

## What to Expect when You're Expecting...a new Pastor

### Introduction

For those of you who don't know me, I was the interim pastor here from November 2011-May 2012. I retired at the end of March after 36 years of ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ – 25 years as a settled pastor in MN, and 11 years as an interim here in Maine and NH. However, I also bring my experience as someone who has been a member of a congregation for the last 11 years where I am not the settled pastor, and now for the past 8 months, I sit in the pew where I'm not in charge of anything or anyone; (though I try to manage John and my cat, Sam.)

What I say today will probably be nothing new – you are wise, thoughtful people who are committed to your faith and the ministry at HTELC; but I am grateful for this opportunity to remind us all of what is important for any congregation when welcoming a new pastor.

And I think it is especially fitting to be doing this on the first Sunday of Advent, as Advent is the season of waiting and expectation – preparing ourselves to remember again the birth of Emmanuel, God with us; and opening ourselves up to watch and receive all that God is doing new.

One of my colleagues, John Bell of the Iona Community in Scotland, tells the story of friends who are expecting their first child, and for as much as they are eagerly anticipating the birth, there is **no room** for the child in the house! For months the expectant parents have gone round and round trying to find a space to fit, but they are reluctant **to change** the rooms they have arranged just so. They are loath to put away their books and their projects in order to make space for a nursery.

Sound familiar? Maybe not the part about awaiting the birth of a first child, but how many of us can relate only too well to the need to create space, the necessity of making room for something new and just how difficult that is to do?

Yet, at its heart, that's exactly what Advent is, the invitation to wait for something new and unknown in our lives, brought to us, in person, by the living God. To wait, without knowing the answers ahead of time, for exactly what it is this new thing God is doing in our lives, exactly what new life God yearns to birth in us.

And in order for that new birth to come, we have to make God room. Author Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way, "God is looking for a nursery, but we are inside the study with the door closed." And if you don't remember anything else we discuss today, I hope you will remember this. **The best way to expect a new pastor is to make room in your mind and heart, to make room in the life and work of the congregation for God to work with through this new relationship of pastor and people.**

As you prepare to receive your new pastor, as you together live into the ministry here at HTELC and beyond these doors, continually ask yourselves, how are we making space for God to lead us together? How will you open your doors literally as well as figuratively? Are you willing to make space and even let go of long held assumptions, convictions and pre-set expectations? Can you make room for God? Because, while you are expecting a new pastor, let me remind you, that really it is not about him or about you, but about how God's Spirit will be inspiring and guiding your lives of faith, your witness in the world, your embodiment of the good news of the grace we have received in Jesus Christ.

### The Nitty-Gritty

Well, enough of a sermon – now some specific ideas about how to make room and space for your new pastor. **First** is something to which I’ve already alluded – as you expect your new pastor, make room for **change**. How will you embrace what may be new and unfamiliar? Please do not find yourselves EVER saying those infamous Seven Last Words of the Church: **“We’ve never done it that way before!”**

Now when I was interim here, I never once heard anyone say to me those words. (Maybe you uttered them behind my back.) But I did hear often: “We **always** do it this way.” Yes, there are cherished traditions. Yes, there are policies, procedures, and ‘the accepted’ way of doing things. But when does our sense of preference, that on one level is nothing other than a sense of entitlement, get in the way of making room for God, making room for change and possibility?

The other important thing to note about change, beyond our often reluctance to accept it because it’s something we don’t want, is to realize that the **process of change takes much longer** than we think it should or it takes much longer than we allow it to take within a congregation. The **second-best** way to expect a new pastor is to realize the normal length of time for a pastor and congregation to feel settled is 3 years. It simply takes that long of shared life together to develop and deepen trust. So, let go of anxiety and worry of how things are unfolding and don’t judge prematurely. Think of how long it takes as we watch our children grow and develop. If you are in a committed relationship, reflect on how long it took for you to feel truly committed. As you expect your new pastor, don’t expect things to move too quickly. I am not trying to scare you but to remind you to be patient and let the transition take the time it needs.

