

IN THE MIDDLE:
A Comparison of the Limitations and Opportunities
of an Individualist Ministerial Stance
and a Relational Ministerial Stance

BY

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the limitations and opportunities of applying a social constructionist perspective to congregational ministry, using practices of appreciative inquiry and relational responsibility. Ministers often stand in the middle between the Academy and their congregations, drawing on their theological studies to impart wisdom as experts in a top-down fashion, aiming to inspire congregational life. An interdisciplinary dialogue between a social constructionist professional ministry and theologians creates ministerial leadership alternatives. Specifically, these alternatives take the form of dialogic theology constructed within the relationships between minister and congregation. Drawing on the relational understandings of social constructionist, as well as the author's own experience, this dissertation explores the implications of understanding and practicing ministry from a relational stance, thereby expanding ministry beyond traditional individualistic, subject-object leadership choices.

Samenvatting

Deze dissertatie gaat na wat de grenzen en mogelijkheden zijn van het toepassen van een Sociaal Constructionistisch perspectief op een congregationele parochie door middel van Appreciative Inquiry (AI) en Relational Responsibility (RR). Predikanten staan vaak in het midden tussen de Academie en hun congregaties, gebruik makend van hun theologische vorming om top down wijsheden uit te strooien als experts met de bedoeling het leven in de congregatie te inspireren. Echter, een indisciplinaire dialoog tussen de Sociaal Constructionistische professionele predikant en theologen schept ruimte voor een alternatieve vorm van leiderschap voor predikanten, namelijk via een dialogische theologie die tot stand komt in de relatie tussen predikant en de congregatie. Steunend op de relationele visie in het Sociaal Constructionisme, alsook op de eigen ervaring van de auteur zelf, onderzoekt deze dissertatie de implicaties van het begrijpen en toepassen van het predikantschap vanuit een relationele houding, daarmee het predikantschap verder brengend, d.w.z. verder dan de traditionele individualistische en op subject-object gebaseerde keuzes van leiderschap.

Dedication

In The Middle is dedicated to all those who minister with tireless faith, committed service and devotion. Our work makes a difference, as do our relationships with each other and the members of our communities. I thank you all for your presence, your big hearts, wise minds and your belief in a world transformed by love.

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A Comparison of the Limitations and Opportunities of an Individualist Ministerial Stance
and a Relational Ministerial Stance

Preface

In the Middle looks at how we might increase our awareness of the choices available to us, both professionally and personally, and the limitations and opportunities those choices offer. Our roles, our language, and our viewpoints are among the tools we can use to engage in a creative, intentional, and relational process – or not. *In the Middle* uses a monologic medium, this dissertation, to discuss the opportunities and limitations of engaging in dialogic language practices while developing an appreciative leadership style for professional ministry. This dissertation also communicates my personal developmental experience of what might be considered an abstract theoretical concept. It is ironic that my personal and professional location – somewhere in the middle between modern and postmodern, monologic and dialogic communication – necessitates the use of written language to affirm my participation in a dialogue that explores the residence of meaning in relational language practices. I have chosen to use words attached to a page to communicate the opportunities and limitations of a monologic language practice and explore the possibilities that lie beyond. To fully appreciate the significance of such an investigation and the personal process it initiated, I begin with this preface, which fully appreciates the possibilities of happiness and inner peace.

“Happiness and inner peace know nothing of fear or scarcity. Happiness and inner peace depend on our relationship to beauty, to gratitude, to love and to service for something greater than the self” (author unknown). I don’t remember where I first read those words, so I have no author to footnote. I have held onto their message for years, using them as a litmus paper of sorts for my own spiritual development. The quest for happiness and inner peace has directed most of

my life's comings and goings. Through the years, the hues of happiness and inner peace have shifted, intensifying or fading, reflecting back to me the progress of my maturing spirit. I do yoga. I read. Mindfulness comes and goes. I am sometimes present, sometimes not so present, always trying to *be*, not merely do. Up and down, approaching, dancing, not quite arriving at happiness or inner peace, yet touching it. I have never consistently practiced nor claimed as my spiritual practice any one of these interests and pursuits. At the same time, there has been an element of consistency in them all, some motivation spinning a thread that holds them together. I know I have been practicing something, because I have moved very close to inner peace and happiness. I may not know them, but I can see them from here.

More and more often these days, I feel an ease where before there had been dis-ease. More and more frequently I hear myself say, "I am happy," and I truly feel the happiness that has been unavailable to me most of my life. I now have enough experience of both inner peace and happiness to have my own true north, a compass setting of sorts that tells me I am getting closer to that which I want to hold onto or move toward.

Happiness and inner peace are words, concepts that we all may claim to understand; yet they represent something unique within each person. Inner peace and happiness can be appreciated as constructs, not conclusions, destinations for arrival, but stars by which we can navigate, discovering and understanding together what comes next. The word *construct* is one of several terms that are central to this dissertation. It will be defined and explored in depth in the body of the work. Other key terms used deliberately in the preface that will be defined in the dissertation include: expert, transformational dialogue, social construction, and positivism.

The U.S. and global economies are in the midst of major change. Somewhere *in the middle* of what the world has known and accepted as dependable, and whatever comes next, lies

possibility. In the fall of 2008, as economic drama was unfolding, I watched. I listened. I waited with the *experts*, hoping to be on the other side of this most uncomfortable middle. After the United States' Dow Jones Industrial Average first fell below 9000, I noticed more than the usual amount of dissonance between my mind, happiness and inner peace. I was feeling a bit uneasy. Driving to work, I found myself wondering about my own financial security. Where was my family financially? What about retirement, building our dream home, health insurance, cancer? I was sliding down a familiar slippery slope of what-ifs, attachments, and projections. Then, somewhere amid my fear-based projections of global financial Armageddon, I noticed I was breathing. This was quite by accident. I can claim no deliberate choice for that action. I did not think to myself, "Breathe! Now!" It just happened, and I noticed. I felt the deliciousness of one simple breath, a breath that initiated a whole chain of appreciative responses. I appreciated being alive. I appreciated the confusion that can surround money. I appreciated my illusions of financial planning. I appreciated having an able body, a bright mind, loving relationships. With one simple breath, I tumbled right out of my monkey mind of fear and uncertainty into joy. As I did so, I marveled at the diamond cut depths of awareness I had unleashed so simply. I laughed right out loud, filling the cab of my pick-up truck with chortles. In that moment, I realized that appreciation had become my spiritual practice. I saw that I experienced reality as something that grows out of my relationship with other people, with the world, and with the economy; this was in contrast to the reality I previously had constructed individually, through my mind and senses. I felt a sense of peace, a sense that perhaps the time had arrived for a transformative dialogue. Maybe, just maybe, a world-wide dialogue, inclusive of the many voices in a global economy, could now be opened and appreciated.

In ministry, the practice of appreciation – together with relational choices and self-reflection – has the potential to transform the experience of ministry from one that consists of a long list of lonely, energy-draining demands, expectations, achievements, and disappointments, into a relational process that is rewarding, renewing and energizing – for minister and congregation alike. As a minister, when I practice appreciation from a relational viewpoint, more choices become available to me. Practicing appreciation also gives me language for those moments in which I feel an urgent need to move out of the middle into clarity; these internal I-based needs become an invitation into self-reflective moments where I can pause, then look for the “we.” Appreciative awareness of those moments asks ministers and congregations to notice. Can we engage in a dialogue about our current predicaments, relationship, needs, and understandings? When we do, when all feel understood, included, and appreciated, new possibilities and a new sense of direction can emerge. We appreciate that there are no expectations, no shoulds, only a revealing relational acceptance of who or what is, as together we navigate our very human middles. This is the dialogue, an opening in shared ministry, that I hope to cultivate.

Practicing appreciation, like practicing a cello or yoga, is all about not quite getting it. We practice whatever it is we want to master, incorporating the feelings of frustration and ineptness that inspire more practice. We practice, acquiring more tools, more choice, more understanding of where it is we want to go as we find our own true north, which then may be challenged or changed when we discover the other, or others, whom we choose to join. It is perhaps the appreciation of this “not quite getting it” that to me is the greatest gift of social construction. This concept of a constructed, relational being is far from the self-contained bodily “I” that I feel so attached to and secure in. The more the concept of social construction becomes

integrated into my language practice and my appreciative practice, the easier it is to appreciate the other, free from my ownership of truth or rightness.

When I practice appreciation I have to choose, moment to moment, where to place my attention, how to be attentive to and appreciate what and who surrounds me. I have learned the gifts of “celebrating the other” (Sampson, 2008). From each action, in each self-reflective moment, my choice of appreciation leads me closer to a different understanding of choice, one that includes the other, that requires relationship. I alone do not choose how I want to engage with each of my moments. The choices available to us emerge out of the awareness of and acknowledgement of whomever or whatever we are in relationship with.

My lifelong tool chest of behaviors, reactions, responses and pursuits contains within it judgments, fear, anger, uncertainty, will, aggression, passivity, timidity, forgiveness and gratitude, among others – and now, appreciation. I have identities: mother, sister, minister, stranger, friend, colleague. Add these identities together with my relationships with others and with all the behaviors available to each identity, and you have many viewpoints from which we may discover many choices.

Intention involves moments of choice, moments when we can acknowledge our motivations, decide on a direction, and be relational or not. When we choose an inquisitive appreciation of a thoughtful or emotional connection, we step into relational intention. Before we decide upon a direction, there is an “I” that assumes either an individual identity with a particular viewpoint or a we with a different, relational viewpoint. The differences between the viewpoints from which we choose, the presence or not of an object, I the observer, or we, the relationship, are what will be explored by this dissertation. Practicing appreciation has helped me to understand the differences between being an “I” – an individual – and being a “we” who

sustain a relationship. Appreciation also has brought me face to face with the me who likes being the expert, likes being the observer of an object distinct from me, as well as with the me who likes being part of a we, part of a relationship where we discover something new that the expert or observer I would have missed or tried to direct. I saw that the I and the we behaved differently, each opening different professional and personal directions, choices and discoveries. The inquiry into and experiences of the limitations and the opportunities of these different voices makes up *In the Middle*. The I and the we voices will reveal and share their differences and how each was transformed by new understandings and deeper appreciation.

At the core of this dissertation is the invitation for a dialogue, which engages the perspectives of both an individualist and relational stance, with appreciation for both voices. The I is not the correct voice over the we voice. The relational viewpoint does not supercede the individualist viewpoint. A comparison of gratitude and appreciation helps to illustrate the opportunities, the both/and of the I and the we viewpoints. I can choose voice, gratitude, or appreciation. They differ. Appreciation is relational. I am in relationship with whatever it is that I am appreciating. We sit together and are patient, curious, expecting nothing more. Gratitude comes from the I context. I, the observer, view the object, the experience, believing or practicing the belief that good will come of whatever I am grateful for, if not today, then someday. Gratitude contains the potential for judgment, which I associate with a positivist viewpoint. It connotes a “this is good” or “that is bad” suggestion, which I, the individual, construct subjectively. When gratitude is beyond my emotional or cognitive reach, I take a 12-step approach, acting as if I were grateful. In this, my I is acting alone, well-intentioned perhaps, but still alone, observing the subject, deciding, anticipating and/or moving toward an outcome. There is no we involved.

The appreciative I understands a we. Whether it is a person, place, event, or thought, the we viewpoint appreciates that there is an other that is equal and present in this unfolding. Neither is attached to what comes next. Each participates in the moment. Appreciation requires no action, analysis, understanding, or qualification other than what is. I do not have to know or decide if this or that is good or bad. I just need to appreciate. It simply is. Once I open up to appreciation, I step into relationship, and the we begins. There is safety there, as all the parts acknowledge, “Hmmm. This is challenging. This is hot, cold, painful, scary, sweet, or _____.” Just fill in the blank with a word, and this word becomes the place to be together until something new emerges. From my initial choice of appreciation, I engage with whatever or whomever I am in relationship with, and we discover together where to go or what needs to come next.

Engaging with appreciation is different than engaging without it. Taking time to choose appreciation creates a pause, a comma between an emotional and a mindful connection. It creates a neutral space of curiosity where I may recognize and then let go of any need I have to be offensive or defensive, right or wrong, leader or follower. Appreciation offers me an alternative to all those viewpoints that I once believed were my only options. How freeing it feels to have an option that is *In the Middle*, between right and wrong, between resisting and complying. I can maintain an intentional self reflective distance as an observer or choose to be connected in relationship; they are two different viewpoints of the same experience, each offering unique pathways to different outcomes. We can all learn to navigate the distances between both viewpoints.

Appreciation offers me an alternative to, a remedy for, all those wooden nickels in my “woulda, shoulda, coulda” jar, a balm for the dis-ease of conflict, disagreement, and

disappointment. It brings me into a relational space where I am free of the I that is present in any war-and-peace-size conflicts or carnivore-versus-vegan-size conflicts. Appreciation is a relational tool available to me in the middle between conflict and resolution, doubt and discovery, fear and trust. Like a baker's hands, appreciation kneads together separate desires to move, resist, resolve, or aggress into a relationship. Practicing appreciation kneads the ingredients of relational interactions, shaping the too-wet, too-dry, too-soft or too-lumpy into an even elasticity, a pliable uniformity that can take new shape and rise to perfection. Much as Marie Rainier Rilke advised in *Letters to a Young Poet* (1934) appreciation encourages relationships to remain in the middle, in the questions and uncertainty until a direction or new understanding shifts the participants. All my uncertainty, questions and not knowing are ingredients in the bowl, in the relationships. I do not leave me out of the mix. I bring me in as one portion of the whole. When baking bread, the baker knows when the risen dough is ready to be removed from the bowl, punched down and kneaded for a second rising. She knows when the loaf is ready for baking. We are each rising. We are in process, somewhere *In the Middle* between the modern and the post modern, the individualist and the relational viewpoints, practicing.

Overview

We touch this strength, our power, who we are in the world, when we are most fully in touch with one another and with the world. There is no doubt in my mind that in so doing we are participants in ongoing incarnation- bringing God to life in the world. For God is nothing more than the eternally creative source of our relational power- our common strength; a God who's movement is to empower, bringing us into our own together; a God whose name in history is love. (Heyward, 1984)

Unitarian Universalism is a religious denomination constructed from two discrete liberal Protestant denominations. Rooted in the Enlightenment, that period in Western history when human reason came to be understood as paramount, Unitarianism is a faith tradition that historically has valued reason as a source of human understanding. It was during the Enlightenment that the concept of individualism took hold in human understanding and religious thought; this new perspective celebrated the mind of the individual and the reality of the individual as being one and the same. Historically, Unitarians have championed the rights of individuals to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The individualistic viewpoint characteristic of the Enlightenment will be explored in more depth in Chapters 1 and 2, particularly as a distinction between modern and postmodern, positivist and relational perspectives.

In contrast to Unitarianism, Universalism emerged more from the heart than the head. Believing in the concept of eternal salvation for all souls, Unitarians grounded their spiritual beliefs in the benevolent presence of a loving God. Their communities were relationally structured in the physical locations they inhabited. Universalists, for the most part, were farmers in rural localities who believed that each individual had a direct relationship with the divine.

Significantly, they also experienced the divine through their relationships with each other in community.

A Unitarian Universalist (UU) denominational identity grew out of years of conversation exploring what the two separate denominations held and appreciated in common, what each valued differently and what they would need to hold onto or let go of when they merged. The years following the 1961 merger of Unitarianism and Universalism revealed both the individualist and relational components that make up Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian Universalism is in the middle of these two understandings, appreciating and building faith from both a relationally oriented understanding of faith and an individually based appreciation of reason and intellect as a source of meaning.

This is significant. There is an opportunity for creativity that takes shape in any middle, the middles between people, and the middles between moments in time. This opportunity is enlarged with every particle of attention that is focused on the relationship and every moment of time contributed by those present in those relationships. Each opportunity is uniquely constructed from the multitude of beliefs, languages, personal qualities, and histories contributing to the relationships. The relationships bring forward all that is behind them as they offer their contribution to what can happen next. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I bring a uniquely constructed measure of ideas, behaviors, and ingredients to the moments and relationships I participate in, shifting, shaping, and affecting whatever new meaning will be discovered.

Unitarian Universalism is structurally organized as a relational faith. UUs come together in individual congregations, which covenant with each other to be in association. That association is constructed out of the principles and purposes defined, communicated, and shared

as a covenant among congregations. We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the following principles, quoted here from *Singing the Living Tradition* (Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 1993, preface).

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

Respect for the interdependent web of being of which we are a part.

Both reason and relationship add to the ongoing renewal of this covenant, as U.U seek to sustain an inclusive, relational relevance to our faith. There is no point of completion in the process, but rather ongoing conversation and relationship about what is important and what might come next.

It was my experience of appreciation for both individual reason and the relational aspects of social construction in Unitarian Universalist UU communities that inspired me to explore the promise and potential of Unitarian Universalism for encouraging life-enhancing conversations. Could Unitarian Universalists open relational discovery and opportunity within religious institutions? Does our historic relationship with both reason and relationships offer some dialogic experience that could engage those who believe differently to participate in new relationships and conversations?

In The Middle explores ministry as a leadership role. My personal history, my faith

tradition, the history of thought, and the roots of Protestant faith uniquely positioned me *In The Middle*. By re-imagining my understanding of words to see them as the building blocks that construct language, I began to comprehend the difference between a relational and an individualist viewpoint. Words are not what constructs language, but are more a product of language practices. Once I was able to make this tiny shift in my understanding of words, seeing them as being sourced in language, I began to appreciate language as the expression of relationships and their stories. I was then able to appreciate more fully language practices as relational, and as a source of meaning. In shifting my association with words to an appreciation of language, I placed myself on a continuum, moving from the individualistic use of words, which emerged from a Cartesian viewpoint, to a new relational comprehension constructed from language practices. This dissertation explores where and how the individualistic understanding of reason can intersect with the relational understanding of covenant to invite interfaith dialogue. My exploration and experience of dialogue as that place in the middle between reason and relationships has transformed my ministry. Could transformative dialogues also encourage UUs to merge their commitment to the rights of the individual with an equal appreciation of relationships as a source of human and institutional growth and perhaps in doing so reshape their understanding of the rights of the individual? Could such dialogues open new interfaith conversations about collaboration and connections across theological and ideological differences?

Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward, liberal theologian and retired Professor of Theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA, wrote:

We touch this strength, our power, who we are in the world, when we are most fully in touch with one another and with the world. That is the eternally creative source of our

relational power – our common strength – introducing a God, whose name in history is love. (1989, p. 11)

The implications of intentionally choosing a relational stance in which to ground my ministerial roles in my work with communal and individual spiritual maturation is the focus of *In The Middle*. Can a relational orientation offer alternative and generative ways of engaging human resources for social transformation?

In The Middle is an expression of my appreciation for our human middle – those places in between knowing and not knowing. It is my narrative assessment of my movement through a particular middle as a Unitarian Universalist minister in between a traditional settled ministry and a new understanding of what ministry can be. My middle brought me into relationship with new language and viewpoints, such as social construction, relational responsibility, and appreciative inquiry. The understandings these concepts reflect and the direction their applications took me has unfolded as my middling unfolded.

At the outset of my journey into the middle, I held an individualist viewpoint of myself as a minister wanting to complete a PhD. Attempting to perform as an individual in a ministry, while learning about social construction and appreciative inquiry, I moved into the middle between an individualist understanding of intention and cognition and an alternative viewpoint offered by social constructionists. I began to choose more relational practices. I was inspired to revisit the relational context of Heyward's theology, Martin Buber and Henry Wieman's creative interchange. Their explorations invited me into the relationship between spirituality and social construction in my own *middling* process. I began entering into relationships by asking more questions, offering fewer answers and having more appreciation and patience for the process of discovery.

From a place *In The Middle* – between the minister as expert; the modernist who observes, concludes, identifies, and directs, and the appreciative minister who is in relationship and dialogue with a congregation – I experienced a re-orientation of my role as a professional minister. I came to understand and appreciate the relationships in religious communities and among communities differently. *In The Middle* mines the potential riches for faith communities when they balance their appreciation of relationships within the community with their affirmation of the freedoms and rights of individuals. This balance can expand the choices for structuring and administering religious institutions. What new possibilities could be discovered if leadership in communities of faith were practiced in strengthening relationships, appreciating differences and in keeping dialogues open? New collaborations and shared resources could be initiated. The addition of a relational view to the choices available to those in leadership positions is a subtle but important distinction for religious institutions, one that relieves the pressure for ministers to know the answers and softens the polarities of right and wrong, good and evil.

The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations covenants to affirm and promote respect for the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. There's the rub, a dissonance that UUs experience strongly and which may also be relevant for other denominations. *We*, the member congregations, *covenant together* (i.e., in relationship to one another) to affirm and promote certain agreed-upon principles and purposes, the first and foremost of which recognizes and promotes the worth and dignity of the individual. At the same time that we covenant together, UU congregations exercise what is called congregational polity, which gives us the right to act as individual communities, affirming and upholding the rights of individuals. So within each community, as well as in our covenanted association, we have both a

relational viewpoint and an individual viewpoint; these sometimes compete with or override one another, instead of supporting and informing one another.

