which is the parallel of the CR. The MR contains the minister's response to around 25 questions, most of them essays. The MRs averaged about 11 pages each. Reading and assessing all of those MRs from Friday afternoon until we met at 9 am Sunday morning was certainly one of our most stressful tasks. That Sunday we identified the ministers we wanted to speak with, the ministers whom we felt best matched the needs of this congregation. Last year we picked eight ministers for Skype calls; this year we spoke with nine. The Skype calls were scheduled during the following two weeks, and each call lasted about 90 minutes. From these nine, we asked four to be "pre-candidates," the same number we had asked last year.

We spent a weekend with each pre-candidate, from Friday night until Sunday afternoon. Despite the horrid winter, luckily the weather did not alter any of our weekend plans. However the arrival of a snowstorm one Sunday afternoon forced one of our pre-candidates and spouse to change their return flights from Manchester to Boston, and their late departure from Logan stranded them in Charlotte. Allison and Tristan had a rainy weekend here, which limited their ability to get out and explore Nashua. Fortunately, the rain didn't kill their interest.

You know the rest: we asked Allison to be our candidate, you asked her to be our minister, and she accepted. I think all of us are thrilled with the outcome and eager to have her here to begin the next chapter in the life of this community.

Growth and Integrity

You may not realize that a search committee has objectives that can conflict if not balanced. We want to attract ministers to the church, yet we must honestly convey our shortfalls. As we become aware of these so-called growing edges, we need to lovingly feed back to you, the congregation, where our self-perceptions may be limiting our attractiveness and potential. Fortunately, this last task is coincident although uncoordinated with the work of the interim minister.

Addressing the last point, we entered the search process being told by several outside observers in UU circles that we were a “plum” church and would be very attractive to potential ministers. That’s probably why over 20 ministers expressed interest in us each of the past two years. However we had our issues. It was difficult for the search committee to see and understand them as we prepared for the search. Olivia plowed a lot of that ground while she was with us. Fortunately, once this congregation sees an gap, we own it and move to address it. Olivia praised us for that willingness to change.

This year, as we were updating our CR, the search committee concluded that the compensation we proposed the first year was not high enough to attract the type of minister we wanted to stand in this pulpit every Sunday. We made a recommendation to the board, which they unanimously endorsed, and all of us were asked to pledge to show our commitment to the future. We did.

When Janet called this extra year of search a bonus year, I think the search committee thought we were being placated. However, she was unequivocally right. We are a stronger, more mature congregation than we were a year ago.

Please allow me to express my pride in our search committee. To the point of painting a positive yet accurate picture of this congregation, both our search process coach, Olav Nieuwejaar, and district executive, Joe Sullivan, have praised the accurate picture of the church that is contained in our CR. Olav has asked to use our CR and website as examples for other congregations in search. That’s high praise. Yet the best proof of the integrity of our work was reflected in a statement Allison made at the conclusion of candidating week. She said she saw no discrepancies between what the search committee told her and what she observed first-hand. I’m proud of our search committee for that fidelity, because it wasn’t easy.

Not Quite Done

While the search is complete, our work is not quite finished.

First, we want to ensure that Allison’s transition here is as smooth as possible and stand ready to do whatever we can to assist.

We are honoring Olav’s request to share our CR and website with other congregations in search and want to make a few changes before we share them. We intend to make them available to you as well.

We are compiling a financial summary of our expenditures, so you are aware of the cost of the search.

And we have some recommendations to make to the UUA about the search process. We have some expertise with that, you know.

A Transformative Experience

When we accepted your call to serve on the search committee, none of us knew what lay before us. A bit like Lewis and Clark, we ventured into uncharted territory. It has been an amazing journey, one we'll never forget, one that will be a highlight of our lives.

Thank you for giving us this opportunity and for your unwavering love and support throughout.

Gary Lerude on behalf of the Ministerial Search Committee
Laurie Goodman, Kathy Grossman, Steve Hedges, Carol Houde, and Donna LaRue



(L to R) Donna LaRue, Laurie Goodman, Kathy Grossman, Tristan Husby, Rev. Allison Palm, Carol Houde, Steve Hedges, Gary Lerude, and Harry Purkhiser (church president), following the call and acceptance on May 10, 2015.