**The third way** to expect your new pastor is **to absolutely let go of all comparisons** with pastors you have known before. Nothing undermines the relationship between pastor and people than always being held up to an impossible standard of another pastor whether fondly or not so kindly remembered! Every pastor, every interim has unique gifts and style, and God works through us differently. And because a number of former pastors and interims live in this greater Seacoast area, it is easy and tempting to invoke what we liked before or to wish for what we no longer have, or to worry because one pastorate didn’t last very long. Through God, you have been led to call this new pastor at this particular time, so trust the unique gifts and skills he brings and let him be himself. **DO NOT** hold him up to those who have gone before.

**The fourth way to expect a new pastor** is related to this ‘no comparisons’ rule, and to state it *positively*, **it is to practice hospitality**. Practice openness in the way you make room for your new pastor to be himself. To say it *baldly* – **be aware of your biases. As you get to know your new pastor, how will you welcome and receive him for who he is, and let him and his family be who they are?** Be mindful of the biases and unhealthy expectations we tend to have, many of which we might not even realize, in areas such as:

Who the spouse is and how she will or won’t be involved in the life of the congregation? You have called a pastor – not a ‘twofer’. (the story of what happened when John and I got married and each congregation’s expectation)

Consider the expectations and biases that might creep in about how the pastor’s children behave or what their priorities are. For example, what if one of them plays on a traveling sports team but your bias is that they should be in church on Sunday mornings?

What if you have opinions about how the pastor keeps his own Sabbath time away to recharge, or how he manages his schedule? Or why it is helpful for both the pastor and the

congregation for the pastor to have a sabbatical? There are an untold number of biases and judgments that church members hold (myself included) that while they are our *opinion*, they really are not our *business*! See your biases for what they are -judgments that are not necessarily valid or true.

Related to this whole conversation about comparisons and bias, I think it is helpful to point out that once your new pastor begins, for a period of time, he will be the only pastor/education person on staff. For the past two years, you have had 2 part time pastors who were able to be in two separate places at once and whose work added up to more than one fulltime person. Before that, you've had Pastor Rhodes and Megan, Pastor Opderbecke and interns... don't unconsciously or consciously expect your new pastor to bilocate – we clergy haven't learned how to do that! And do not compare his work to the work of two. Please be aware that this change in the amount of staff time can easily lead to unrealistic expectations. Which leads me to...

**The fifth way to expect your new pastor is to be mindful of exactly what you have called him to do.** Take a look for a moment at the piece from your church's Constitution that describes **The Pastor**. Some of it is very straightforward, but some of the items may surprise you – or be potential sources of conflict as any pastor you call seeks to follow this. For example, C9.03.a5 says the pastor shall: “speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world.” When your new pastor does this on issues that could be controversial, how will you support him? When he “with the council administers discipline” C9.03.b4 or “endeavors to increase the support given by the congregation to the ELCA...” C9.03.c4, will you accept it is part of what you've asked him to do, or will you take offense?

**A sixth way to expect your new pastor is to forget about taking a break!** The tendency in congregations when the new pastor begins is to sit back, breathe a sigh of relief and think, “We're in good hands; I can rest for a while.” Absolutely not! The most helpful thing for a new pastor is to step up and volunteer; make sure faith formation responsibilities are covered, positions on ministry teams or other volunteer opportunities. A new pastor is not license to step back from involvement!

**The final way I want to suggest that you expect your new pastor is to trust God and to pray.** Trust that God has been and will continue to guide and bless you as your ministry together unfolds. There will be much that is known and like always; there will also be surprise and adventure in the way God works through this new relationship. Pray that you will be open and make room; pray for the ministries of HTELC; pray for the members and friends; and pray for your new pastor and his family as they prepare to join you. And pray for the congregation he leaves. Pray and trust that God will be working within each of you to make the room that is needed. May your prayer be as the words from the Holden benediction: “And now, O God, as you have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown, so give us the faith to go forth with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ. Amen.”

*Rev. Diane L. Harvey, Dec. 3, 2017*