The different viewpoints and identities created by the covenantal relationship among UU congregations, the training and expectations of UU ministers as experts, and the dominance of the UU principle affirming the dignity and worth of every individual offers UUs a context for rich conversation about balancing choices and best practices.

Social constructionists teach that “all that is real and good ... emerges within our relationships and communities. Thus, values and beliefs are born out of relationships” (McNamee, 1998). Establishing an intersection between spirituality and social construction creates a context for UU communities to reexamine possible imbalances created by focusing exclusively on individual freedom and the power of reason while neglecting more relational choices. Allowing dominance of the first UU principle, respecting the dignity and worth of every individual, can leave ministers and congregations feeling ill-equipped to define or develop expectations or boundaries for acceptable behavior. Without a relational viewpoint or context to shape or balance it, our first principle becomes a defining principle – one that does not necessarily invite a spiritual practice that might expand the principle’s relevance. Individualism without an alternative viewpoint, can limit the resources available to ministers and members of the community when divisive conflict erupts. Without a relational understanding of expectations for how members behave, engage with one another, or hold and appreciate differences, there is no measure of accountability other than the right of the individual. As a result, any person who asserts power over another can be the one who defines the outcome of engagements, minimizing the chance of there being a transformative, relational moment that reveals new opportunities. Power and choice can go, by default, to the person who is most aggressive or manipulative or

who may have a personal rather than communal agenda. Choosing to equally affirm the inherent dignity and worth of relationships as well as individual rights offers an additional tool for constructing an effective response to institutional development. Might choosing to affirm the relationships in a community as well as the individuals in a community increase the potential for spiritual and institutional maturation?

In The Middle addresses Unitarian Universalism's historic grounding in individual freedom, an understanding of self and the power of reason, and examines the implications for leadership when a more relational style is adopted. Appreciating historic UU roots helped me to see and open to an opportunity for something new. What would a relational viewpoint of history, theology, congregational identity, community purpose, and values, rather than an individualistic viewpoint, look like? How might members and ministers of faith communities increase their choices for community conversation about policies and procedures and the efficacy of its ministry?

Sourcing responses and approaches to managing institutions solely in the context of individual freedom and reason without a relational context for the whole can limit the potential utilization of resources within the community. Without relational appreciation, individual fears can exert a disproportionate influence on the decision-making process. Relational responsibility, a way of holding one another in relationship, sustaining dialogue while managing differences, creates transformative dialogues. The transformative dialogue is a conversation that appreciates fears and anxiety and incorporates them in a way that allows new life-changing possibilities and understandings to emerge. Understanding, appreciating and integrating the powerful resistance or motivation that individuals may experience are essential to making the most out of being in the middle. Individual responses to community responsibilities and tasks acquire new potential

when viewed from a relational perspective. Each facet of administration brings added value to the relationships, minimizing the potential for omissions due to judgments or fear of disagreement and conflict. Awareness of and appreciation for all the communal and individual responses to leadership and management are essential to supporting the process of being in the middle and mining its full potential.

An appreciation for relationships among individuals, as well as for their individual talents, opinions, strengths and weaknesses, offers more opportunities for staying in the middle until that very middle reveals what comes next. Locating and prioritizing the relational aspects of community creates tools for managing the urge to avoid conflict, stay attached to the past, or push prematurely into the future, while encouraging appreciation for the richness of being in the middle and the transformative opportunity available there.

The intention of *In The Middle* is to compare and contrast the limitations and opportunities of an individualist stance and a relational stance. From within those two stances, I explore spirituality and community, creatively and appreciatively. I want to introduce appreciation as one tool in a faith community's toolbox for staying patiently in the middle of conflict, growth, emerging need, or change. Appreciation can help institutions have patience with and curiosity about the feelings of frustration, sense of stagnation and urgency to push for movement that arise in the middle. There may be transitional moments that are so uncomfortable that a community will force an early resolution or exit, in doing so moving its members and the institution out of the middle to a new place that is not necessarily the best place. Appreciating being in the middle allows time, patience, and relational discovery to open new opportunities for enriching and growing from the experience so that moving on becomes transformative. The

more actively participants appreciate being in their middle, in relationship to one another and to their middle, the more dynamic their dialogues and transformations can be.

I believe that how our middles are sourced, matters. Whether we see our lives as intersecting with a community as a group of individuals or that community as multiple relationships, or as a combination of both, influences the practices and wellbeing of the community. A community's understanding of and fulfillment of its mission and vision, and its spiritual maturation is different if its meaning is individually or relationally understood.

A very brief encounter with Appreciative Inquiry as a tool for organizational development inspired me to apply appreciative inquiry (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) and relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) in a select setting, as the minister of a particular Unitarian Universalist congregation. Viewing change within a relational context motivated me to ask if the unique combination of church, faith, and change created an opportunity to develop spiritual maturation through appreciating change. My understanding of change shifted in the process, leading me to an appreciation of the middles that occur after a need, loss or awareness is acknowledged and before a change takes place. Social construction's "communal construction of the real and the good" (Gergen, 1999) suggests that what we know and experience are constructed within relationships. Nothing that I "am" came to me in isolation. From conception, this Elaine Beth Peresluha entity, this "I" has been more than a body encased in skin, thinking and perceiving. "I" was and am an ongoing construction of history and relationships, between my parents, within a family, within a community, within a human story. I arrive at this moment in time with all the relationships that preceded this moment, speaking, learning acting choosing with the tools and understandings constructed by my relationships with people, places and things. Social constructionists question the existence of any "self" or

“reality” that is distinct or separate from all the relationships, conversations, and experiences that have preceded the present moment. A constructionist viewpoint understands all that we are, have been or will be as an integrated, interconnected whole of time, place and relationships.

After being introduced to social construction, my awareness of ministry began to shift. I began to observe and document the congregation I served for seven years as a way of understanding and appreciating change sourced in relationships. I tried to move my choices of behaviors away from those of an expert who observes and documents the other, that is the leadership choices of a positivist (the term *positivist* will be defined in following chapters), and toward behaviors based in a more relational understanding of my choices and professional responsibilities. The ways in which I was successful, or not, guided me to a deep appreciation of the unique possibilities of being in the middle, and of the potential of an appreciative leadership style. I stood in the middle of change, in the middle of relationships, in the middle of my own learning and understanding – until I and my congregants moved into a new place of shared ministry.

The process in which minister and congregation and minister and community leaders engaged revealed our strengths and weaknesses as we sought to dialogue, prioritize relationships, and gain an understanding of a *We* as contrasted to a collective of *I*'s. I, along with all the other *I*'s, had to reflect on *my* agenda versus *our* relationships. This reflection motivated quantum leaps in my spiritual maturation. The institutional development and spiritual maturity of the religious communities I served were affected in direct proportion to my appreciation of the impact of our relationships on their development.

Originally, I chose a very positivist behavior, intending to combine a process of learning, observing, testing and documenting to arrive at a conclusion that would have wide applicability.

I decided. I chose. I wanted to make constructionist dialogue relevant, understandable, and available to any community experiencing change, not only to congregations. As a minister, I wanted to share social construction and its relational framework with other ministers and congregations. By understanding and practicing relational dialogues and by being relationally responsible, *I* believed Unitarian Universalist congregations could more effectively model what it is we say we value. *I* believed an appreciative, relational practice could inspire UU congregations to fulfill our vision to be engaged, effective, principled agents of social change. All the *I*'s seem so apparent now as I write them. They are my reminders of how transformations, middles, begin.

In The Middle opens a conversation about applying social construction theory, through the use of appreciative inquiry tools, dialogue, and relational responsibility, to imagine a spiritual practice of appreciation. For it was my experience with two congregations, both of whom were managing their middles, that applying an appreciative process enhanced the maturation of spirituality and expanded the honesty and clarity of those congregations. Beginning with the UU Society of Bangor and moving on to the UU Fellowship of Wilmington, I improved my ability to be a relational, appreciative presence. The differences in my abilities, the differences in choices, outcomes, and conversations are notable in each community's ability to remain present in the tensions created by difference and to appreciate their unique identities and ministries. In both congregations we acknowledged appreciation as a first and important step towards transformation. For each congregation and in each shared ministry, appreciation was the beginning of a practice that led to something new.

Somewhere in between where we have been and where we are going, there is an opportunity for a new realization or creation. In the relationship between what is and what can

be lies our middle. The middle is fertile territory where anything can be imagined or discovered. When two or more people engage in a conversation in which they intentionally leave space between their differing understandings and beliefs and intentionally appreciate and respect the other, something new can emerge, something neither individual could have discovered on his or her own. Both come away changed by the dialogue.

My intention to remain in the middle for as long as was necessary transformed my understanding of religious community and ministry. The dialogues between me, the minister, and the congregations I served allowed us each to come through the middle, moving from what we had believed into a new understanding of our reality and the intention to move towards new place. My hope is that people of faith will practice an appreciative approach to mission and shared ministry that encourages deepening faith through dialogues; that opens richer relationships between members of congregations and between diverse communities of faith.

Chapter 1

A Monological Introduction to Language and Meaning Constructed Through Dialogical Communication

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things come into being through him and without him not one thing came into being...And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son. (John 1: 1-3, 14-15; Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version)

This verse, quoted from a Christian Bible, can be understood as words, quoted from a book, a collection of printed symbols that represent a literal story, history, reality and truth. There's another way of understanding the words in this verse – as a particular language practice, one that sources its meaning in the relationships of the writers, their history, and context, to those reading. Whether the reader believes the Bible as an historical document or a sacred, divinely inspired text will affect the meaning the reader derives from the words of this well-known verse. Moreover, the relationship that readers have with one another, with religion, and/or with the Bible will shift the language they use to communicate the intents of or response to the Bible. The distinction between two understandings of language, how and what it communicates, and the associated implications are central to this paper's examination of two approaches to ministry. How we understand language can reflect an individualist (or positivist) stance or a relational (or social constructionist) stance. Do we extract meaning from what we read, that is from the printed story; from our beliefs about it; or from our relationship with the story and with others who read and write using the same language? Chapter 1 provides an overview of the development over the last few centuries in western understanding of how language works and

how we make meaning, addressing the implications of this shift for the two approaches to ministry that are the subject of this dissertation.

Years ago, shortly after being ordained, I welcomed old friends for a visit. Kathy, Sarah and Suzanne and I had known each other since sixth grade. We have shared grade school, puberty, first loves, college adventures, marriages, birthing babies, divorces, deaths and all that we have gone through in the last 40-plus years. One day while we were on a walk together, Kathy was expressing strong feelings about a family situation when she started to use a four-letter word. Suddenly she stopped, mid-word, looked at me and said, "I'm sorry!" Then she substituted another word. I looked at her in disbelief! "Kathy! You are apologizing to me for swearing? Since when?" She responded, "Since you put that Rev. in front of your name. I don't know, I guess I feel . . . well, God, Elaine! I'm Catholic! I can't swear in front of you now!" Kathy's relationship with me changed upon my ordination when her perception of me as friend and peer shifted. The shift was grounded in her relationship with her community of faith, Catholicism, which communicates a particular "truth" about ordination. When her perception of my identity changed, our relationship changed and so did the language she was comfortable using.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." I started thinking about the power that words wield. I began noticing my own choice of words and the results of my choices. A journey began, as I moved away from using spoken words as a means of sending and receiving communication, that is *monologic* communication, and toward choices of language that communicated the opportunity and discovery that relationships inspire, or *dialogic* communication.

On this journey, I have joined with others who are engaged in a making paradigm shift.

There are others who are engaged in conversations about the limitations and opportunities of a predominantly western understanding of a self, housed in skin and bones as the source of truth, and reality. The conversations explore the possibilities of detaching from that self's ownership of power, reason-making and meaning-making, and moving to a relational understanding of constructing reality. This relational perspective rejects the notion of a dominant truth, instead sourcing reality and meaning in the relationships amongst and between people. We can appreciate that our 21st century experiences reside in the middle, somewhere between Rene Descartes (1644); Martin Buber (1926); and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) and whatever comes next. This movement from a first person I perspective, a self defined by individual thought, toward an other-centered, relational dialogic we perspective is a process that is unfolding in our time. We are in the middle of this journey. It was Rene Descartes' understanding of *cogito, ergo sum* that ushered in a new era in philosophy, breaking with the traditional Scholastic-Aristotelian concept of the human being. Descartes opened up a centuries-long adoption of a "truth", our belief in the individualistic power of our minds and bodies, an understanding of existence, meaning and reason that secured human development. He identified and amplified the individual authority of the human being, now understood as a separate, thinking, creation encased in a body which is defined by having doubts, while it understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and perceives through its senses (1637). Then Descartes linked this human existence to his interpretation of thought and reason.

In the years since, many voices have engaged in the conversations that further developed our understanding of what makes us real, by deconstructing human understandings and experiences of power, identity, truth and meaning. The participants in this dialogue are moving on from the Enlightenment, from Descartes and from modernity. The conversations have taken

the word, reality, from a belief in the existence of absolutes into a constructionist conversation, appreciating the present as a continuum along which lie fluid understandings and experiences of power, identity, truth and meaning. We are still in transition. John Searle wrote, “I think that realism and a correspondence conception are essential presuppositions of any sane philosophy, not to mention of any science” (1995, p. xiii). He is expressing our human need to have something that grounds us, something real without which we would be as substance-less as smoke and ash. In the same generation of the conversation, Ken Gergen writes, “In the traditional view, language is a reflection of the world – a picture or map of events and objects. This view is wedded to the assumption that truth can be carried by language and that some language (and chiefly those that are scientific) are closer to the truth than others” (1999, p. 34). Confirming his comfort with not having the real something that Searle is insistent upon. Searle and Gergen mark the edges of our ongoing conversation, the continuum.

We are participants in an ongoing conversation, continuously building upon the history, relationships, and knowledge that precede this moment. We are continuously recreating the meaning of considerations in the continuation of a dialogue among and across academic and professional disciplines. It’s a huge shift. Gergen observed that “...as many see it, we are perhaps witnessing a shift in cultural beliefs that is equal in significance to movement from the Dark Ages of Western history to the Enlightenment” (1999, p. 4).

Rooted in the works of Peter Berger, Thomas Luckman (1966) and Thomas Kuhn (1962), each of whom built their understandings upon the insights of numerous philosophers preceding them, the contemporary paradigm shift that Gergen refers to moves us away from our attachment to a self who mindfully manages an outcome or goal, into the discovery and appreciation of the process of relational communication through participation in dialogue, discourse, and social

interaction. We are moving away from the dominance of one group which defines the truth of an empirical reality toward an appreciation that no one group holds the “answer” or wields dominance over another. Where before words were understood as representing accumulated knowledge and the source of meaning and language, now relational communication becomes the source of what is real and meaningful. (McNamee, S. and Gergen, K. 1998). Culture, language, and/or education can locate a person and their associated viewpoint socially, without making them less than or more than any other. When more viewpoints are engaged in any process, or conversation, the process changes. New meaning can be discovered.

The distance between individualism and social construction, between a positivist and a relational orientation is vast, daunting. We can get there from here if rather than seeing the shift as a distance or chasm to be leapt, we appreciate the shift as a process in which we choose to participate. We do not have to leap immediately from an internal orientation of a self that looks out to a relational understanding of ongoing creation. We can choose to participate in the reorienting process, starting from where we are and moving toward that which we can appreciate and understand. Somewhere on a continuum between the dominant western discourse, a received view of science and a relational constructionist thought style, we each experience what is real to us and gives shape to our lives. This is not a distance to be covered with one exertion of energy, one action, or intention. Rather, we step into decades of dialogue at a particular point in time and process. We remain curious, generous in our listening and regenerative in our conversations. The shift of a social paradigm reflects a level of participation and commitment to a process, rather than absolutes, rights or wrongs. A process involving intention, non-attachment, appreciation, and learning in relationship contributes diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives that are to be appreciated and celebrated. The process begins with

allowing the possibility of something to open which is other than a self that is separate from all other selves. Once open to this possibility, relationships begin to take on a new position in meaning-making. Relationships influence understanding as we live life with a more intentional awareness of the other. The distance then shifts from an either-or discussion to a both-and dialogue. The difference is that either-or discussion uses persuasion with the intent of convincing while both-and dialogue is the sharing of multiple perspectives with the intention of learning. In dialogue, an appreciation of how reality is constructed expands through a more self-reflective, authentic, and appreciative celebration of the other. As McNamee and Gergen wrote, “Personal identity, an awareness of who ‘I’ am, emerges within relationships and our negotiations, language with those relationships” (1998). Martin Buber wrote, “Primary words do not signify things, they intimate relations. Primary words do not describe something that may exist independently of them but being spoken they bring about existence” (1958).

Social construction is considered a postmodern approach to understanding. It is postmodern because it is a frame of reference that moves beyond modernity’s structuring of reality as derived from the reason and experience of the individual. Modernists focus on each individual and his or her consciousness, a self contained in an individual body, as the source of reality. This individual consciousness is understood to be an interpretation of what is taken in through the senses and processed by the mind, thereby producing a definition of reality. Social construction views reality as created in the relationships between people and their environment.

In the preface to his book *Celebrating the Other*, Edward Sampson stated, “Were a genuinely dialogic view, and the lives built upon it, in force, business as usual could not be carried on” (1993). He shared his concern for the depth to which our western understanding of human history and our construction of the present moment are based on the dominance of

individual reason and choice. This is the modernist viewpoint. The paradigm shift that I believe we are in the middle of is the shift from this modernist viewpoint to a postmodern viewpoint. This is a shift away from the monological use of self-accumulated, mind-processed words to communicate meaning and toward the appreciation of dialogic language practices that communicate meaning which is sourced and experienced in relationships. To the modernist, my words convey or represent my reality. To the constructionist, language encompasses more than words as it evolves within relationships, culture, and environments. It is language that creates reality. This is a significant shift in the understanding of language. Does language *represent* reality or does it *construct* reality? In the constructionist stance, language is the result of our engagement with others; therefore, our understanding of the world and ourselves, of reality, is always relational.

In the English language, we often use the three words “I love you.” The meaning of those three words is derived from the relationship between the speaker and whatever or whomever the speaker loves. If the words “I love you” are scribbled on a note and passed between two sixth graders on the playground, it represents one language practice. If a parent coos “I love you” to a baby on the changing table or out on the grasses of a prairie, they construct another reality. When expressed by one person to another in the heat of sexual passion, another language practice is constructed. In sum, the words “I love you” communicate the reality and understanding that is constructed in the relationships of people to one another and to their environment. Culture, history, genealogy, place, and time all contribute to the conversation, as does the relationship that constructs the intention and the meaning of the language practice. Language and meaning are in a constructive relationship, continually and organically informing and redefining one another. As John Shotter wrote in *Conversational Realities: Constructing*

Life Through Language, “[t]he unique meaning for those involved will be apparent in the flow of activity in which it appears...” The words, ‘I love you’ will then draw their power to change the whole character of the future flow of essential conversational activity between the partners – very little from the words themselves. The declaration of love works to create a whole new kind of relationship with the other. “...Where from within that new kind of relationship a new kind of reality becomes apparent” (2002, p. 3) The language I use in this dissertation carries forward more than 40 years of dialogue among scholars, philosophers, teachers, clinicians and practitioners, many of whom are excited about an other-centered way of understanding meaning-making and the construction of what is real. The term *social construction* is credited most often to Berger (1969) or just as often to Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966). Many other individuals from diverse disciplines have integrated, deconstructed and honed the tenants of social construction, bending, shifting, adapting and developing its stance for consideration in a variety of disciplinary settings, supporting a variety of interdisciplinary relationships. The social construction viewpoint is flexible since non-attachment to any viewpoint or ownership of reality is foundational. While this non-attachment may appear to weaken the credibility of the concepts communicated, in transformative dialogue it is counterproductive to claim rightness or wrongness, truth or fallacy; it is also counterproductive to *make a point*. We are so accustomed to winning and losing, being right or convincing others, that the motivation to sustain dialogue can be interpreted as not convincing, not right or not true.

In the Middle is about staying in relationship, letting go of rightness, and the comfort of authority generally assumed in leadership. It is about building from knowing to not knowing, with questions and responses, as power is redistributed and the partners in construction listen and respond, then listen and respond again and again, discarding, adding and processing what is

given and received. Rather than owning a modernist, self-centered truth, we all construct a postmodern, other-centered viewpoint. As we do so, we anticipate new possibilities for communicating and strengthening relationships, modifying assertions of power, meaning, and reality. As we move more deeply into the dialogue that constructs meaning and reality in relationship, there is an opportunity for newness around that which we may previously have considered fixed in time and place. Relational communication moves in a spiral rather than a linear direction, touching upon the edges of the relationship, moving and expanding from a center that nurtures participants and the relationship. Something new emerges from that place in the center, a place where it may be difficult to find language because relationship precedes the language available to express it.

My commitment to relationship, rather than to an idea or a reality grounded in self-centeredness, has strengthened as my motivation has expanded from an individualist self-centered one to a relationally other-identified motivation. What I seek is relationship with others willing to continue to discover and construct new meaning in a continuous, inclusive, and ever-deepening process. What I have found in the middle is the motivation to practice constructionist, other-centered language. I have developed an appreciation of communication as felt and perceived through relational connection rather than through thought alone. From a sense of physical softness that invites, appreciates and integrates what is given and received, I am able to respond with something wholly new that acknowledges and builds upon what has been offered and received. The heart, in partnership with the senses and mind, becomes the source of language practice.

The way humans relate to each other, to our environment, the work we do and the lives we lead is constructed from the past, carried into the present and moved into a future. Social

workers, therapists, academics, and social scientists have been engaged in a dialogue about meaning-making and constructing reality. They have all participated in the construction of power and in the development of our human abilities to communicate, participate in, and understand “progress.” Language shared in a dialogue moves beyond a modernist monologic structure, where each individual is sending or receiving a unique set of words with the hope of persuading or engaging the other. A monologue does not build upon interaction in the same way that a relational dialogue does. The meaning of the word *dialogue* itself shifts, changes, and evolves as dialogues are practiced. There is no set definition or particular meaning that exists in time and space, outside the conversations, concepts and understandings that have been shared for decades. Questions about what dialogue is and is not are still being discussed. Our understanding of what makes a dialogue different from a monologue changes as people understand more and more about what enriches or limits the creativity and learning in a relational experience. Perhaps the most important characteristic shared by social construction, dialogue and relational responsibility is that they behave like sub-atomic particles in that they are always present, always in motion and always changing; we cannot to locate them by sight, but we can know where they have been by the tracks they leave behind.

In this dissertation I use a language practice that has developed among social constructionists. I use terms such as dialogue, construction, relational responsibility and transformative dialogues as they are used in constructionist understandings, dialogues, intentions and experiences. A parallel is found in the medical language used by doctors or structural language used by engineers; they are languages used to construct and communicate meaning within like-focused, similarly educated and relationally connected communities. Language, which encompasses so much more than words, encourages shared meanings that are generated

in particular settings. Language and the meaning it creates are continually in process, while at the same time shared conveniently among peers.

Social construction, dialogue, and the relational responsibility acknowledged in their understandings represent a process that we engage in, not a destination to which we arrive. The words support each other, existing as a language practice that links them in a triad of understanding which constructs a process one can choose to engage in. Engaging in the process affirms the viewpoint that we construct meaning together through our relationships and communicate that meaning through language. *In The Middle* invites the participation of religious professionals and people of faith in a dialogue about the construction of faith, spirituality, and human maturation, a dialogue with the potential to enlarge the meaning and relevance of faith communities. The process asks us to respect one another, celebrate the other's perspective, be vulnerable to being changed, and let go of the safety or power one might have enjoyed as an individual who believed that she or he had ownership of what was real and either good or bad. Social construction appreciates that there is no one formula or equation that creates meaning. Participating in dialogue is more about process than about the exchange of words. Dialogue opens a process – not to change something but to create something together, where all appreciate the potential in coming away changed.

A medical doctor told me recently how his professional title has affected his experience. He said that when he telephoned other doctors on professional business and introduced himself as *Mr.* rather than *Dr.*, his call would be put on hold or referred to someone else. But when he introduced himself as *Dr.*, he was put through promptly to the colleague he was calling. Relational respect, an awareness of shared understanding and an appreciation of time are communicated efficiently and effectively simply by using the word “doctor.”

Human beings are language-based. As individuals, we use words to communicate to one another. We can choose to give words the power to shift our perception and evoke strong mental and emotional responses. When we are individually oriented in our language practice, the meaning of words can also be subjective. We may each accept, reject, or modify the meaning of words through our own understanding and interpretation of our life experiences. From this viewpoint, words are symbols for the common realities of life we want to communicate. We each have experiences and interpretations that create our unique understanding of words. Our unique and individual understandings are all modifications of the original intent of a word. We interpret, expand, and contract the meaning a word originally symbolized.

In a relational orientation, our ability to share a common experience or communicate meaning depends upon shared understandings and perceptions that are communicated by language; communication is an experience that includes more than the sending and receiving of words. For the reader of *In the Middle* to appreciate the meaning I am trying to convey, a relationship must develop between reader, writer and the ideas and experiences being shared. To develop the relationship, it is important for me to define the terms I use to express a particular viewpoint and understanding and to initiate a dialogue with my readers.

Language I will use throughout *In the Middle* includes the following:

Relational responsibility. This term gathers together all the meaning that is communicated and potentially connects or separates people when they relate to one another intentionally. Relational responsibility refers to words spoken, body language, and the intention to be respectful, appreciative and in relationship with another person or group – without taking ownership of what is “right” and or, inversely, what is wrong or bad. Being relationally

responsible is intentionally placing the importance of the relationship with another person or group in front of any other motivation.

Appreciative inquiry (AI). This term describes a characteristic form of asking questions and engaging in conversation. When used in this document, appreciative inquiry refers specifically to the process developed by David Cooperrider and expanded by associates in the Taos Institute for a variety of disciplines (2008). As an organizational development tool, appreciative inquiry utilizes the relational viewpoint of social construction to gather as many people who are part of a system together as possible and to inspire their participation with appreciation. The process affirms what works well in the organization and builds upon generous listening in order to discover sustaining core values within the organization or system. The process utilizes relational opportunities as viewed by social constructionist that build upon what is revealed in an intimate and appreciative process of asking questions in a dyad interview process. AI when referred to in this document is referring to such a process as used in a congregational setting.

Transformative dialogue. Whenever we focus our attention and intention on being relational, there is the potential for a transformative dialogue. A transformative dialogue contains an ah-ha moment or moments. When we engage with another person or group of persons and come away more aware of and appreciative of the other, when we are changed in a way that makes us a more appreciative person, we have experienced a transformative dialogue. The following example illustrates.

Recently at a church board of trustees meeting, the conversation wound its way to an ongoing controversy in the community – whether or not to make a monetary contribution to the fellowship a requirement for membership. A few members felt strongly that membership should

require a financial commitment. An equal number felt strongly that a church should not require a financial contribution of its members. As we talked, I noticed Don shaking his head; he was obviously disturbed by the Board's leaning in the direction of making a financial pledge a requirement for membership. To find out what motivated Don's attachment to not requiring a financial contribution, I initiated a relationally responsible conversation, an appreciative inquiry. I said, "Don, you obviously feel very strongly. Can you help me understand how you came to believe so strongly that a church should not require anyone to give money in order to be a member?" Don hesitated only a moment before telling us about his mother. She was a woman without much money, and the thing that gave meaning and respect to her life was membership in her church. When she became very ill, shortly before her death, she would not have received the same care and respect, and eventual funeral, had she not been a member of that church. Though she did not have the money to buy the support of her church, she was treated as equal in all respects to those members who did give money. By the time Don finished his story he had tears in his eyes. There was a hushed silence in the room as we realized the depth and personal nature of his conviction and beliefs. He held a particular viewpoint based on his experience, and we got it, emotionally and cognitively: Don did not want anyone to be excluded from our fellowship because of money. In the future, any discussions and decisions about money and membership would need to respect and include Don's understanding and experience. The nature of that discussion – the silence, the appreciation, the feeling in that room, and the shift in the Board's intentions – epitomize transformative dialogue.

Words can intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate power and authority, negative or positive images, misconceptions or accuracy of meaning. Words carry with them a story, which is then passed on through the use of those word. Just as barnacles cling to the underside of a

boat, history, culture, deeds, intent and relationships stick to words; sometimes we pass them on without intention or knowing. We may not completely comprehend what another person hears when we utter a word. We do not always know the whole story of a word we use to communicate. Power, authority, credibility and a perception of truth become attached to words, though these attributes may or may not be accurate or validated by all. Understanding the relationships words represent, the symbolism that is attributed to them, as well as their roots and original meanings can move us beyond our individual thought-oriented awareness of words into language communication with a more relational, appreciative orientation. Reclaiming and reframing words as components of language, components in an ongoing process, and understanding their meaning-making in relationships can help us beyond individualism and our experiences of separateness.

I heard recently that at a local non-denominational church tension had been created because every year a certain member closes an annual congregational letter with the words, "Yours in Christ's service." Some people in the church were uncomfortable with the closing. The word *Christ* evokes strong feelings and images. It is the term that deifies Jesus Ben Joseph of Nazareth. It elevates him from the human plane, evoking images of crucifixion and resurrection, salvation and the redemptive nature of his death. For those who have a strong sense of themselves as Christians, the word "Christ" affirms their faith. To those who have rejected the deifying and redemptive images, but who may find depth in Jesus' teachings, the word Christ can be as grating as fingernails on a blackboard. A word becomes divisive, thereby distorting the healing message of love that Jesus offered. Using the name of the man, *Jesus*, without the word Christ attached to it, can provide a common thread for the engagement of Christian and non-Christian alike. Those who respect his lessons of love and justice will feel included along with

those who feel redeemed by his death. By sharing equally the words of all prophets and sages, past and present, Christian and non-Christian can expand their understandings.

Years ago, an issue of the Unitarian Universalist journal *UU World* included a commentary by a woman who had chosen not to sing with the choir at the Unitarian Universalist Association's most-recent annual national convention, General Assembly, or GA. As a feminist and an atheist, Valerie White said she felt offended by the words in several hymns that had been selected. The commentary articulated her very clear and intentionally respectfully perspective. The hymnbook commission had given much time and thought to removing references to darkness as evil and to adding feminine images of the divine in order to promote inclusion and raise consciousness about sexism and racism. But, White wrote, the choice of theistic hymns, anthems and readings alienated humanists, while a choice of liturgical materials that did not mention God would have offended no one. She wrote:

If we must use God-talk in order to make the theists comfortable, then we should also sing Dan Barker's "Friendly Neighborhood Atheist," Mother Jone's "Pie in the Sky" or Tom Lehrer's "Vatican Rag." Now, I wouldn't blame theists for being outraged if we did. But they should also understand my outrage when we sing Godly hymns or bow our heads in godly prayer. In fact, there's no need for anyone to be outraged. We can make a joyful noise, join our hearts and our minds in meditation, read responsively from the wealth of music and liturgy that comports with those principles we hold in common and exclude no one. And then I'll get to sing at GA. (citation pending)

How do we reconcile such differences in opinion and perspective? How do we find a place in the middle that is respectful, appreciative and not so weakly constructed that it carries no meaning for anyone? That is one of the challenges for Unitarian Universalists who attempt,

intentionally, to be in relationship with a wide variety of understandings and beliefs that have the potential to exclude or demean one another.

The root of the word religion, *religare*, means to bind together. It means to overcome separation from each other, from other species, from God; to overcome separation from goodness, from a moral life, and from wholeness and from being. With our behaviors and language practices, in the small acts of love and courage behind words, separateness really is overcome.

Sociologists say that North Americans are the loneliest people in the world. Our first defense against loneliness is hard work, followed by football and rock concerts. We retreat into television, on average, for seven hours a day – a scary statistic. Occasionally some venture out to a church on a Sunday morning to see if there is something different, something that may actually fill a spiritual void and alleviate the loneliness that drives us to addictive and destructive choices. We do not venture out on Sunday mornings to do more work, or for a cup of coffee and conversation. We come to church on Sunday mornings because we long for community, for relationships that will move us along in the journey from individualist to relational lives; we long for a place to belong, for a sense of extended family, for a spiritual home for “we.” We come searching for some connection that will sustain us through the chaos and challenges of the week ahead. We want to know there is something more to life than feeling overwhelmed, alone.

We also come to church to *worship*, a word that is derived from the old English *worthship*, which means celebrating that which is of worth. Worship is both a transitive and intransitive verb. It does not need to take an object. So we do not necessarily come to church to worship an object or a word. We come to celebrate the other, to celebrate life, its joys and its sorrows. We come to bind together that which separates us. As Unitarian Universalists, we are

committed to fostering a critical understanding and an openness of soul. In our tradition, religious community is understood to be an educating community, where education means to lead forth. *Educo*, to educate, means to lead out of ignorance, to lead out of bondage, to lead out of isolation, to lead into the light, not with the likes of Moses at the helm, but through a caring community whose members educate themselves and each other, listening and learning, not only with the mind, but also with their hearts.

Words are sacred – though not because we fall down and worship them, giving them power and authority over our hearts and minds. Words are sacred because our utterances have consequences. A conversation rooted in a relational appreciation of words, one that recognizes linguistic honor, sensitivity to different experiences, the inclusion of race, culture, faith and gender, can become a transformative dialogue, opening up new possibilities of change within the individuals or community sharing words. Henry Nelson Wieman calls this a “creative interchange” (1982). For Carter Heyward, it is God (1989).

When I began this project, I intended to focus my learning on the phenomenon of change. As I moved through my learning and my practice of appreciation, I learned how limited, exclusive and singular my own understanding of change was. I had a preconceived understanding of change and people’s responses to change. This moved me in a particular direction as I was thinking, observing and interpreting the behaviors of members in the UU Society of Bangor. I was unable to behave appreciatively of their choices, their language, and their communication, because I was attached to a meaning of change that directed my actions and behaviors. It was only when I could modify my definition and use of the word change that I could be more appreciative and responsible in my relationships. Change was just one of the

words I had to loosen my grip on; I had to release any ownership I felt of meaning or experience before I could learn and grow as a minister, as a person.

Language matters. Whether in a church, a business or a family, language practices carry with them much more than we see or hear. We need to be accountable for the language we choose, the communications we hear, our language of origin and the cultural understandings we carry forward if we are to remain in relationship with those with whom we are in conversation. The comparison of language choices in the following pages demonstrates that a relational process of appreciation can help us learn to celebrate the other as we let go of an individualist viewpoint and of the traditional western understanding of conviction and the power to change the other.

Chapter 2

Learning What Being Relational Really Entails

Gather 100 children between the ages of 10 and 18. Put them in a room together without any assignment or instructions beyond, “Talk with one another.” Encourage their confidence to communicate with cheerful colors, a few chairs easily moved about and soft lighting. Then watch. Without interfering, watch. The room will begin to change in size and structure as the youth discover one another, talking and rearranging themselves. The group will take shape by size and age, style of dress and interest. A pink and orange haired group delight in comparing one another while another group bonds with talk about last night’s game and the state championship. Some will gather to share their excitement over the mock trial and a trip to Washington, DC. Music and head banging will draw another portion of the mix together. In a matter of minutes the room is transformed into a giggling, bubbling mass of energy creating itself through conversation. This is social construction, the creation of meaning and purpose through language and relationships that connect a variety of viewpoints and voices. The language of that youthful space communicated with by so more than verbal expressions. What that took place in that room brought births and stories, families and classrooms, music and dance together with the colors of playfulness and affection. The context for their gathering invited communication and relationship, constructing reality for those present, creating community, and making meaning.

“An individualist-positivist belief about the world and self are historical and culturally contingent” (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming).

As these young people grow, they will remember that relational weekend. It will give them an alternative frame of reference for their lives. They will also be moving through a

society dominated by an individualistic stance and its expectations for them. They will have their bodies and they will have their relationships as they incorporate or reject the many ways in which their socialization tries to shape their understanding of what is real in this world. The relationships they participate in, schools, peers, families, physical and economic locations, social expectations, all will contribute, intentionally and unintentionally, to the construction of their reality, their understanding of what holds meaning, their language practices. Many will seek zones of comfort, acknowledging only realities that provide them reassurances, and familiarity. They will prefer an environment that they can understand and manage. Others may experiment. They will navigate in and out of their self-identified, bodily shaped reality and their relationships as sources of meaning making. Their generation is growing and developing in a world somewhere in between the traditional western viewpoint of individualism and the relational understanding of meaning-making.

From Individualism and Realism to Social Construction

Most adult human beings experience comfort inside our skin. Skin reassures when we perceive that it confirms where we stop and someone else begins. We are comfortable knowing what is expected of us, how we can negotiate our needs, and how we can achieve competence, confidence, and belonging. We really like knowing that there is a reality that exists, a real world, quantifiable, observable and proven with facts and figures. We spend much of our time and education accumulating understanding, comparing and experiencing. We work at defining right from wrong, good from bad, self, from other. Competency is sought and developed. Our skill defined by comparing our productivity to that of others, labeling one as better or worse. This is one way in which human beings can understand success, create security, and appreciate a self.

“In an individualist or positivist approach, the purpose of inquiry is to produce

knowledge about the other as an object or subject of the observation. The two are separate, individuated” (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming).

When human beings define an edge that names what something is, we also define what that something is not, limiting, perhaps unknowingly, the potential for discovery. For a constructionist, definitions can be boundaries that secure a concept as true for perpetuity. If definitions can be understood differently, as part of language practice, which includes much more than words, then definitions become one of many permeable, linguistic tools. Definitions become useful in their ability to inspire communication, create relationships, and sustain dialogue. Definitions are not meant to be the goal, the end of the conversation or the learning about what is. Rather, they are steps along a path to what might be.

Definitions of social construction have been just that, steps. I stepped into an ongoing dialogue about the construction of social reality, with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. In *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), they offered an experience of language. I was inspired to wrestle with an alternative to the objectification of a symbolic universe. With their definitions and additions the dialogue has moved further towards appreciation of the primacy of relationship in constructing meaning. Berger and Luckmann do not use relational language for that which they are calling attention to and redefining. They remain in the cognitive, theoretical investigative mode. Their language points towards and opens the way for the development of language affirming the primacy of relationship in understanding dialogue as a source of language and meaning making. “Only after a symbolic universe is objectivated as a *first* product of theoretical thought does the possibility of systematic reflection about the nature of that universe arise” (1967, p. 105). They introduce many of the concepts and definitions that needed to be re-linguaged to move into the relational stance. The individualist, cognitive sourcing of meaning

and theoretical language of legitimation of institutional order sets up the language with which meaning is communicated and perpetuated. Berger and Luckmann define legitimation as the process of explaining and justifying which is further defined as an individual, cognitive process. However they remain positioned on the outside, looking at, rather than stepping into a relational viewpoint which sustains and validates positivist, subject-object credibility. At the same time they foreshadow the engagement with relational language through their explanation that knowledge comes to individuals through cultural traditions and explanations, which are the equivalent of history and sociology. These become components of relational language. They make way for the legitimation of the relational construction of reality. The dialogue is under way.

A Relational Stance

“A relational stance suggests that personal identity (motive, character, intention and action) is a byproduct of negotiations and dialogue within relationships. The self therefore only takes shape as the creation of relationship” (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming).

Social construction encourages conversations about our multi-faceted understandings of how humans know what is real and communicate meaning. Social Construction encourages a dialogue, which communicates new understandings of reality that move, grow, and shift through conversations and relationships. Social construction is a lens through which its practitioners view choices of language, self, others, and the world. It moves the boundaries of thought that might limit an idea, concept, or reality. Social construction expands the possibility of human understanding and creativity through the exchange of words, ideas, and experiences.

Several applications reside under the conceptual umbrella of social construction. One application is relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1998). Within conflict or difficult

change, relational responsibility offers an other-appreciating stance as an alternative to a self-asserting position. Relational responsibility is an opportunity to ask, “Do I want to be right, or do I want to be in relationship?” When the choice is made to be in relationship, alternative language and tools are available to sustain dialogue, stay in relationship and celebrate the other. A new understanding of reality that includes and appreciates diverse experiences and understandings is possible within a relational dialogue. When two people committed to being in right relationship share through dialogue, new awareness can emerge that neither individual could have created alone. This new awareness can create win-win solutions in situations where win-lose was once the only option. In responsible relationships, discovering, collaborating and intimacy replace debating, convincing, winning, or losing. There is an absence of judgment, dominance or the immobility of one assertion of power pushing up against another. There is an appreciation of the other, balanced with self-reflection and inclusivity that creates room for creativity.

Appreciative inquiry is also an application of social construction. It is an approach to organizational development and individual inquiry that incorporates the concepts of social construction and relational responsibility. Appreciative inquiry creates a process of dialogue that discovers, dreams and designs. It is a process based on best practices, on what works well, positive images, and peak experiences. Rather than focusing language and attention on what needs to be fixed, what is going wrong or what crisis has erupted, attention is focused on listening and learning what the individuals or organization does best. Appreciative inquiry brings people together, creating engaged relationships that work well. Together, language is practiced and a future that is inspired by dreams is discovered. Stories of what inspires exceptional moments generate ideas and understanding through dialogue. Questions specific to an organization or project are created to inspire dialogue and discover core values. What is most

essential to wellbeing and satisfaction is revealed and affirmed through conversations and relationships among participants. The more members of an organization that are included in the process, the more effective the discovery, dreaming, and design. Through a series of questions and conversations initiated in a workshop format, appreciative inquiry discovers what works best in a system, rather than defining problems, or what is not working. Energy is created and sustained around the enthusiasm and appreciation for what is good, rather than expended on fixing what is broken. The concept is constructionist, co-constructing reality through dialogue, creating possibility through relationships. One of the guiding principles of appreciative inquiry is that communities and individuals move in the direction of their vision. The more positive their vision, the more positive their choices and direction will be. So through fostering language, questions and exploration around what works best, what is most inspiring or what brings joy, a core value is discovered. The pearl that lies at the heart of the community or individual is discovered. Social construction's relational responsibility and appreciative inquiry language practices open the possibility of reversing the individualistic perspective, that there is a reality to experience and believe in, and replacing it with the possibility that when we believe something we can construct the reality that we will experience.

In *Conversational Realities* (2002), John Shotter expanded the appreciation of language beyond words to include history, culture, viewpoints, emotions and experiences. He relates this expanded understanding of language by explaining how language constructs our human experience of reality. Shotter builds upon the work of Berger, Luckmann, and linguist Benjamin Whorf (1956), whose research and writing explored the relationship between language and thought, to communicate his belief in language as the source for meaning-making. Shotter wrote:

. . . in social constructionism, all of what we might call the person-world, referential-representational dimensions of intersection at the moment available to us as individuals – all the familiar ways we already have of talking about ourselves, about our worlds and about their possible relationships, which in the past we have taken as in some way primary – we now claim must be seen as secondary and derived, as emerging out of the everyday, conversational background to our lives. (2002, p. 8)

Shotter invites us to make a distinction between the world as we understand it from an individual human viewpoint and a “conversational world within which we have our being.” He steps into an ongoing dialogue, between modern and postmodern, individualist and relational stances, using language to shape construction, easing us out of one world view into the conversation moving toward a viewpoint in the midst of the dialogue and reality he is communicating. He shifts the outsider/observer of subject stance.

In *An Invitation to Social Construction*, Kenneth Gergen enlarged the dialogue, taking it back to the early 1900s as an alternative to human “faith in no-nonsense facts, the importance of reason and the truth of science” begins to undulate (1999, p. 3). He describes the tension in our society between holding on to what has always been and letting go into something that only reveals its relevance once we step into it. He shares his views of the potential opportunity for expanded understanding that can be part of reorienting ourselves to a more relational stance. He also appreciates and discusses the conflict between those who hold to a dominant individualist subject-object viewpoint and those who are engaged in a postmodern conversation that asks for a re-making of what constitutes knowledge and truth. Gergen and others who are enthusiastic about the potential of a postmodern relational discovery are in an odd dualistic position. They are engaging in and sustaining this new relational dialogue while expected to use the accepted

language of credibility to validate its alternative perspective. Ironically, Gergen explores questions and possibilities in order to *make the case* for a viewpoint that acknowledges the limitations of the very make-the-case methodology of empiricism that he employs. He invites dialogue that is inclusive of those resisting or engaging in the shift, as he plays with the limitations of remaining in an exclusively self-centered orientation – not in order to assert a new truth, be right or better than, but to expand choices and alternatives.

In *The Construction of Social Reality*, John R. Searle wrote:

It is tempting to think of social objects as independently existing entities on analogy with the objects studied by the natural sciences. It is tempting to think that a government or a dollar bill or contract is an object or entity in the sense that a DNA molecule, a tectonic plate or a planet is an object or entity. In the case of social objects however the grammar of the noun phrases conceal from us the fact that in such cases process is prior to product . . . and in a sense, the object is just the continuous possibility of the activity. (1995, p. 13)

Searle participates in the relational stance with his appreciation of process, but he retains the availability of facts, external reality and objects to be observed, as he believes the two viewpoints can coincide. He is neither totally constructionist and relational, nor totally individualist.

Each author brings different language to the dialogue. Together they make diverse meaning out of the language of their experiences, study, relationships, and conversations. My placing them together on this page does not bring them into dialogue with each other, but it does allow our discovery to include the creation of language that puts them in relationship with each other. As I learn and discover, I too am stepping into the relational conversation, attempting to

communicate and practice something new that emerges from within my relationship to these authors. I am also in the position of being on the outside, observing the dialogue, while pulling out their language to my self-differentiated place. From within and without, I am discovering how language practices construct meaning and purpose. This construction of meaning is inhibited by the absence of relational responsibility. When one voice monologically asserts a truth over another, process and communication are thwarted. When the language of differing voices comes together in an other-centered dialogue, something new is possible. Shotter, Gergen, Searle and others have all written of their understandings of the construction of reality, creating language that they believe constructs new meaning. There are relationally oriented intersections that I can integrate as I learn to shift from my self-centered to an other-centered viewpoint.

Social construction is an evolving human inquiry, engaging previously held ontological and epistemological assumptions with the anticipation of “What if...?” With the constructionist applications of relational responsibility and Appreciative inquiry, the scope of praxis expands beyond the limits of theoretical and scholarly environments to a broad range of social and organizational circumstances. Intentional construction of open and affirming dialogues recognizes and engages the potential of our multidimensional existence to create new opportunities. These opportunities have been unrecognized in the past, lost to a dominant, more limiting understanding that sought to reveal, discover or own the truth.

Social construction is a philosophical bearing. It is a lens through which its practitioners and scholars experience human beings and the environment in which they exist. It is a lens not in the modernist sense where social construction becomes a structure through which we view things. Rather, social construction is a “form of life” (1999 pg 38). It is a way of orienting

ourselves to the world. It is a way of being, a form of action, of choice of engagement. Unlike a single ocular lens, social construction acts like a prism, bending light, refracting how we experience reality through the many facets of diverse possibilities. The aim of social constructionists is not to arrive at a single defensible conclusion, but to expand the experiences and descriptions of reality through relationships and dialogue.

In 2005, in the first draft of this dissertation, I wrote:

For five years the UU Society of Bangor has focused on growth. Membership and programming have grown, but the energy and membership only gets so far, then stalls. Spiritual maturation and faith development seems inconsistent. I believe this is because the congregation has hesitantly understood or articulated its mission. As the historically liberal religious voice in Bangor, ME, the Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor (UUSB) has always accepted its role as the socially active urban parish. I have an attachment to that historic mission. Is this an outdated identity or “my” mission? In terms of growth, is it God’s will or mine that this congregation to grow? We are a pastor-centered ministry. Our membership growth and expanding programs have me at the center. I have insufficient time for observing, praying and reflecting on my role, my ambitions or my vision separate from the mission and vision of this congregation. I need Spirit to breath wisdom into me and the congregation; quiet to hear God’s plan, to discern my role, to gain skill and understanding to support this congregation in identifying and fulfilling its mission.

I wrote those words prior to my 2005 sabbatical from the UU Society of Bangor, where I had been serving as the settled minister. The congregation was tired and confused – and so was I. We disagreed on what needed to happen next during what we all acknowledged to be an

institutional transition and what I had defined as a size transition. I had engaged the congregation in an appreciative inquiry process to facilitate its move through this presumed size transition before I fully comprehended the relational stance of appreciative inquiry and its social constructionist viewpoint of knowledge and leadership.

“When one chooses a positivist or individualist position, the subject object stance is assumed. The observation of a subject by an individual is the normative ideal for producing ‘objective’ knowledge” (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming).

Today, I recognize that the role I chose with the congregation was an individualistic approach in which I chose to use my knowledge and experience, and the power and authority granted to me, to facilitate as “the expert.” I made observations, interpreted them, and reached conclusions, which I utilized to lead the congregation. I chose to observe, evaluate, and report a plan of action to the congregation. In offering the congregation the conclusions I had arrived at on my own, I eliminated the more relational options and opportunities of a more collaborative, dialogic process in which the congregation and I could have engaged, together, and perhaps developed a different, more sustainable model for our ministry.

Rene Descartes believed that he discovered and documented the source of human knowing. He grounded his search and his answers in his experience of an individual self – bones wrapped up in skin, with a mind that integrated and processed messages delivered through the senses. His historic conclusions revolved around the primacy of the individual’s ability to take in and process information, a self-contained knowledge machine whose ability to define reality was directly proportional to his or her intellectual capacity. Thinking makes it so. In his view, independently thinking and acting individuals became the agents of truth and the definers of reality through their individual acts of observing objects, interpreting their observations, and then

formulating conclusions.

Social construction moves out of this dominant western individual subject-observer source of knowledge into a relational understanding of knowing that centers on the relationship between people and their environment as the source of communicating what is real. Social construction is characterized by the presence of ongoing dialogue, relationships, and the absence of absolutes. As Shotter wrote:

The changed relationship acts upon the speaker to change the nature of the speaker, too. For not only will the speaker now take on new duties in exchange for new rights regarding the person of the other, but what he or she will notice and care about in the other will also change: she or he will be changed in their moral sensibilities, in their very being. (2002, p. 2)

Thus, a relative reality and its meaning are continually evolving, neither static nor established once and for all, but reconstructed through dialogue and relationships.

The Project

In the process of leading the UU Society of Bangor, defining its size transition and its related structural changes, my own understanding of ministry shifted. I was changed. What I believed changed and what I experienced subsequently changed. I had accepted the limits of a traditionally defined ministerial role of leader, understanding my responsibility to be facilitating change by bringing to the congregation my opinion and conclusions as an expert. I was simultaneously exposed to Alice Mann's work on size transitions in congregations (1998) and to the concept of appreciative inquiry as an organizational development tool (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). I believed both to be applicable to my experiences and observations at the Bangor church. What I did not comprehend fully was that there were other options to the

individualistic leadership voice. In the process of learning about social construction and practicing appreciative inquiry, I began to understand the addition of relational options to my choices as minister and the implications of choosing, intentionally, to engage the congregation in a dialogue rather than delivering top- down directives and conclusions. Through my attempts to understand and create a more relational stance, I moved from a limited individualistic stance toward a more relational leadership style. This project is not about getting it right. It is an appreciative approach, taking my experience as a way to understand how complicated it is to make a shift from a dominant individualistic stance, a leadership style totally dependent on the observations of the expert, to a more relational view. My experience throughout this project becomes part of the dialogue about how human beings begin to move towards a postmodern understanding of us in relationship. My starts and stops, my successes and failures are now part of the language practice that is constructing our motion toward more relational practices of leadership.

Social construction has taught me to appreciate the multiple approaches, choices of behaviors, voices, and relational engagements available to ministers. I could have chosen a more appreciative and collaborative role as minister of the UU Society of Bangor. Had I done so, I would have modeled and encouraged a more sustainable, relational shared ministry. We would have been more able to minister together, creating meaning and purpose that reflected relationally shared experience.

There are many ways to manage the expectations and responsibilities of our lives and professions. The position of expert is one, sometimes necessary and sometimes appropriate, response to fulfilling the responsibilities of many leadership roles and institutional needs. Ministers often are expected to fulfill extraordinary expectations for productivity, care, and

inspiration. Ministers are often left to balance those expectations with their academic, emotional, and spiritual resources as we seek to create viable and sustainable professional choices.

Whenever expectations can be processed dialogically between minister and members of a congregation, more sustainable patterns of behavior can be discovered and choices developed while relationships are strengthened. The social construction dialogue is not about engaging to discover the best way or the right way, but to expand the conversation, the options, and the scope of what is possible. For me, that is a most welcome opportunity, one that can yield more sustainable professional practices and more fulfilling results.

Ministers from different denominations often share the joke that our professional roles as ministers and positions as leaders present us with all the responsibility of leadership but none of the authority. This is our humorous recognition of the ways in which the relational and the individualistic can intersect and compete in the understanding of clergy leadership. Authority and responsibility can both be bestowed and accepted or rejected, individually or relationally. In theistic faith traditions, those that source power and authority in a divine omnipotence and in the Christian Bible as the word of that omnipotence, there is a recognized or assumed connection between the minister and God. Through study and spiritual practice, clergy establish and confirm this connection. God, as all-knowing and omnipotent, communicates with or through the ordained clergy through their theological education and developed authority to interpret scripture. Ministers and priests are trained, educated, and granted this authority to interpret directly or communicate wisdom understood to be from God. Advanced degrees, ordination, and apostolic succession are some of the practices through which ministerial authority to communicate the word of God is understood and bestowed.

While Unitarian Universalist ministers share equivalent requirements for education and training in the arts of ministry and are ordained by the congregations they serve, we do not have a denominational doctrine or unified theology that agrees upon or comprehends omnipotence or divine authority. Because of the wide range in beliefs of our membership, from atheist to theist, Buddhist to Pagan, we are not granted the same authority to interpret or represent God as is given to other clergy. We are, however, expected to assume equivocal responsibilities for the leadership of the institution. Unitarian Universalists cannot preach the word of God when we need authority for delivering “truth” or want someone or something to add power and credibility to our prophetic observations, conclusions or messages. Without the understanding of divine authority, the word of God to back us up, we experience all the responsibility and none of the authority in our leadership roles to a greater extent than other ordained clergy,.

The belief of some ministers that they lack the necessary authority to lead effectively is based on an individualistic Machiavellian understanding of leadership. This understanding is sourced in a thought-oriented viewpoint of power and authority that is earned or granted to those body-encapsulated selves who think and act themselves into positions of leadership. Ministers study, earn degrees, serve internships, and practice the arts of ministry, pastoral care, administration, and creativity. We fulfill the requirements established by our institutions of learning and our denominational authorities. We jump through the required hoops and expected practices to prove our worthiness and our competence as expert. Identification as the expert is a self-centered credibility measure that assures us that we have achieved success. Other-centeredness does not hold the same secure measure of standardization. When we allow “the other to happen to us” (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming), we must be willing to let go of the security and confidence that all our efforts, training, education and credentialing have provided

and be willing to let something unpredicted (and not necessarily socially or professionally affirmed) occur. There is insecurity in letting go of what is comforting, familiar, measurable, and provable. Human beings like to be certain. We like to be right.

In orchestrating what I perceived as necessary changes at the UU Society of Bangor, I exemplified some of the defining differences between a positivist-individualist style and a relational approach to ministry. What I wanted in Bangor was a relationally responsible, transformative dialogue. What I actually contributed to was the continuation of the traditional minister as expert role – a positivist subject- object defined reality, with its self-sourced understanding of knowledge and power. This gave members and minister a reality that was familiar, measurable, and provable. That individualist orientation to leadership, for me, as a professional minister, felt safe, providing a role that was quantifiable by a professionally agreed upon standard. Within professional guidelines, my choices could not be questioned or challenged easily. It is comfortable to know, to feel competent at knowing. There is a safety in knowing where one begins, where one ends and where an other begins. That is what makes individualism so enduring and dominant. Its perceived logic seems so aligned with our experience of a body that is “in possession or ownership of its own capacities and abilities” (Sampson, 2008, p. 31); with our experience of a self that is part of an external, physical, reality that is supported by data received from our five senses; with a subject-object, evidence-based understanding of what is real.

To entertain the possibility of shifting this self-centeredness to an other-centeredness, we need to believe in the human potential for personal, spiritual, and institutional growth. We need to let go, even though we may not thoroughly understand where that letting go will bring us. Human beings have difficulty contemplating integrating a new idea or orientation without

believing there is something to be gained. For me, the gain that resulted from choosing a social construction stance in my ministry was the experience of personal wellbeing that grew out of relational connections. I associate my emotional and spiritual experience with the choice to let go of the lone-wolfness of ministry from an individualist stance, which I found to create an dissatisfying and unsustainable loneliness. I found the associated responsibilities of the minister as expert, the subject-object role, both physically and psychically exhausting. So I was motivated to let go, to try something new, to practice. The professional weight upon my shoulders was lightened with my shift to a relational identity, a sense of self that emerged within relationships and shared self-reflexive responsibility, dialogically constructed within those relationships. The opportunity for ministers in having leadership choices is to develop more sustainable practices that draw upon many resources, many voices, collaboratively constructing meaning and an experience of community that expands appreciation of faith and renews the joy in our calling. As McNamee and Gergen wrote:

All that is real and good to us emerges within our relationships and communities. Thus values, beliefs, and meaning are born out of relationships. If we can create multiple selves in different relationships, we must realize that we can also create multiple ways of relating. In other words we have many resources for engaging with others despite our tendency to be consistent. Each of us represents the intersection of multiple relationships. (1998)

Churches Are Relationships and Relationships Transform

Communities of faith exist as intersections of multiple relationships, carrying many voices, many different opinions, views, and attitudes, even on the same subject. These diverse voices represent the accumulation of an institution's history, decisions, past and present

relationships. Structures are built upon an historic reality constructed through generations of social and institutional relationships. “In effect we carry the residue of many others with us; we contain multitudes. Yet most of our actions along with the positions we adopt in conversations are one dimensional,” McNamee and Gergen wrote (1998). The one-dimensional aspect of such conversations is referred to as monologic. Monologues express information and receive information representing and confirming the existence of an established reality. Monologues do not engage contributors in relationally constructing reality. Monologues represent only a small segment of what we might do or say. Social construction suggests that we ask: What other voices are available to me? To this person? To this conversation? Who is not being heard and why? How can they be heard and brought into the conversation? How can we bring something beyond what has always been done into our choices for action today (McNamee & Gergen, 1999)? We discover more value through being together than in being right.

Transformational dialogues are the fruit ripened by the integrity of social construction. Within the discovery, relational commitment, and truth-telling of a dialogue, transformation happens. The social construction of reality in dialogue gains multidimensional integrity and creates radical change. What makes a dialogue transformational is its strength to inspire participants to move beyond the fear and doubt that can accompany any discussion to let go of the control and security that are attributed to a reality sourced in individual bodies and minds. Transformational dialogues are improvisational, have minimal structure, and thrive on the tension between serious and playful (Transformative Dialogues Workshop, 2007, notes). They add a desirable element to human experience that can counter the fear of letting go of the dominant, exclusive perspective of individualism.

A relational orientation really can be as simple as understanding that it “takes two to

tango,” to quote a well-worn expression. It can be as complicated and rich as the philosophy of dialogue that Martin Buber explored more than 80 years ago in his book *I and Thou*. This philosophy acknowledges that an *I* exists within and derives meaning from an I-Thou relationship; a spoken *I* infers the existence of the other, and no action takes place in a social vacuum independent of the others who are in some way complicit.

Many a movement termed reflex is a firm trowel in the building up of the person in the world. It is simply not the case that the child first perceives of the object, then, as it were, puts himself in relation with it. But the effort to establish relation comes first – the hand of the child arched out so that what is over against him may nestle under it; second is the actual relation, a saying of Thou without words. . . . The inborn Thou is realized in the lived relations with that which meets it. (Buber, 1958, p. 27)

When we respond to the presence of an other, our behavior invites a response from the other. Together, responses dance, creating meaning in the interactions of each with the other. The proverbial tree falls in the forest. Is the construction of sound independent of or dependent on the ability of the individual’s senses to capture it? Is the sound dependent on or independent of the interpretation of the mind beyond the ears that hear it? How does the number of pairs of ears, the number of minds and their sharing of the experience affirm the experience or change the meaning of the tree falling?

What may be interpreted as superfluous, confusing rhetoric actually allows human beings to explore new opportunities to understand the depth of our experience, a defining component of spirituality and religion, meaning-making. A relational orientation to ministry appreciates that all events are interrelated. As in science, where no action occurs without the exertion of energy, in social construction, no action occurs spontaneously without relationship. If an interfaith

appreciation of the meaning-making in relationship can be cultivated, the exclusive ownership of truth characteristic of the tension between religions could begin to relax.

[W]ith Relational Responsibility each is making room for the other, staying in conversation without holding on to or asserting an expectation of reciprocation. When relationally responsible, one cannot be hoping to make a deal, convince the other to change, need or want to be right. (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming)

What I have begun to understand as foundational to a relational, appreciative, leadership style is that in each and every encounter I have the ability to choose my behavior, the voice with which I engage with the other. I have the ability to choose to stay in relationship, celebrating the other, or to be separate from the relationship. I find that often my ability to appreciate the relationship as a priority is in direct competition with my appreciation of my individual self and it usually comes down to the degree that I experience ownership of an idea, outcome or direction, which is an individualist experience. Sometimes, I think I am right! My individual self, thinking and reasoning feels attached. I have a particular position and proportional need to be right, to assert my expert voice. That is not relational, but I have to own that in some moments, that is the voice available and preferable to me. To choose an effective response, I continually need to ask myself, “Do you want to be in relationship, or do you want to be right?” I choose. I decide. Moment to moment, conversation to conversation, I am self reflecting on the place in the middle between the comfort and familiarity of being an individual and learning, risking learning the opportunities of a relational stance. I have chosen intentionally to be right, often. I choose it less as my ability to let go of my edges and celebrate the other grows. To intentionally choose being in relationship I have learned to ask questions. Asking a question loosens up my need-to-be-right particles, like tilling the earth breaks up the sod. Softer dirt nurtures seeds. Relational qualities

are seeds that need to be planted, then nurtured. Practice is nurture.

In celebrating the other, it becomes important to ask questions that would not hold the same significance in a subject-object orientation, such as, “What social functions are being served by attributing intentions to self and/or other? How is it that some voices are considered credible and others within a conversation or silenced or dismissed? Who decides? When our attention and intention are on the other we can begin to notice who is visible, who is absent and whose voice dominates. (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming)

In seminary and ministerial internships, I was encouraged to develop the confidence to present myself as the expert, to hold a self-differentiated stance. Relational was interpreted as without boundaries. There was a notion of “ministerial presence” that is sourced in a necessary projection of authority and competence. Having been introduced to the relationally responsible choices available in an appreciative leadership style, I now intentionally develop my skill for a more relational ministry. I practice appreciation. I am still in the middle, still learning, engaging and modifying my choices of language, behaviors and perspectives. I am still shifting from the stance of an observer who evaluates a subject to a dialogic appreciation of constructing new relational understandings of what I call “faithing.” Faithing is my relational verb for faith, which many understand as a noun. I understand faithing as unfolding in relationship, something to be continually practiced, rather than a goal that is achieved once and for all.

What has become clear to me is that there is a paradox. To be relational requires personal vulnerability. I must be willing to let go of the comfort that comes with the confidence and competence of individually knowing. We experts spend time and money learning how to be right, how to know, by following a dominant and classically affirmed understanding of what

being right means. My experience and practice in appreciating a relational versus an expert stance is that it is scary to let go of knowing. There is vulnerability in accepting the initial uncertainty that accompanies the choice to make room for the other. The paradox is that the position of vulnerability requires confidence – not only in the process but in one’s self, when that self is exactly what must be deconstructed to experience the relational opportunity of discovery.

Risk

My teacher says,

You have to stink first.

I tell her, I don't have time to stink –

At 64 years old

I go directly to perfection

Or I go nowhere.

Perfection is nowhere,

She says, “So stink.”

Stink like a beginner.

Stink like decaying flesh,

Old blood

Cold sweat,

She says,

I know a woman who's eighty-six,

Last year she learned to dive. (Author unknown)

This is another poem, loved and appreciated, that arrived by email from somewhere and whose author unknown to me. Whoever wrote this had learned the opportunities in not knowing,

of being open to new revelations. To explore the opportunities and limitations in choosing either a relational stance or a positivist stance, one must practice relationship. One must risk stinking. We are already experts in being individuals. We need to risk being beginners in celebrating the other before we can recognize and develop the ability to choose effectively between many options, improving best practices. I chose to risk and I began. My first attempts to engage a relational stance were not exactly perfect. The interesting thing is that it is only now that I know that I was risking and that I was beginning. The individualist, expert stance offers a sense of security in its competence. I did not know what I did not know. I felt empowered with observations and conclusions based on the accumulation of knowledge. As Berger and Luckmann wrote, “The symbolic universe legitimates the institutional order” (1967). My language and understanding of my role were limited to the subject-object individualistic perspective. The absence of another universe legitimized my behaviors and my choices of leadership style. With my choices I reinforced subject-object language and choices. Therein lies the rub. To step into a different conversation and break the cycle of accepted legitimacy of that which is most familiar requires an initial awareness and intention that appreciates that something different is possible. Without language, without the meaning of that something different and of the relationships that will develop language and therefore meaning, one remains alone with one’s mind. One can sometimes feel it, the something different, before the language is developed to engage relationally in new construction. I did not know I was risk-taking or practicing anything. It is only over my shoulder that I can look back and see the limitations of my resources and appreciate the labor that birthed a *we*. In Chapter 3, I will explain in more detail the structure of the practice and the results of the risk-taking initiated by my desire to develop and practice a more sustainable and effective ministry.

Chapter 3

Discovering the Limitations and Opportunities of Minister as Expert

Ministry and the Construction of Size

Congregation size is a significant concern for ministers and members. It was a significant context for me to begin recognizing the limitations and opportunities in choosing either to maintain a minister as expert stance or to begin choosing other voices in which to generate conversations. This chapter acknowledges the dominant viewpoint in religious institutions that bigger is better while opening other opportunities for understanding size in a congregation's identity and for the ministers who serve with them. From this perspective, mega-churches that fill sports stadiums with tens of thousands of engaged participants appear to wield the most power and influence. The underlying principle is that if a church attracts that much support and engagement it must be right. Churches with thousands of members and friends on their rolls are often more visible and more assertive in delivering their message. Having a loud presence facilitates the accumulation of significant financial and human resources, which in turn facilitates the continued communication of the church's message. Larger churches support larger staffs that maximize coordination of volunteers and the ability to network in service of the vision or mission.

Positive or negative evaluations of a minister's authority, credibility, and influence often are directly proportional to the numbers of members in one's congregation. The more members enrolled, the better the evaluation. This perception seems to cross-denominational and interfaith lines. Whether a religious leader is liberal, conservative, Christian, Muslim, or Jew, the number of people proclaiming allegiance to one's leadership establishes, in many minds, the credibility, and competency of that ministry. Congregations of fewer than a hundred members are often

viewed as being of little significance to anyone but the few community members directly involved. Consequently, the question of size is an important identity and power issue, both for ministers and congregations. Size transitions within congregations take on importance for ministers and congregations. Growth is the spoken and unspoken expectation for ministers and staff. Ministers are directed to produce growth in numbers of members, increases in budget size and growth in power as measured by denominational and social influence.

If growth is the intention of a ministry, then knowing what size a congregation is, what size it can be or should be is important. Not knowing creates institutional and individual uncertainty as accepted benchmarks of congregational size are achieved, or not. When members ask, "Are we growing?" they are really asking, "Are we OK? Are we good enough?" Ministers feel the pressure of the uncertainty, expectations, and questions and experience their own uncertainty. Human beings do not like uncertainty. This can manifest in a wide variety of emotions, reactions, and behaviors, including fatigue, judgment, increased effort, decreased effort, and withdrawal. From a self-centered individualist viewpoint, the very nature of any transition or transformation ensures a measure of uncertainty. Before a religious institution can navigate a size transition and arrive at a new understanding of reality or itself, the individual members of the congregation must allow for a measure of uncertainty to inspire them and then ripen them into their something new. In *Younger Next Year for Women*, Henry S. Lodge, MD, and Chris Crowley wrote that human beings are hard-wired neurologically to make rapid decisions in response to the discomfort or anxiety of uncertainty. "When there is not hard information, we choose the fastest route to decision – any decision – to end the panic of uncertainty. You can measure this in the lab, and experimental psychologists have shown over and over again that humans will reliably make blatantly bad decisions to end the feeling of

uncertainty” (2005, p. 272). Ministers are often solicited as experts specifically in the hope that they will provide an answer, that is, relief from discomfort. Ministers are often rewarded and appreciated based directly on their abilities, as experts, to ameliorate congregational uncertainty

This phenomenon occurs in Unitarian Universalist congregations even though their self-identified religious liberalism is based in a willingness to affirm faith without certainty (Rasor, 2005). Liberalism is defined by the “ability to hold faith claims with a certain tentativeness . . . and the liberal commitment to open minded inquiry and the realization that truth is not given once for all time” (Rasor, 2005, p. ix). The inference in this definition is that liberals are more comfortable with uncertainty. I believe, however, that this liberal versus conservative distinction as it relates to comfort or discomfort with uncertainty is more a qualitative rather than quantitative distinction. The liberal identity held up by UU congregations does not necessarily translate into unlimited, Universal acceptance of all unknowns. Unitarian Universalist congregations I have worked with can tolerate the uncertainty of not knowing in theological or ideological exchanges, or the uncertainty inherent in appreciating the ongoing revelation of meaning and truth. Their discomfort with uncertainty manifests itself in other contexts, such as the financial uncertainty of an unbalanced budget or of a changing institutional identity, or perhaps the uncertainty of congregational initiatives that address class or cultural diversity.

Uncertainty: Self-Centered and Other-Centered Choices

The phenomenon of uncertainty, not knowing, helped me to compare and contrast the opportunities and limitations of a self-centered viewpoint and an other-centered or relational viewpoint in ministry. For an individual or institution, uncertainty can create anxiety. Because it is felt in the individual body, this anxiety is considered to be real. Feeling anything in one’s body reinforces the truth of realism and its individualist viewpoint. Taking action is one common

self-centered strategy for creating comfort. Taking action creates a sense of movement. As individuals, many of us seek bodily comfort by doing something. Moving is comforting from an individualist stance because of its association with control, competence and achievement. Individuals perceive change as improvement and therefore are reassured.

The perceived distance from one defining moment to another, institutionally or individually, is what I have chosen to explore as “the middle.” What I chose to do or be, how I responded to a place of uncertainty, I call *middle-ing*. Middle-ing is part of my language practice around all that transpired during my ministries in Bangor, ME, and Wilmington, NC. As I learned, practiced, made choices, and improved my relational skills, I developed the language practices to construct a “we” out of “me and them.”

With a relationally dialogic process of letting go and making room, “allowing the other to happen to you” (McNamee, 2007), the language practice in uncertainty shifts, constructing different meaning. The other, included in the language of celebrating the other, may refer to persons participating in the dialogue; a new contribution to process; a differing intention, story, or understanding that participants bring to a dialogue, or the environment of discovery. The social constructionist stance is that it is the language of uncertainty that constructs anxiety. There is no uncertainty or the anxiety associated with it without the language practices that construct it.

Not knowing what to do next is an element of being in the middle. For institutions, the perspective that any decision is better than no decision, because of the anxiety or panic response to not knowing, is a choice. In choosing an individualistic voice or engaging the language of uncertainty, a particular selection of responses is available to ministers. In choosing an appreciative, relational language to explore leadership options, a different selection of responses

is available. The ability of relationships within the system to sustain dialogue is a factor for consideration when choosing leadership language. The ability to be in relationship, in conversation about what we are experiencing, can be a different option for comfort, an alternative to just doing something.

Relational responsibility and transformative dialogues, initiated and cultivated, can be alternatives to the minister-as-expert approach; they are relational tools for managing uncertainty, for making the place in the middle more comfortable in order to prevent possibly premature and less-effective solutions being chosen out of avoidance, anxiety or prevention. My premise is that engaging the most effective leadership voice for each situation encourages creativity, discovery, and growth. The more choices available to ministers, the more likely we are to recognize and be skilled at using the most helpful voice and language for whatever reality we are in. During my ministry in Bangor, I had limited practice and understanding of the voices with which I could respond to the roles and responsibilities of the ministry. By the time of my next ministry in Wilmington, I had expanded my choices and my ability to practice those choices effectively. The limitations and opportunities of each ministry, and the leadership choices I engaged, yielded different outcomes. My personal and professional development through the integration of a social constructionist relational stance was reflected in the progression of my choices of language and voice. My research and documentation of the Bangor congregation from 2004 to 2006 reflected my academic study of appreciative inquiry and social construction, before I had developed the essential integrated, relational praxis. Ironically, I continued my long-held minister-as-expert stance, and its associated behavioral habits, even as I was inviting the Bangor congregation into a relational process. I encouraged and invited a relational ministry

without an understanding of my individualist orientation, its limitations, and the other voices available to me as a minister.

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor (UUSB)

We all represent the intersection of multiple relationships within local and immediate manifestations of relational histories. In each relationship, we develop a particular discourse that has coherence relative to that relationship. Each relationship will develop its own unique discourse with a multiple sense of “the good” or “the real.” (McNamee & Gergen, 1998)

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor carries forward a unique history, based on its roots in the merger of two congregations. In Bangor, the Unitarian congregation was first gathered in 1818; the Universalists formed their congregation in 1836. Even though the two congregations were distinctly different, there was a longstanding relationship between them and their members. Their relationship was competitive, judgmental, and antagonistic for over a century, each believing in the rightness of their theology, social initiatives and values. The two congregations continued their conversation and negotiations about a merger for nearly 35 years longer than it took to negotiate the merger of the two denominations nationally. Unitarians and Universalists merged to become the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations in 1961. It wasn't until 1995 that the two Bangor congregations accomplished the equivalent merger. Four years after the Unitarian church and the Universalist church in Bangor merged, I was called as an expert settled minister expected to lead the merged congregation with an assumption of authority. The nature of the relationship between minister and congregation had been established about 180 years, earlier, but each congregation had a different understanding of what that was.

“When relationally responsible, one cannot be hoping to make a deal, convince the other to change, need or want to be right” (McNamee, 2007).

When I arrived in Bangor in July 1999 to candidate for the position of settled minister, I walked up the hill approaching the church and was appalled to see huge garbage dumpsters blocking a once-elegant front entry. The doors were badly in need of paint. There were weeds and an unkempt gravel driveway. I said to myself then, “If I get this job, I will have this front door renovated and opened in five years.” My motivation was inspired by a vision of a strong ministry and a growing congregation. I wanted the UUSB to be a significant downtown urban presence. I had a vision, so I made a decision and formed a goal, even before I had the job. Within five years, those doors would be opened and a perennial garden installed that was as glorious as the garden at the neighboring Congregational church. I see now that this came of my need for a sense of accomplishment and credibility. Surely if in five years the church had an entry to be proud of, I would be recognized as a good Minister. I never used a “we” in the vision-making. I never had a conversation with anyone about whether this goal was reasonable or even desirable. Instead, I felt my ever-present unspoken agenda pushing from behind in every initiative, conclusion, and decision I promoted. I wanted those doors open. I was ashamed of, mortified by, and completely judgmental about the appearance of the building. When it did not appear that the membership or leadership was going to address the appearance and entry directly, I started noticing other visual defects, paint, windows, railings, etc. My evaluator voice and expert voice were fine-tuned. My judgmental self was working on overdrive.

Time and again throughout my seven years in Bangor, I revisited my vision for the church entryway. I had researched the historical uses of the front foyer. I found old wedding photos showing brides dressed elegantly as they descended a mahogany spiral staircase now

closed and in disrepair. I wanted the former grandeur and stature of the congregation to be restored. I was attached to a definition of success that I perceived would be affirmed by an open front entry. My notes reflect my observation and conclusion. I presented my observation in discussions, persuading with the intention of convincing, rather than inviting a dialogue in which we could share multiple perspectives on the front entry, discover and learn – with the goal of creating a choice of action.

I initiated the formation of a task force to evaluate the entrance to the building, which had been unused and closed since 1954. Disagreement over whether renovating and opening the entryway was necessary was expressed covertly but not discussed openly. At about the same time, a separate task force was created to evaluate renovating the Dorothy Memorial Social Hall. The two groups competed for limited funds as each sought to establish its project as a priority. Each task force was charged with observing, researching, and then presenting their findings to the congregation's decision-making body, the Council.

Another task force was chosen to further evaluate, using Alice Mann's methodology, options for size transitions. More experts, or positivists, were engaged in each area of inquiry; the assumption was that the more expert input the better. I grew more comfortable. Plotting a course would temper uncertainty about subsequent decisions. I influenced the task force. The task force looked to me, as minister and expert, for guidance, and I accepted that role.

My presupposing the adoption of my suggestion reflects the subject-object stance of a positivist research and analysis. Holding an opinion or anticipating a foregone conclusion influences the intention and therefore the outcome, diminishing the integrity of the process. I wanted to be right – about the size transition, about appreciative inquiry; about the church front entrance. Looking back on this, the image of a bulldozer comes to mind – certainly not a

relationally inspired presence.

The rational agent goes out to observe, document and conclude. She is guided by a preproposed methodology, which is designed to protect the study from arbitraryism. An individual can observe the one real world, out there, that is available to the senses but independent of our minds. It is assumed there is a Truth to be discovered. (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming)

In September 1999, when I arrived in Bangor as the settled fulltime minister at the UU Society of Bangor, I stepped into a perceived reality with my own professional intentions and expectations. Members of the congregation likewise held their intentions and expectations for professional ministry. They communicated some of these role expectations to me verbally and directly. Others were non-verbal, subconsciously perceived, and historically understood. The congregation and I subtly assumed them. That fall, I wrote to the Bangor membership encouraging the to plan intentionally for the future of the congregation. In the UU Society of Bangor monthly newsletter, prior to my having been exposed to appreciative inquiry, I wrote:

What are your dreams for this church? Its physical buildings? Its worship? Its religious education? How do you see our role in the greater community? What are we called to be as we prepare to enter a new century? During October, contemplate and formulate a vision, which will guide and motivate our decisions and actions in the future. Let our arrival in the year 2000 be one we have chosen and worked for . . . not an arrival of default or crisis management. We have a rich source of strength and wisdom, which is foundational to our church and our denomination. We belong to a religious association, which emerges from the struggles of learning how to respond compassionately to the whole of life we encounter.

These thoughts seem to be a preface for what I would focus my attention on and for my desire to discover a more effective ministerial presence. In 1999, I already held a relationally grounded theology, having been inspired by the works of Carter Heyward and Martin Buber. In Chapter 5, I will discuss in depth the connection between social construction, the relational theologies of Heyward and Buber and the creativity notions of Henry Nelson Wieman. I mention Heyward and Buber here to explain that my immediate receptivity to appreciative inquiry was a result of my existing orientation to a relational theology. Had I practiced a less relational theology, I may not have seen the possibility for appreciative inquiry in a religious context. The creative impulse that I experienced in the juxtaposition of appreciative inquiry and relational theology inspired my reading of Wieman. The three together have inspired my development of a deeper relationally responsible ministerial praxis. The seeds of my relational ministry were planted long before 1999. They lay dormant until 2000 when I heard Diana Whitney describe appreciative inquiry in Portland, ME. Diana Whitney was the keynote speaker at a daylong event organized by The Maine Association of Professional Women. The relational seeds sprouted.

For three years, the UUSB and I enjoyed the mutually satisfying and deepening relationship of minister and congregation. There were expectations in terms of who would do what and who was ultimately responsible that we each understood and fulfilled, albeit differently. After three years of navigating our differences, it grew increasingly difficult to communicate and complete tasks effectively. The support staff – sexton and office administrator – turned over more frequently than in the past, two or three times each over two years, rather than after more than five years, which had been typical in the past. More tasks assigned to staff and volunteers were left unfinished. Attendance at committee meetings

dropped. More responsibilities seemed to fall through the cracks without being addressed. Cleaning, recordkeeping, volunteer recruitment, and welcoming of new members were left undone or done poorly. The communication of information grew less effective. People were frequently heard to say, “I didn’t know that.” Whether it was regarding an invitation to an event or a change in the budget, members said they were not informed.

Size Matters

The statistics that are used to define size in religious communities vary. I have chosen to use numbers that Alice Mann referred to in her book *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (2001). To determine the size of a congregation, Mann recommends review of recorded membership numbers, the total number of youth registered in religious education programs and Sunday morning service attendance. In 1999, the UU Society of Bangor identified 120 people as members of its congregation. An average of 60 to 70 people attended worship on Sunday mornings and 45 young people were enrolled in religious education programming. Based on Mann’s definitions, UUSB was a pastoral size congregation. Two years later, membership had increased to 160; attendance on Sunday mornings averaged between 100 and 120, and 95 young people were registered in the religious education program. This increase brought the UU Society of Bangor up to the lower limits of Mann’s definition of a program size congregation. The difficulties we were experiencing were similar to those that Mann attributes to a size transition from a pastoral to program size congregation. It appeared to me that we were navigating the choppy waters between two sizes.

By 2004, when we held a summit on appreciative inquiry at the UU Society of Bangor, I believed I had internalized and integrated appreciative values into my ministry. It was not until these many years later, after continued exposure to and education about social construction,

relational responsibility, and appreciative inquiry, that I can appreciate the magnitude of the shift from an individualist to a relational stance that I was integrating. (See Table 1 for a timeline of events at the UU Society of Bangor.)

From the fall of 1999 through the fall of 2004, I was fulfilling my ministerial expectations and those of the congregation without being aware of the limitations of that role, of the other choices available to me, or of the implications of the minister as expert role. In 2004 when I began the Taos/Tilburg PhD program, I began documenting my observations. At that time I had some consciousness of my role as expert but was still unaware of the dominance of individualism in me. I was using an expert voice, the role of observer of the subject, without the awareness that I could engage the language practice of uncertainty to appreciate and engage my experience of not knowing the correct size of the congregation. I made observations and then interpreted the significance of those observations, adhering to the individualist stance of object-observer monologic process. It was not until 2006, after I resigned my position in Bangor, that I began to understand I had other options. I began to appreciate both the limitations and the possibilities in fulfilling the expected role of expert by adding more relational choices to an understanding of a shared ministry. The dominance in my choices of the expert voice was a self-serving, comfort measure on my part. I felt the anxiety of uncertainty. I was comforted by what was familiar and acceptable. I was unsure of my role, its boundaries, or what defined competence. There was uncertainty about my expert role because the professional expectations for the minister are different in a pastoral size church than in a program size church. And the church was growing. The use of the building by the surrounding community was increasing. My perception as I walked by the facilities, arranged scheduling, or attended meetings was that it was difficult to a place to meet. There never seemed to be an evening when the street was not

crowded with cars and lights in the building were not blazing. Our church newsletter *The Chalice and Chimes* had doubled in size from four to eight pages. These are symptoms attributed to size transition by Alice Mann in her work on congregational size transitions:

Congregational life during a size transition tends to be confusing and stressful. One pattern of interaction has run its course but a new one has not yet emerged. Members are constantly bumping into boundary phenomena – experiences that disrupt previously reliable expectations. Leaders have a hard time planning because their tools for predicting and regulating the life of the system are no longer adequate. (1998, p. 8)

I often felt strained, over-extended and fatigued as I sought to balance the professional demands of the congregation with my personal needs. I could not seem to keep pace with the number of pastoral calls, meetings to attend, and initiatives to support. I often felt inadequate in my role as expert, uncertain of correct actions to take. I was not certain how to manage the diverse volunteer contributions and the expanding communal needs. I projected my own experiences as minister onto the institution, deducing that if the changes it was undergoing were straining the minister they must also be straining the institutional structure. I was emotionally and spiritually reactive rather than self-reflective.

When choosing a leadership style, in addition to choosing alternative voices one can engage in differing levels of relationship. There is a continuum of choices. I did not understand the option of *we*, only of an *I*. Therefore I fulfilled expectations and led as the authority. The expert voice – the *I* who observes, interprets and concludes – sits toward one end of a spectrum of choices. The relational *we* that constructs meaning and purpose in dialogue approaches the other end of the spectrum. I attempted some dialogue, some relational appreciation, but I did not fully understand the place for the expert in those attempts. I rarely engaged in a dialogue without

holding an opinion. My leadership style was moving toward a relational one, but remained predominantly realist and individualistic.

The need to explain my leadership style on a continuum demonstrates the tenacity of my self-centered mode of leadership. The more I move off a linear perspective, the more I am able to participate with the language of social construction, which offers no endpoint, no culminating relational point on a continuum. A characteristic of the social constructionist stance is the absence of any point of completion, just as infinity offers no attainable endpoint. Instead, there is process, language and relational meaning. Rather than the establishment of a reality or conclusive truth, meaning and understanding are seen as ongoing, created through self-reflective reciprocity that is continually communicated in relationship.

The Limitations and Opportunities of Minister as Expert

I, as an individual with particular learned skills and understandings, observed the subject, the UUSB. I took in information through my senses and processed the content in my mind and in my emotional body to deduce my individual conclusion, which I presented to the congregation as truth. Following are some of my observations and interpretations, and the language I chose to communicate them. I concluded that there was institutional strain; this conclusion was based on my individual feelings as well as what I observed about the number of projects that committees were able or unable complete. To me, the Building and Grounds Committee, Worship Committee, and Membership Committee seemed best to illustrate the presence of an institutional transition and/or overtaxed system. My subject-object, self-centered rather than other-centered viewpoint is reflected both in the prevalence of the *I* in the previous paragraphs, as well as in the comments below excerpted from my original notes for this dissertation. A noticeable absence of *we* reflects my solitary stance of the leader as expert. The strain and fatigue I document also is

reflective of an individualist stance, and there is an absence of language that constructs a collaborative relationship that together can construct a sustainable structure of distributing responsibility. When reconstructing the time line of events, I became aware of the significant events that occurred during my ministry from 1999 through 2006. Had I been more relationally oriented, relationally constructing language, we also would have incorporated into our language practice events such as 9/11 and my cancer diagnosis. Who knows how their inclusion in our language would have created new meaning? As it was, our language practice was around size transition and uncertainty.

In 2004, in the first draft of this dissertation, I wrote that the UU Society of Bangor's church building "was showing signs of neglect, in need of paint inside and out" (Peresluha). I concluded that the building's appearance communicated a particular identity to the residents of Bangor. I communicated my judgment that the appearance of the building was less than desirable and reflected a stressed condition within the institution. The unspoken insinuation was, "How could the UUSB and its minister be credible if we look like this?" I chose the individual expert option not to ask questions or engage relationally. I chose not to invite comments and different perspectives from members or neighbors or colleagues regarding their experience of the appearance of the facility. Instead, I formed my conclusions then sought out stories from those who would corroborate those conclusions, believing this was a dialogue process. I was motivated by the need to move out of my discomfort and arrive quickly at a new more comfortable place. I was focused more on results than on process or relationships.

Following is another example of observations in the original draft of my dissertation that reflected my individualist expert stance at that time:

The hours worked by the sexton were inadequate to keep the building clean after public use. The roof needed work and space needed reorganizing to meet the increasing demands for meetings and Sunday school classrooms. Long time members of the building and grounds committee were not able to complete tasks the way they had previously. What had been informally organized needed more structure. Before, friends knew what needed to be done and who would come down to the church to get a job done. The small group was dedicated, hard working, and well intentioned but the scope of work was getting beyond what a small intimate group could complete. (2004)

I wrote these observations with the intention of objectively communicating a reality, when in fact I was experiencing an internal need to justify my conclusions and establish a reality that I could then respond to expeditiously, as the expert. I intended to move the congregation through its transition. I intended to make my life and work easier. Again, I did not engage in a dialogue, did not seek the input or the experiences of others. I was functioning as an individual who held power over an institution and its members. My understanding of the power I accepted carried with it my sense of responsibility for doing what needed to be done, an interpretation of power and responsibility for tasks and outcomes in which “the buck stops here.” I intended to fix what I saw and experienced as problems at the same time that I was intending to use and engage an appreciative inquiry process to address what I evaluated as being a size transition.

Following are more observations that I recorded in 2004 (Field Notes).

- The Worship committee was taking on new responsibility for organizing and preparing the sanctuary on Sunday mornings, a task previously handled by one or two members and the minister. As the quality of worship increased, attendance increased

which increased the need for more precise attention to the aesthetics of worship.

Members of the worship committee were dividing up more and more responsibility.

- The membership committee manages welcoming and integrating visitors and new members, nametags, greeting on Sunday mornings and the presence of coffee and food after the worship service. The committee was showing signs of burn out.

Meetings which had been fun and social were taking longer and longer to finish the agenda. Frustration with the lack of hosts for coffee hour or greeters was getting louder and harsher. The numbers of people coming in the door and passing right back out the door after a few visits were more noticeable.

- The church administrator was doing her best to pick up the slack but was also feeling that the hours she had been hired for were not adequate for the tasks she was expected to complete. Committee chairs were passing on work for her to complete that they were unable to complete. I was passing on tasks I had previously done myself. The number of rental calls for the building increased, taking more of her time to manage.

I contributed the observations and interpretations of a traditionally trained expert engaged in a positivist process. I studied. I read articles and books on size transitions and appreciative inquiry. I attended workshops on appreciative inquiry. Then I concluded that what Bangor was experiencing was indeed the transition from a pastoral size church, organized around the skills and leadership of the minister, to a program size church, organized around membership and programming. I decided, as the authority observing the subject, that it was time to engage the church leadership in identifying and addressing this size transition. I supported my expert voice by citing another expert voice, that of Alice Mann, author, senior consultant, and seminar leader for the Alban Institute, an independent ecumenical organization based in Herndon, VA, whose

mission is to support congregations. Mann is considered an expert in her field – she has written five books addressing strategic planning, spiritual health, size, and size transitions in congregations – and her voice carries significant authority and credibility. She articulates the connections between the health of a community, its mission and size. As I began exploring the symptoms of size transition at the UU Society of Bangor, Mann’s work reinforced the non-relational voice I chose as leader of the institution. Based on Alice Mann’s writing I determined, without question and without conversations with church members, the available options for me and for the UUSB. Those options were to:

- deliberately decrease programming and membership to remain a pastoral size community;
- deliberately expand membership and structure into a program size community;
- passively remain the same size, in-between a program and a pastoral size church.

Then I presented these options to a small group of individuals with whom I had credibility and therefore could influence. As I had anticipated, they were convinced and went on to present to the congregation the options that we had discussed, but which I already had determined beforehand. My choices of behavior were consistent with McNamee and Hosking’s description of a rational agent: “The rational agent goes out to observe document and conclude. She is guided by a pre proposed methodology, which is designed to protect the study from arbitraryism” (forthcoming).

I had been learning about the principles of appreciative inquiry and, in my expert voice, concluded that an appreciative inquiry summit would have the relational power to inspire and engage the congregation in a decision that they could own. Even though my stance in making that choice was minister as expert, I held a relational context in which I chose that voice. I believe that this is one way in which an expert voice can be helpful and effective in developing

language practices that have the potential to create discovery out of uncertainty. Had I been more other-centered in my relationship with the congregation up to that point when I recommended the summit to the congregation, the outcome may have been more sustainable. I had chosen my expert voice and modified it with parental overtones. The use of my parental voice had been empowering with my daughters and I assumed it would be in this context. What was missing was the reciprocity and appreciation that was foundational to my expert voice as a parent. I was observing the symptoms in the congregation as the expert evaluating its subject without the assumed objectivity of an investigative presence. I had no relational dialogue to construct the necessary reciprocity that assures the validity and effectiveness of an action plan. I researched consultants based on location, price, experience, and references. With the Council's endorsement, I chose David Sanderson of Eagle Point Consulting of Lamoine, ME, to plan and lead the UUSB appreciative inquiry summit. My process in the selection of a facilitator was partially relational and partially appreciative, as I engaged the leadership in a conversation about choices. At the same time, I continued to hold on to my personal agenda, my vision for the congregation and for those front doors. (See Table 2 for examples of my language and behaviors, the voices I chose, other options, and the limitations and opportunities in these choices.)

Launching the Boat: The Appreciative Inquiry Summit

During the summer of 2004, the leadership of the congregation and a newly formed Appreciative Inquiry Task Force were invited to have a conversation to set goals for an appreciative inquiry summit. David Sanderson interviewed individuals to gain a sense of what would be helpful to the UUSB. He also spent a lot of time listening to me talk about my experiences of my leadership role. He and the others he interviewed agreed that I was exhibiting fatigue, and that there was a feeling of “not enough” within the congregation – not enough time,

not enough volunteers, not enough money. The intentions of the leadership and members were to relieve my fatigue, encourage more participation from members and friends, and correct what they experienced as insufficiencies. The leadership and members contributed their thoughts, their time and their commitments to participating in the appreciative inquiry process that the task force and I had initiated and which David Sanderson completed. Together we were relationally engaged, trying to discover and design what it was that held energy and meaning for us. For a moment, we all were looking up, together. The summit gathered 68 members out of a congregation of 165. This was less than an ideal percentage by appreciative inquiry standards but a surprisingly good turnout for this particular congregation. I appreciated the efforts of the task force and members in marketing and encouraging the weekend effort.

We met on a Friday evening, then all day Saturday and again on Sunday following the service. Attendance was consistent for the entire weekend. The congregation engaged in dialogue in dyads on Friday evening and again on Saturday using the following questions to explore their connection to and appreciation of the UU Society of Bangor:

- Tell me about the best times that you have had as part of the UU Society of Bangor. Looking at your entire experience in this congregation, recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement. What made it a significant and fulfilling experience? Who was involved? Describe the event in detail.
- Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself – just as a person, with no special role in mind?
- When you are feeling best about your part as a member of the Society, what do you value about your participation?

- What is it about the Society that you most appreciate? What is the single most important thing that it has contributed to your life?
- What do you think is the essence or heart of our Society?
- Think back to a time when we enjoyed abundant finances. What was happening – what were we able to do? What benefits did we realize? And what allowed us to have that level of abundance?
- If you had three wishes for our Society, what would they be?

The dialogues brought each participant into a fuller awareness of how and why they came to the congregation, what their unique gifts were, and how best to add them to the community. The experiences, ideas and commitments shared in those dialogues was collated and used to name what was at the heart of the congregation, its core identity and an action plan. Following the weekend summit, energy was high for about six months. I appreciated the initiatives taken, volunteer time, creativity, and commitments. I experienced relief of my own fatigue and feelings of being overwhelmed. I no longer felt alone, as I was connecting with their participation. Many effective initiatives were created and sustained followed through after the AI summit. Increasing energy, participation, shared vision relational responsible conversations were emerging in the congregation. (See Appendix H, which includes the commitments made by the Council, and Table 3, which details the action plans that were created at the summit.)

One of the teams from the appreciative inquiry summit worked with me to understand and modify my job description, their expectations, and our communication skills, but my emotional, physical and spiritual fatigue, along with my limited relational skills, prevented my making use of their contributions in a way that would have led us forward together. I concluded, without their verification, that we did not share an image of the future. I was not fully

relationally engaged with the process. Looking back, I believe I was disappointed that the visual improvements in the facility were not as prominent on the community's agenda as they were on mine. I was not able to relationally hold my position and allow them to happen to me as Sheila McNamee had encouraged me during our supervisory conversations. I did not account for the differences in our pace of decision-making and taking action. I was in a hurry and interpreted their slower pace as a lack of enthusiasm when it may have simply been a slower response rate. I also had no awareness of those dynamics from the place I inhabited in my skin.

With high hopes of stronger relational development and personal renewal, I planned and executed a five-month sabbatical plan for 2005. I structured it to include one month off in February, after which I would return to lead a leadership retreat. In April I would depart again for the remaining four months. My intention for the sabbatical was to address my minister-as-expert role. I hoped that putting physical distance between the congregation and me would enable self-differentiation, allowing for independent reflection both for me and for them. I also wanted to expand my appreciative and relational skills and my understanding of both, as well as to recover from my fatigue. I applied, together with three other women ministers from Bangor, for a Boston University sabbatical grant, which we received (see Appendix F). The grant enabled us to create congregational structure and financial support for our departure from our ministries. My process for deciding to apply and then completing my application is an excellent example of my non-relational, positivist minister-as-expert approach. I did not discuss the sabbatical plan, its intentions, or my needs with anyone until after the grant was applied for and obtained. My sabbatical plan was submitted to Boston University and my dates were set without any conversation with the congregation. I acted collaboratively, in relationship with my three colleagues, but not with the congregation I served. I simply told the sabbatical committee what I

was planning and worked with them to structure coverage of essential responsibilities for the congregation in my absence.

On January 18, 2005, I began the first part of the two-part, sabbatical. I stayed in Bangor, reading and reflecting for four weeks. I met weekly with my three Boston University colleagues to reflect as we fulfilled the requirements of our grant. My intention was to construct a reflective distance between myself and the congregation, which would facilitate the integration of what I was learning with my ministerial responsibilities. I studied relational responsibility, social construction, and appreciative inquiry. I connected the values and understandings they offered with my professional practice.

There were two groups in the UUSB leadership structure that I believed were essential to the success of any strategic planning – the Committee on Ministry and the Small Group Ministry. I planned an appreciative inquiry meeting with these two groups, scheduled to take place upon my return to the office.. I believed that taking time away from the day-to-day responsibilities of the ministry would give me more objectivity and more opportunity for self-reflection. During my time away, I crafted the following questions and appreciative process to help create the environment for a transformative dialogue.

- How does what I do help you?
- How does what you do help me?
- How do you imagine our relationship and our work together in the future?

I planned to use reflectors to listen to the conversation, not to correct or problem solve, but to add their insights. I based this choice on a reference by Ken Gergen in *Invitation to Social Construction* (1999) to what Tom Anderson, a therapist and author, has designated as “reflecting teams.” I wanted to offer members of the Committee on Ministry and the Small Group Ministry

the opportunity to work in dyads. My hope was that together we could reconnect with our passions and with each other. I wanted all of us to have something concrete we could hold on to – a core precept of appreciation that would inspire the committees during my absence in the second part of my sabbatical. I believed it was essential for these two groups to be inspired by renewed commitment for their work while I was on sabbatical. I wanted them to be energized, focused, and committed to doing something in my absence.

Ten individuals attended the appreciative inquiry meeting on March 5, 2005. We worked together for four hours, practicing an appreciative process of inquiry. The volunteers expressed an appreciation for the idea of the congregation discovering what it was they wanted to experience in our ministry. They felt they could create opportunities for people to have conversations while I was on sabbatical. They were given three names as resources for appreciative inquiry, including Sanderson. The concept was that they would engage the members of the congregation in a reflective process exploring what they wanted for a future while I was away on sabbatical engaging in a similar self-reflective process. Then, when we reconnected in July, the congregation and I would be prepared to have a conversation about what we all had learned about what we wanted.

There were two essential ingredients missing from the process – the congregation's perspective and input into the motivation and goals of the engagement, and a relationally responsible connection between the 10 participants and me. I had acted as expert in designing the process, an effective choice if there is strong understanding of the limitations and opportunities of the expert voice in that process. I was not using my understanding of the appreciative inquiry process to create an environment for discovery; I was using it to promote my preconceived agenda. I already had determined a desired outcome before engaging anyone

in the process. There was no opportunity for something new to be discovered. I was simply creating a process to get the group going where I wanted them to go. In my field notes I wrote: “Depth and breadth of information surpassed practical application. I have been looking for and at the very heart of the issues, confronting the church. How do I connect what I observe to the theories – reflexive inquiry-generative theory-dialogue potential transformation?” (2005).

To me, these notes communicate the heart of the difference between my ministerial presence in Bangor and my presence four years later in Wilmington, NC. While in Bangor, I had learned the constructionist and appreciative inquiry words. But my individualist academic learning style did not allow for the integration of the concepts nor their practice in relationship. I did not know what I did not know. On my own, I could not fulfill the potential of a relational theory. I was using words rather than relationally constructing a language practice. Language would have been constructed had I been relationally engaging in a dialogue, a reciprocal communication with the leaders and members of the congregation, rather than limiting my voice to an individualist leader/expert stance. My documentation of my observations exemplifies the distinction between words and a language practice. I had learned words, and I expected the words to carry meaning. I had missed completely the necessity of relationship for the creation of language and did not understand that language is the source of meaning-making. I had explored concepts but I had not integrated the concepts, nor had I practiced them relationally. Without the relationships, I was limited to words. We had no language with which to construct meaning or experience transformation. Despite my intentions, my approach was consistent with Sheila McNamee’s description of an individualist, or positivist, approach where “the purpose of inquiry is to produce knowledge about the other as an object or subject of the observation” (2007).

Like my field notes, my initial draft of this dissertation reflected the dominance of my subject-object, self-centered orientation. Following are excerpts:

- A pastoral response to the auction and membership Sunday would be direct supervision and instruction by the minister. A program response structures a committee to make decisions and the minister only responds when asked for feedback or direction.

- The chairperson of the Building and Grounds committee called the office to request that the minister or student intern greet and direct the furnace repairperson. The expectation is that the minister is always available to pick up member responsibilities. Clearly a pastoral church model.

- Member co-facilitator of the Coming of Age class abdicates responsibility for creating an obstacle course and places responsibility on the minister, (me!) to find someone. He offers to help if I cannot find someone.

- Neither the minister nor the student intern was able to not take on this responsibility. Gender issue? Co-facilitator is an older male who uses judgment and intimidation as a communication strategy to accomplish his goals. The council (UUSB governing body) needs to clarify minister's role. Would council prefer consistent pastoral or program response from minister?

- Council can clarify my role, either pastoral or program?

- I will document when I give instructions or direction. Council needs to clarify who is to accept responsibility for consequences of the directions are not followed.

My notes continue with page after page of observations. There is no self-reflection noted. No appreciation is expressed for challenges, efforts, or companionship, either of staff or members. I clearly am alone, a self who is making observations of a subject, speaking in an

almost abstract voice. There is an odd degree of judgment mixed with frustration that reflects a lack of the power or professional authority typically associated with the role of an expert. This prevented me from taking in the multiplicities of the congregation. I failed to create a safe environment for expressing difference. My choices in behavior did not facilitate people meeting each other where they were; rather, they enhanced attempts to convince or challenge. So not only had I accepted the role and responsibility of the minister as expert, I was not asserting power or authority in a direct supervisory capacity. I created an ineffective range of behaviors from passive to assertive reaction – a range of behaviors that does not effectively utilize the power or authority of the expert voice. I had chosen a role and a voice but had not optimized the opportunities of the voice. Instead, I exacerbated the limitations of the role without experiencing its advantages. My notes, questions and conclusions about various communications such as phone calls and personal interactions reflect a consistently resentful, knowing and, at the same time, passive voice. I am almost acting as victim. When I wrote, “Council can clarify my role” and “Council needs to clarify who is to accept responsibility for consequences of the directions not followed,” I almost sound as if I am looking to be rescued or vindicated. I hear myself desperately asking for help – “Tell me what to do!” – as well as a between-the-lines tone of “I’ll show them.” I am seeking an outside expert voice to reassure me at the same time that I am expected to be that expert. Nowhere in my notes is there documentation of any conversations that engaged others with a other voice than that of an expert who is alone, on the outside. Even the minutes for team meetings show that I created the agenda, opened, led and closed the meetings. I controlled content and environment. I set the tone with readings, seating and the choice of where to meet. The roles I enacted were parental. This shows little or no trust in the

congregation for taking on responsibilities, acting relationally, being engaged or collaborative. I effectively joined in and held taut the congregational tug of war.

My entry into the process using the voice of expert, with its preconceived conclusions, limited the relational environment for discovery. The conversations I had with the UUSB leadership and task forces were monologic rather than dialogic. They lacked the openness and inclusivity characteristic of a relational approach, an approach that would have integrated more diverse perspectives and built upon those contributions. Because of the authority invested in the role of the minister as expert, the voice with which the minister chooses to lead has a disproportional effect on the environment created. While I appeared to be engaging in a dialogue by asking questions, the way in which I structured the meetings, where the meetings were held, where I sat, and how I distributed information and questions maintained my power and position as expert. My retention of that authority allowed my observations and conclusions to dominate the process. I effectively silenced dissent and limited the exploration and discovery, while appearing to encourage and engage in dialogue (see appendices D, E, F and G). In effect, I failed to see what McNamee and Gergen described when they wrote: “Persons and relationships are not things. Selves within, conjoint relations, relations among groups, and macro-social formations all represent forms of intelligibility with a history and situated applicability; each a potential move in a conversation” (1998).

A majority of the UUSB members indicated that they liked me and appreciated my ministry. They expressed enjoyment of and derived satisfaction from my initial enthusiasm and energy. They appreciated my work ethic and my demonstrations of expertise. They communicated an experience of calm within the congregation that they related to the predictability of my managerial consistency. They felt inspired by my worship and preaching

style and what they interpreted as a collaborative leadership style. In comparison to the less consistent and more Machiavellian leadership styles they had experienced previously, mine seemed collaborative to them. I had the opportunity and the right ingredients for building a more collaborative ministry and creating a conversational space that would help us to develop relational language to create meaning. It is not apparent in my notes that the missed opportunity was related to. My reflexive understanding of this moment is that I was not ready to let go of the dominant viewpoint in religious institutions that bigger is better. From that viewpoint, I remained attached to non-relational assessments of competency and success. I was ambitiously pursuing recognition, while projecting all of my professional insecurity onto a hoped-for renovation of the front entryway, which I viewed as the key measure of my success.

There was a small number of members who recognized the subjectivity of some of my observations and disagreed with my conclusions. They chose to express their disagreements and propose alternatives. Some were less pleased with me than others. They were unsure of my intentions, unsure of the reality of the size transition I was emphasizing. They were concerned with the impact my initiatives might have on the stability of the congregation. They expressed their doubts to me directly and to other members. They believed that what was being experienced in the congregation was unrelated to a size transition and so endorsed a different approach to addressing the symptoms. We all agreed that issues existed but we disagreed on how they related to the size transitions and membership plateaus outlined by Mann. The individuals who disagreed with my conclusions attributed their experiences, disappointments, and dissatisfaction to my ministerial skills and behaviors (see Appendix K).

The voice of expert has its place, its opportunities, its potentials, and its limitations. One of the essential requirements for the fulfillment of its opportunities and potential is to accept the

role of leader and then lead well, being sure to look over your shoulder frequently to see if anyone is following.

Upon returning from my sabbatical, I discovered that no essential conversations, planning or reflection had occurred in my absence. I was frustrated and disappointed. It was not until after my subsequent experience in Wilmington that I could own responsibility for that outcome. Had I offered a more relationally responsible process, had I discovered an effective sabbatical process through dialogue with the Committee on Ministry and the Small Group Ministry leaders, we might have succeeded. Had I dialogued with them instead of trying to inspire them to adopt my vision, we might have discovered goals and a process they could own and fulfill.

When I returned from my sabbatical, I was able to open a more relational space and engage the membership in new, more dialogic opportunities. Yet I was still unable to sustain the self-reflective other-centered viewpoint that was needed to redistribute power, expectations and responsibility and create a more sustainable shared ministry. Not long after my return from my sabbatical, I began to feel overwhelmed once again. I attempted to work with my Committee on Ministry to re-evaluate my job description and restructure my time, while simultaneously continuing to work with the size transition team to address the pastoral-program church issues. But I felt no relief from burnout. I did not feel inspired, creative, or engaged. The dominance of the expert in my leadership voices and behaviors left little room for the renewal that can be found through relational, shared leadership voices. I continued to carry most of the responsibility and control. Had I more effectively utilized an other-centered dialogic process and self-reflection, I may have more effectively delegated responsibility and invited a more sustainable pattern of institutional choices.

By the beginning of 2006, I no longer felt hopeful for resolution. Internally, I had made the personal decision to end my ministry. My internal, self-centered choice felt like the only option. I believe this experience of limitation was indicative of the dominance of one particular voice in leadership. Later, in Wilmington, I was able to appreciate that experience of limited options as an opportunity to expand the dialogue by inviting more voices and discussing how to expand the conversation. The more voices we, as ministers, have available to us, the more flexible and balanced we keep our leadership presence. We can keep the *we* from being dominated by an *I* by remaining open to our participating in, appreciating and inviting others into an expanding dialogue. The heat or discomfort of a particular situation can be diffused through the relational recognition that we are uncertain. From the recognition and appreciation of uncertainty, we can explore questions such as: What would be helpful? What are we missing? Is there someone or something absent from our conversation, from our process? What is working well?

I did recognize the institutional consequences of my decision to leave and did seek input from other ministers about how best to structure my departure. I was unsure of the best method and timing for communicating my decision. Aware of the church's financial campaign calendar, I was concerned that I would influence members' donations unfavorably if I made my departure public before the campaign, and I felt members would feel angry and/or disappointed that I had been dishonest if I waited until after they pledged their financial commitment to tell them I was leaving. The extremes of both of my conclusions helped me appreciate that there would be different consequences depending on how I chose to exit. I did not want to make this choice alone. I was motivated equally by my increasing awareness of the relational potential in choosing together and by self-centeredness, by my fear of blame. Whatever the choice and its

consequences, I did not want this to be seen or felt as solely my fault. I also believed that the best choice would only come through a conversation. This an example of the progression of my relational development as well as an example of the imbalance of power and authority that I took on my shoulders. I made a decision, unilaterally then called for a conversation on how to deliver the choice I had made. I called a meeting of my transition team, the three most significant congregational leaders, the council president, treasurer and head of the pledge campaign. I informed them of my decision and asked for their thoughts and perspectives on the best timing and method for sharing the news with the congregation. Their responses are detailed in the exit interview (see Appendix K). They were shocked, hurt, angry, and disappointed; I believe they felt blindsided. I felt great relief in finally letting go of the reins and placing the responsibility in their hands. This was a shift in the power and authority but not a transformative dialogue.

The leadership and member's shock and my relief are such exclusive responses. They are responses symptomatic of a non-relational monologic form of leadership. The minister and the congregation were so out of synch with each other that we were not aware of what was happening with the other. My subject-object collection of data and individual conclusions based on my perceived observations left the congregation out of the conversation. Their voices were missing, and their assistance disabled, which exacerbated my stress and fatigue. Stress and fatigue led me to the individual choice to terminate the ministry. This was a monological form of decision-making. I solicited information and opinions from professional colleagues and from select committee members in the congregation. I listened, but we were not engaged in a transformative dialogue. I did not invite a dialogue, honestly express my experiences, or offer transparency about my internal conversations. I did not relationally invite others into a dialogue about my decision to leave. I did invite a dialogue about how to depart, but only after I had made

the decision myself. The dialogue led to a joint decision that I would wait until after financial commitments had been received to tell the congregation. I would mail a letter directly to each member and family informing them of the time and reasons for my departure, and I would leave relatively quickly after the notice (see Appendix L.) My last Sunday at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor was June 18, 2006. Following my departure, the executive director of the Maine district of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations was called in to interview me and the Council in order to gather pertinent information and review my departure. That interview revealed to me the surprise and disappointment of the congregational leadership regarding my departure; this was further evidence of how out of touch I was with experienced reality of the congregation's leaders. Had we been in a responsible relationship, I would have understood their needs far more accurately. We could have discovered a common reality constructed out of our language and relationship. The choice to leave may have been the same, but the circumstances of that departure and the emotions attached to it could have been very different.

My limited relational experience, attachment to a particular ministerial voice and identity limited my viewpoints on size and my ability to discover, design and dream about what size the UU Society of Bangor could be, should be or wanted to be. I sustained a problem oriented approach to my experiences as the minister, which prevented some new discoveries or unique opportunities to arise from the relationships within the congregation. Appreciation of the assets within the community, congregation, facility and membership and utilization of the relationships between those aspects of the UUSB allowed a continued domination of the institutional view that bigger is better and its inverse that there is something wrong with small.

In Chapter 4, I continue my discussion of my experience of appreciation as an effective process for remaining in the middle until something new is discovered. I will discuss how engaging in a more relational style of ministry, asking questions, and trusting the appreciative process as more than an organizational tool allowed me not only to generate questions but to free my self from intention and expectation, other than to generate conversation and possibility.

Chapter 4

Integrating the Diverse Voices and Choices for Leadership

In this chapter, I describe the continuation of my process of integrating a relational voice into professional ministry within the context of interim ministry. The time-limited, goal-oriented needs of an interim period in a congregation's life lend themselves particularly well to the relational choices I am offering for ministries. In most interims, neither minister nor congregation hold pre-existing expectations or preconceptions about what will be accomplished. In my experience as an interim, there was an openness and an invitation, as well as the safety, to be creative and to discover. This offered me the encouragement I needed to risk a new approach to my ministerial role. This sense of openness and encouragement was quite different from the limitations I had encountered in settled ministry.

Chapter 4 covers the period in my ministry following my departure from the UU Society of Bangor and the subsequent year. In this chapter, I explore in depth my experience as interim minister at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington, NC (UUFW). It is presented as a narrative of the Wilmington congregation's movement toward appreciative inquiry. In describing various phases in our journey together, I quote from social constructionists as a way of introducing discussion of the relationally responsible qualities that are relevant. The experiences described following each quote demonstrate the process through which we experienced the relational characteristics presented and discovered their possibilities. I also quote at length from email communications among congregational leadership, using their own words to illustrate movement from bitterness toward appreciative inquiry and to show how a shift in the congregation's culture produced an outcome. (See Table 4 for examples of my choices in leadership voice in Wilmington and their impact.)

It Works If You Work It!

In 12-step recovery programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, short pithy statements are used as quick resources for changing behavioral choices. Easy to remember phrases such as “Let go and let God,” “Easy does it,” and “It works if you work it” are process reminders to stay with intention rather than allowing emotional habits and less-conscious motivations to lead one astray. Addictive thinking is cunning and can unconsciously sabotage the best behavioral intentions, unless effective tools are readily available to counter its assertion. I recognized during my first few months away from the congregation in Bangor that the dominance of individualistic thinking was thwarting my more conscious intention to be relational in my behavioral choices. I found the readily available Twelve Step reminders helpful in managing my habitual, learned behavior and mindset to make an intentional relational shift.

I spent the year following my departure from Bangor renewing, reflecting, studying, and integrating what a relationally responsible orientation entailed. I was learning, and practicing what I learned. There are a variety of relationally responsible behavioral choices that are reflected in my choice to engage in an interim ministry with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington, NC. In 2007, at the end of June, I explored interim ministry as a specialized opportunity to practice relational skills and appreciative leadership choices in ministry. The comparatively short-term, transitional needs of interim ministries could be well-served by a relationally oriented process. It would also be more reasonable for me to expect myself to sustain a relational orientation for a shorter term-limited ministry, rather than assuming I would be able to sustain those relational qualities long-term. I was unsure of what I was going to encounter as I began choosing more relational leadership practices. I thought it prudent to practice a relational stance for a clearly bounded, short-term commitment rather than in an

ongoing unsustainable, commitment. My thought was, “I can do anything for a year or two.” I was also committed to intentional process, working it until I got it.

I chose to enter training for certification as an interim minister, intentionally communicating my preference for approaching interim transitions with appreciative inquiry methods. My purpose in training was to understand the unique transitional needs of congregations while expanding my leadership choices. I wanted to understand how to integrate and balance the expectations for the minister as expert with relational leadership choices. I wanted to affirm that we each carry multiple internal voices reflecting past environments, relationships, experiences, strengths, and imperfections. I could feel my experiences of the Bangor ministry encouraging a new appreciative, relational leadership voice. I was learning to ask, not tell, inquiring of others, and myself, “What would be most helpful for congregations in transition? How would they best relate with their minister?” In the choice to be relational, there is an invitation to be with another, open to discovery. In being open to discovery comes the inspiration and motivation for mutual, reciprocal creativity. The process, I discovered, is neither direct nor linear. Each discovery leads to something unexpected, which then leads to new direction, and new possibility. Trust and commitment to process are essential for allowing intention to find discovery and for discovery to construct meaning. It is difficult in descriptive writing and in the process not to frame or define outcomes as solutions, experienced. Our dominant language practice is so effectively utilized to affirm linear problem-solution efficiency. The relationally responsible process trusts that something new will be revealed. The absence of desired outcomes or expected solutions that can limit discovery expands possibilities. That is what we must trust will work, if we work it.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington (UUFW)

It is important to understand that a relational stance is not a preferred or better than viewpoint. The intention is to expand the conversation, increase the participation, and develop alternatives so that new and unique alternative to what we have can be constructed. (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming)

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington's settled minister of four years had departed unexpectedly. At the suggestion of the Transitions Office of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the department that manages ministerial transitions, Wilmington's leadership considered the benefits of working with a minister specializing in leading congregations through transitions. A search committee from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington was formed, and authorized by the congregation's governing body, the Board of Trustees, to interview and recommend an interim minister.

A representative of the Search Committee called me on July 8, 2007, to inquire about my interest in becoming their interim minister. Quite ironically, I was at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, NH, attending a Taos Institute conference on Social Construction, Toward Transformative Dialogue. It was the perfect conversational environment to begin a relationship with the UU Fellowship of Wilmington. I was aware of the language I wanted to use; based on the limitations I had experienced using the language of an expert. I introduced myself as a minister who worked with appreciative inquiry methods in developing a relational style of leadership. I described my experience and study of appreciative inquiry methods, explaining that I would like to work with them offering what I could about appreciative inquiry. I also shared that I was currently working on my PhD and that my dissertation involved the use of appreciative inquiry tools to support congregations moving through transitions. We agreed that the unique ending of their settled ministry created an opportunity for the congregation's

members to explore and experience different styles of leadership in sharing their ministry. The Search Committee expressed their belief that the Fellowship's members were motivated to practice new relational and communication skills. The Search Committee expressed the willingness to learn about and participate in an appreciative process in order to successfully move through their ministerial transition in order to call the best possible settled minister.

“What distinguishes a relational orientation from a subject object orientation is its emphasis on the processes of relating rather than an emphasis on observing objects interacting” (McNamee & Hosking, forthcoming).

I intentionally chose relational, other-centered language to begin our first conversation, practicing an other-centered relationally responsible voice to share our explorations and decision-making (see Appendix N). To me, this meant that I responded to the Search Committee's questions with “what we could explore” rather than “what I would do.” I did not stand outside their gathering, observing them, assessing, or drawing conclusions. I was less focused on communicating my credentials and competence than I was on listening to their experience and exploring our options. Our conversation was not long enough for me to discern whether they were interested in a more collaborative model of ministry, but I was intentional about using a voice other than expert and not offering solutions to their identifications of problems. The committee members noticed something different in our conversation, and expressed appreciation and interest in learning more. I was intentionally reflecting on my language. I was aware of what voice I wanted to introduce to this group. I wanted them to be empowered, to feel safe being direct and honest. I asked myself what would be most helpful. I risked not knowing. I asked them what they needed from me to assure the safety they needed to ask me what they wanted to know. I offered just enough expert language to reassure them that I

was a professional, but it was an expert voice with no agenda for what needed to be created, other than trust. The Search Committee felt safe enough to recommend me to the Board of Trustees, as their candidate for the interim ministry in Wilmington.

Relational Viewpoints on Invoking Group Realities

Individual actions are manifestations of groups to which he or she belongs. Whenever we speak or act we represent larger groups; we speak and act in ways that are intelligent to them. When we wish to cast individual blame, we may ask; what group does this action speak for? How do we see this action in a positive way? When I cast my blame, what group am I representing? In what ways is interpersonal conflict always a local manifestation of inter group conflict? How can group meaning be coordinated?

(McNamee, 2007)

Following the Board's acceptance of the Search Committee's recommendation, the president of the Board and I had a conversation. We discussed my making a preliminary visit to Wilmington. We agreed that it would be helpful for us to meet prior to a final decision. Meeting leaders and members of the congregation would expand our learning and offer a chance to talk about our mutual needs in a contractual professional relationship. Before my arrival, I emailed a brief introduction to appreciative inquiry to the Search Committee and the Board of Trustees (see Appendix O). I suggested they create some group opportunities for people interested in meeting and speaking with me.

During my visit, several small group gatherings were scheduled. We had the opportunity for several different conversations with people serving a variety of roles and responsibilities in the Fellowship. I discovered through our conversations that each person attending each gathering held a distinctly different perspective on the departure of the previous minister. A

similarly wide range of emotional reactions was expressed about Rev. Susan Carlson's departure. At each small gathering, I attempted to establish a safe environment for conversational opportunities. I was careful where I sat – close, easily accessible, not in the middle but not off to the side either. I was intentional about how I listened and responded. I did not invite the expert voice to be in the room. I engaged as an appreciative listener to what it was these members had experienced and wanted next. I listened and asked exploratory questions about each individual's experience of the Fellowship's ministry (see Appendix N). I asked people to tell me their stories, to tell me about the Fellowship, its members, and its significance to them. I asked what they felt was important for me to know, what they hoped for and how they wanted us to work together. I listened to their anger, disappointment, and concerns. I reflected care and appreciated their sharing. I made no promises, offered no conclusions or solutions and when asked for strategies, I suggested we would discover those together, after we discovered what was important. I asked more questions and listened to what they most wanted to have accomplished. I closed each gathering by thanking each person for his or her time and feedback and let them know that I enjoyed meeting them, respected their feedback, and appreciated learning more about the Fellowship. After three days we agreed on a one-year letter of agreement to work on the interim tasks. We left open the possibility of my continuing for a second year if we should agree that it was needed and that we wanted to continue together.

While in Wilmington I looked for and found a place to live that would keep me at a reasonable distance from the Fellowship. I knew that if I was too close, I would spend too much time at the office, and if I was too far, I would spend too much time commuting. I spent a significant portion of this visit to Wilmington reflecting on what I would need to nurture myself and meet my personal needs. I appreciated that I would be a long distance from my spouse,

children, and close friends. I have learned that my wellbeing is dependent on being able to accurately assess and meet my personal needs. Personal wellbeing is an essential ingredient for assuring my ability to be self-reflective and relationally dependable. I wanted to avoid creating unreal expectations for accomplishments or productivity. For me to detach from the security I had known in the minister as expert role, I needed to have resources to assure my personal wellbeing. If I were stressed, I would fall back on the familiar role of expert, choosing that voice because it was easier, not because it would be most helpful. Finding an affordable, comfortable place to live that allowed me easy access to the beach, kayaking, and swimming, was an essential ingredient for self-care, self-reflection, and sustainable boundaries. For me, comfortable living conditions supported my making relationally responsible choices. The UUFW accepted their responsibilities in our relationship by providing adequate professional compensation, housing, salary, health insurance, and professional expenses that would assure my comfort and safety while in Wilmington.

When I accepted the position as interim minister in Wilmington, by signing a Letter of Agreement, I made the intentional, but minimally practiced choice to practice an appreciative leadership style. I decided I would relationally focus with the Wilmington congregation as consistently as I was able. I would be direct about owning when I was not able to be relational and take time away to be self-reflexive until I was able.

I believed that if I could initially establish a relationship of reciprocal responsibility with a small group, this small group and I could practice, discover, and adjust concepts before sharing and modeling with the larger community. I believed that I needed to first begin with a few people. I wanted to learn, practice and collaborate with a small group so that together we could learn how an appreciative leadership style and shared relational ministry might be engaged in the

Fellowship. I was aware that I did not really know who these people were, what their culture was, or their habits of relating. I did not feel like an expert on how to engage with them. I did have a willingness to learn, a few tools to practice and the supportive resources of the Taos Institute staff, and UU interim ministerial colleagues.

I returned home to Maine after a three-day visit in Wilmington. Upon my return to Maine, I wrote a letter of thanks to the Board of Trustees and asked them to discuss and suggest members who would be interested in forming a Transition Team to work directly with me on the appreciative inquiry process. I requested people who would communicate with me during August, in preparation for my September arrival in Wilmington. I included eight copies of *The Appreciative Organization*, by Harlene Anderson, and David Cooperrider, one copy for each board member to read and pass on if they choose (see Appendix P).

During August, I learned the names of the six individuals chosen to make up the Transition Team (TT). I emailed each member of the Transition Team an introduction to appreciative inquiry. I gave them a list of books they could read and invited them to become more acquainted with appreciative inquiry prior to my arrival. We communicated through email and established a meeting time for my first week in Wilmington. The meeting was intentionally scheduled to follow our first worship service together. We did this so that they would not have any relational advantage or superiority by meeting me before others. That feedback had already been expressed and acknowledged. Some members were offended because others had been chosen to meet with me in July without the opportunity for the whole congregation to meet with me. This was my first opportunity with the Transition Team to encourage their appreciation of the feedback and to respond to it rather than feeling defensive, judgmental, or afraid. We had several email conversations. I asked them for their feedback on the individuals involved, what

these people had experienced before, what might they be afraid of, reacting to or hurt by. We acknowledged that the previous minister had been seen as closer to some members than others. She “had favorites,” I was told. Some members felt left out and less important. We agreed to do everything possible to assure people that I did not have favorites and that we would all be engaged equally with each other and the interim process. No one was going to be left out.

The first worship service in Wilmington was my opportunity to introduce myself to the congregation. I began by unpacking the “interim bag,” a canvass bag I brought to the service that I had filled with tools that symbolized the work we would do together. I described the hammer, which as a social constructionist, I would use to build relationships; the mirror that we would use to reflect back to each other the meaning we were discovering; and of course the water pistol they could use to shoot me if I tried to tell them what to do.

I explained to the congregation that I had already had a conversation with the Worship Committee about the order of service. I had some suggestions for ways that the service could be rearranged and asked for their permission before I made any changes. I described to them my thought process for the changes and asked for their feedback using the announcement part of the service. I did not want to have them resist or suspect my intentions. We discussed moving the sounding of the chime to after announcement to create a quieter, more contemplative beginning to the Sunday service. “Would that be OK? We can try it, get your feedback and make any other changes based on your suggestions and feedback. And candles of joy and concern – I would like to have them right after the offering, trusting your ability to keep them short and relevant so that I can incorporate their content into the service rather than have any jarring disconnect between the candles and what I have offered in the sermon and readings. Would that be OK? Then, please note these changes for today. Next week they will be printed in the order

of service.” When they agreed, I played with them during the first service and implemented the changes the following week. I asked them at the end of the second week’s service how they felt about the changes and got positive feedback.

The choice to first talk with the Worship Committee and then suggest changes combined the expert voice with a relational mother voice. My knowledge and experience has taught me how to arrange an effective flow to worship that optimizes the integration of content with inspiration. I did not just come in and make the changes, because I knew that an atmosphere of trust and slow motion were required to build an atmosphere that would support and sustain relationships.

I communicated my delight to be with them, my appreciation of the difficult circumstance that had called us together and said I would stay with them until they no longer needed me. I promised to own when I was wrong and to never put being right ahead of being in relationship. I promised to be their cheerleader, to confront issues that were not helpful, respectful, or relational and to listen to all they needed to share with me. I explained the boundaries of our relationship, the tasks we were expected to accomplish, and the relational way in which I hoped we would engage this transition (see Appendix N). I received enthusiastic, positive feedback after this service.

The Transition Team and I met the following week. We began our first meeting with a reading of the following poem by Hugh Prather. The District Executive, Annette Marquis, had introduced it to me when she opened the start of worship for the Board of Trustees and me earlier that week. For me, the poem described the relational tone of communication I hoped to engage with the Transition Team. I hoped the poem would speak to them and inspire their participation.

I must do these things in order to communicate:

Become aware of you (discover you).

Make you aware of me (uncover myself).

Be ready to change during our conversation, and be willing to reveal my changes to you.

For communication to have meaning it must have a life.

It must transcend “you and me” and become “us.”

If I truly communicate, I see in you a life that is not I and partake of it.

And you see and partake of me.

In a small way we then grow out of our old selves and become something new.

To have this kind of sharing I cannot enter a conversation clutching myself. I must give myself to the relationship, and be willing to be what grows out of it.

To have this kind of sharing I cannot enter a conversation clutching myself. I must give myself to the relationship, and be willing to be what grows out of it.

And we began.

Entering the Systemic Swim

All events are interrelated; no action is a spontaneous occurrence. Whatever action occurs, depends on an enormous array of other events and occurrences. . . . How is this action reflecting the context in which this individual works, the state of our relationship at this point, the condition of the country? (McNamee, 2007)

In order that the work I was asking the Transition Team to participate in be effective, we needed to shift ourselves out of the very familiar traditional roles. The individualistic model would be for me as the expert to impart information, the “truth,” to the Transition Team, which they would then internalize. Once they had accepted the truth as I had described it, they would pass that truth on to the members of the congregation. This option represents John Shotter’s

notion of the currently, taken for granted, world we inherited from Descartes (2008, p.82). The congregation already had its own concepts formed based on their individual experiences of Rev. Carlson's departure. There are basic concepts, of time, and space, matter and motions, feelings and reality that went into each member's experience. For them to consider accepting a different interpretation with which they could move forward, they needed a never before practiced relational context for moving forward. If they carried their experiences in the traditional framework of individualism, there would be limited movement for them to go forward without carrying that story into their future decisions and choices. For them to be free to discover something new for their Fellowship and for its relationship to their minister, the Transition Team and I needed to offer them something new, a relationally responsible understanding of the way in which the meaning of their experience could be interpreted. A conversation would need to be generated in which multiple perspectives and experiences could be appreciated without any one dominating. Once individuals could see, hear and appreciate that someone else had a completely different experience than theirs, we could put the pieces together into a constructed whole that would add meaning to their discovery.

I introduced myself to the Transition Team, whose six members represented a variety of ages, lengths of membership, level of involvement and intimacy with the previous ministry. We spent the first two-and-a-half-hour meeting getting to know each other personally and briefly discussing the process of appreciative inquiry. We agreed to meet again within a week to discuss whether or not the appreciative inquiry methods would be helpful and how we would engage the tools with the Fellowship. There was initial enthusiasm about the possibilities an appreciative approach could offer. I planned to have them engage in an appreciative inquiry dialogue during that meeting and to give them literature on appreciative inquiry. We were working together with

me as the expert here, with my own understanding of what elements would be important if we were to develop a relational language practice. My awareness of some of essential relational ingredients helped us to be relational. It was part of the we – of me with the team. We practiced and modeled what we hoped would be an effective language practice for our ministry. Self-reflexively, I was internalizing the depth and breadth of the relational concepts while developing language that was relational, inclusive, and safe. Truly being the expert can be relational as the role opens one to learning, readjusting, and developing the flexibility in understanding and praxis, which invites the other into the learning and practice with us. A relational expert voice differs from the individualistic expert voice. I had previously believed that the expert voice existed only in the individualistic context.

Invoking the Group Realities

Conflict and disharmony are a natural and inevitable outcome of social existence.

Likewise, all that is good and valuable within a relationship is dependent on others. We have the relational ability to transform conflict or diversity into a resource of strength rather than a liability if we can increase the choices and voices engaged to communicate, to appreciate rather than dominate. By appreciating the presence of an other we invite other voices into the dialogue, assuming the relational responsibility for their safety, allowing meaning to be reconfigured, together. (McNamee & Gergen, 1999)

Moving from my initial awareness of social construction as an academic theory to an appreciation of social construction as a way of leadership practice was a process of integrating concepts and tools as language practice and behavioral choices. I recognized a continuum developing between an individualist leader as expert choice and a relational, dialogic approach

reflected in language, voice, and the conscious and unconscious shifts in behavioral stance. The intentional navigation of leadership style along that continuum reflects an awareness of ministerial authority, and the intentional redistribution of power as relationally sourced. Table 4 compares stories, language choices, intentions, and the outcomes they can produce. I watched and recorded different situations at the UUFW. I watched and reflected. I was not always able to immediately offer the relational response that I thought would be the most effective. Sometimes, I backslid into the more familiar individualist, minister as expert, power-over-another response. I began to recognize that this response usually indicated that I was feeling threatened, or that I had a personal investment in outcome or was personally attached to an identity or sense of accomplishment. My responses became another tool for evaluating my choices of leadership style. When uncomfortable, threatened or attached I began to be intentional of what style I was choosing rather than unconsciously slipping into behaviors. When I intentionally chose to be the expert sometimes I could pause, and consciously ask, myself Is that what would be most helpful in this situation. Then, my choice became the best I could offer at the time as opposed to an ineffective unintentional reaction. My comments reflect how my choices, understanding, and therefore my ability to be intentional expanded as I ministered with different congregations moving through similar institutional transitions.

UUFW Appreciative Inquiry Summit: A Leap Weekend

The choice to plan and engage the Fellowship in an appreciative inquiry summit was an outcome that emerged gradually from a dialogic process. Our process included continually checking and rechecking. The Transition Team and I initiated many opportunities for the members of the congregation to have conversations with me and with each other reviewing their stories of the settled minister's departure. We called the gatherings "cottage meetings." The

intent of the cottage meetings was to help members tell their stories and listen to others tell their stories. We hoped that through this sharing, members would reframe as perception that which they previously had experienced as truth. There would be less judgment or divisiveness between differing perceptions than between differing “truths.”

We planned and offered three to four different meeting times each month so that almost everyone could find a time convenient for them to attend. We offered afternoons, evenings, and weekend times. We met at the Fellowship and in member’s homes. The gatherings were structured to accommodate the presence of five to 30 people. The Transition Team members had read about and practiced appreciative inquiry facilitation. They felt comfortable working with me, on their own, or in pairs. Each member had the skills to create questions that would open up the conversations and to talk about their experiences with each meeting. After each gathering we checked and rechecked our purpose to ensure that we were not asserting a group agenda in a way that *we* as a team knew what was best for the UUFW. We discussed what we hoped to accomplish by continuing to offer gatherings for conversation. We evaluated the environments we were choosing, listened to feedback, discussed and let go of possible interpretations and conclusions and tried to continue creating and supporting a place for members to learn, express and share without having to solve a problem that we were not going to identify. As meeting attendance decreased from a high of 30 to a low of zero, we offered fewer and fewer times for gatherings until we felt everyone who wanted to attend a cottage meeting had attended one. We sent out an announcement via email to solicit responses. We asked if there was anyone who wanted to attend a cottage meeting who had not been able to attend. We offered an opportunity to sign up for a gathering and indicated we would continue scheduling meetings if necessary. We received feedback that no more cottage meetings were needed.

Several dominant themes emerged out of the conversations during that fall. As the Transition Team and I began to recognize and discuss the themes and their meaning, we discussed the possibility of gathering as many members as possible in the same room with each other to talk. We agreed that an appreciative inquiry summit would give us the right environment to talk with members about the fellowship, its history, and its future. We met several times and discussed the options and the character of the Fellowship in an effort to choose the most effective way to engage the UUFW in discovering a plan for its future. We used the themes discovered in the cottage meetings to create a structure for the appreciative inquiry summit. The Transition Team and I decided to take advantage of the 2008 Leap year calendar and to plan the summit for that weekend. We called it the LEAP weekend and started marketing it early to assure maximum attendance at the weekend. This announcement was first published in the December church newsletter. The first part was a column signed by the Transition Team and outlining the sources of information and also defined the inclusivity of the process. From childcare to parking, to invitations and information packets, the intent of the Team was to open access, include as many voices as possible, and to appreciate people's time and energy in making it possible for them to attend.

In appreciating the relational context that we were trying to create, our understanding was that the more effective we were in creating an inclusive environment, the more voices would be present in the process. The more voices that we could engage in the discovery, the more authentic the dreams resulting from the conversations would be. If my charge as interim minister was to support the selection of an effective settled minister, then a representative understanding and discovery of what that minister's personal strengths and limitations should look like and what her professional skills should be, then we needed as many members as possible to be in the

process. The system would only reveal itself when as many intersections as possible were created with as many areas of the Fellowship's life and presence in the Wilmington area as possible.

“How is this action reflecting the context in which this individual (the UUFW) works, the state of our relationship at this point, the condition of the country? How are we all contributing to this kind of occurrence?” (McNamee & Gergen, 1999).

Following is the text of the Transition Team's column in the Wilmington Fellowship's December newsletter.

LEAPING! To Discover, Dream. Design and Deliver!

The UU Fellowship of Wilmington's LEAP weekend is the seminal weekend of our two-year interim ministry. Dreams have been discovered. Now, we are ready to design and deliver the course to move those dreams into reality. If you have not received your invitation and information please pick a LEAP packet up in the office or from the visitor's table on Sunday.

During the cottage meetings you had the courage and integrity to discover your dreams. You have been heard and appreciated. Now we want you to join in designing the reality that will fulfill those dreams. On Friday February 29, from 7:00 to 9:00 PM we will LEAP from dreaming to acting, prioritizing and organizing our dreams into an achievable plan. Saturday we will create teams and tasks to move the plan into action.

On Sunday we will deliver a vision, vote on the future and initiate the action steps to make our vision a reality.

Youth six grades and older are invited to participate in all the LEAP activities. Those fifth grade and younger will participate in an organized age appropriate LEAP

process. Parents and guardians of fifth grade and younger need to pick up an information pack after registering for the Kid's LEAP.

Parking on Friday and Saturday will include Roland Grise Middle School. Sunday's parking arrangements will be finalized and communicated next week.

We want our whole fellowship to be part of the conversation and the plan. Come! The more who participate the more reflective of our whole community our choices and plans will be.

Following is a separate announcement that also appeared in the December newsletter and was also included weekly in the Order of Service on Sunday mornings.

LEAP! TOGETHER

Launch the search for our settled minister!

Envision our future!

Apply our strengths!

Promote our passion!

February 29, 2008 7:00-9:00 PM Let's begin

March 1, 2008 9:00 AM-4:00 PM Learn what we love. Claim what is important

March 2, 2008 1:00 PM- 4:00 Put it all into action.

SAVE THESE DATES! Make sure you are part of the fun and satisfaction of LEAPing into the future of the UU Fellowship of Wilmington.

Prior to this LEAP event, the Transition Team and I were gathering the members of the Fellowship together to encourage safety trust and develop relationships. The context was fragile, as members were dealing with hurt based in the perception that a few had made decisions for the many, that there was secrecy and a hidden agenda in the system. Now that those emotions had

been vented and relationships and trust had developed, the community was ready to take on the more-complex task of system analysis and placement of individual experiences into a systemic context. Planning an appreciative inquiry summit would give more members more access to more information and open the conversation for an understanding of the relational premise that all events are inter-related and that each member was in some way was a part of the events that unfolded. Without blaming, isolating, or judging, a new pattern of communication and relational responsibility would be possible.

The Transition Team and I continued to meet weekly for slightly less than two hours each time. We practiced listening skills and discussed conversations that we were hearing in the Fellowship. Together we discussed initiatives that were working, issues that seemed to concern people, and ways to engage conversations. The need to hire a new settled Minister was the obvious, way-out-in-front priority. Accomplishing that task in a thoughtful, effective manner was what everyone wanted but were unsure of how to accomplish. Quality worship, getting more volunteers and communication were also high priorities. Respecting the appreciative inquiry process, we decided to make sure we had no preconceived agenda for the LEAP weekend. We talked for a long time about how to create a thoughtful, engaging, and exciting process that would keep people active and present for the whole weekend. We had fun creating, discussing, and relating. The team's commitment and devotion to the Fellowship was key to our success. Getting my *self* out of the way and not forming an opinion or an agenda were my gifts to the process. I had to sit on my hands several times, watching my individualist self, who wanted so much to add an opinion or lead the discussion in a particular direction. When asked for an opinion, I responded and tried to engage them with questions that would flush out an answer rather than my providing an answer. We practiced exercising our relational muscles with

intent. We committed our time and energy to the weekend, each of us making the personal choice to facilitate, engage in questions, sustain the process, and complete the follow-through. After the first evening, distinct interest groups emerged around the themes from the cottage meetings. Members of the Transition Team and I each selected a particular interest group to work with, support, and facilitate. We each remained with our groups during and following the LEAP weekend to support their initiatives and follow-through. (See Appendix U, LEAP Retreat Report of Leadership/Ministry Project Group, for details on the groups, their reports, initiatives and follow-through.)

I was able to share my enthusiasm, experience, and energy, while at the same time sustaining my relationship with the team and adding to the sum total of our collaborative effort. No one felt or expressed any ownership of a goal. *We* discussed hopes, concerns, and ways of relating. We decided. We did it. We felt confident that we could do a good job. We rarely questioned or tired. We had fun, laughed, supported one another. We felt and experienced a sense of satisfaction in the outcomes and possibilities that had energized all who attended. Follow-through was excellent and ongoing. How different from Bangor! There, initiatives did not have the same percentage of completion or follow-through. Energy deflated only a few months following the appreciative summit there. Several initiatives never got off the ground after the appreciative weekend in Bangor. Others became controversial, reflecting a lack of skill at managing different opinions and perspectives.

I also realized that relationality and appreciation are more easily sustained with confidence. Low self-esteem and insecurity actually shift the motivation that grounds the choice to engage the individualist expert leadership choice. There are both appropriate and inappropriate uses of the expert voice. When I was in Bangor, my choice to engage the voice of

the expert came from the need to have ownership of the growth and positive changes, so that I would increase my stature as a minister, as a woman. My own lack of self-esteem and lack of confidence motivated the less-relational, less-effective usage of what can be a helpful leadership stance. In Wilmington, I had more confidence. I also was relationally engaged. This added to my confidence because I was now part of a we, and we were figuring this out; I did not have to do it myself. I also was not looking for the personal affirmation that I had needed in Bangor.

Our urge to protect ourselves with control, withdrawal, or other self-oriented behaviors lessens when we feel relationally supported and competent. That is one way of deciding which voice to use when. What are the risks? How do we evaluate risk? How vulnerable are we willing to be? A parent who is letting a child play in the backyard takes some risk. She may decide that letting the toddler learn to play on the jungle gym is a manageable risk and so does not interfere, keeping a watchful eye while the toddler experiments, falls down, and grows in confidence through taking risks. But most parents would not find it an acceptable risk to allow the toddler to walk out into a street in order to experiment with eye-hand coordination or muscular strength with moving vehicles. The loss-gain ratio in the risk is too big! The parent as expert would be risk-averse and grab the child before he or she entered the street. This is an appropriate and effective use of the unilateral individualistic expert voice.

The institutional transitions being managed in both Bangor and Wilmington presented symptoms that I, as minister, assumed responsibility for managing. In both congregations, I entered the relationship as the expert, observed behaviors, institutional structure and the expectations and tasks being managed by volunteers and staff. In Bangor, I only understood one role, one choice for ministering and leading, so I observed, responded and concluded from the stance of the expert. I did not relationally engage with members and staff in a process of

discovery as I would in Wilmington. Without an awareness of differing voices, leadership tools, and the opportunities or limitations of those choices, ministry was limited to an observer-subject relationship. Shared ministry can be expanded and deepened when an appreciative relational approach redistributes the power and authority among the members and the staff in a mode of dialogic discovery.

Relational responsibility is a self-reflexive language practice utilized by social constructionists to communicate the potential for new understandings and choices open to us if we can commit ourselves to the praxis of being in relationship rather than to being right. Social constructionists first used the words “relational responsibility” to communicate the necessary elements of dialogue – one of the foundational components of social construction. Social construction proposes that what human beings experience as reality is actually constructed through language, which integrates and communicates our expressions of historic, cultural, and communal experiences through our words, our stories. Therefore, social construction presumes that dialogue can be intentionally directed to construct differing realities. But not just any dialogue will suffice. What is required is a dialogue in which participants are so engaged and so committed that they can sustain dialogue by staying present in the dialogue process without giving in to any emotional or intellectual urges to dominate, silence the other, or walk away. In that staying, the possibility for discovery and creativity is enhanced. This creative discovery is what social constructionists understand to be the very nature of reality, that is, a socially constructed understanding revealed and shared through transformative dialogue.

The responsibility in this relational dialogue is different from the more familiar individual responsibility to a moral definition of right or wrong, good or evil; Relational responsibility is different from those behavioral expectations previously understood from a modernist frame of

reference. The responsibility in relational responsibility is understood within the context of the relationship. It is rooted in the need to sustain the dialogue and the relationship long enough to move into the experience of something not-yet known and never-before experienced – and from there, appreciatively into whatever lies beyond. Dialogue then creates a reality that participants in the relationship could not have imagined or predicted prior to the engagement in dialogue. This relational approach to dialogue and discovery requires time, attention to relationship, self-awareness, and the ability to appreciate and make room for the other. It is an expansion of the possibility for shared ministry and institutional health. The relational approach differs recognizably from an individualist approach with an expert presence by its absence of an agenda and of any preconception of outcome or direction. Had I assumed the language of a size transition, or conflict resolution, or healing grief in Wilmington, we never would have addressed some of those very issues. It was within the safety of discovering together what was important that these concepts could be taken out, examined and discussed – without the hindrance of congregational fears and mistrust from being told what to do

During my last month in Wilmington I was able to watch and recognize incredible institutional growth that was a direct result of our work together. The congregation never addressed a size transition directly, but accomplished many of the institutional and relational structural changes associated with moving from a family size to program size congregation. The structural changes they have addressed have prepared the Fellowship to encourage and manage the growth associated with becoming a program size congregation. They chose how they wanted to be together, what was important and what they loved best about their fellowship. I helped by sharing my own understanding of the important qualities and institutional identity needs for different size congregations as well as offering relational language choices, motivated by

discovery rather than a choice. The expert remained available upon request, as a resource for what we wanted to experience and how we could succeed in arriving where we wanted to go.

The following sections demonstrate the qualities I associate with the Wilmington congregation's institutional and relational growth in three critical areas – communication, leadership, and decision-making.

Communication

Email! When I arrived in Wilmington and the story of Rev. Carlson's departure unfolded, email was blamed as the cause of her resignation. The story was that there had been expressions of discontent with a variety of issues surrounding the ministry. One couple particularly disgruntled over a ministerial issue responded by resigning from membership in the Fellowship. They chose to communicate their resignation via email on the Fellowship's list-serve and also posted a written copy on the Fellowship's bulletin board. The email posting inspired responses ranging from sadness to outrage. The conflict was exacerbated by the many different responses expressing emotions. The president of the Board of Trustees attempted to manage the volatility of the emails by requesting an end to email communications. Her attempts were effective in calming the emotions but not soon enough to prevent the resignation of the minister.

When I arrived, the "email war," as it was referred to, seemed to hold most of the different sides taken in the conflict, the emotions, judgments, and blame. It was six months after my arrival that I was given paper copies of all the email exchanges leading up to the minister's resignation. One member who had been on the Board of Trustees came forward with a package. She felt that I would understand the Fellowship better if I read the emails. She had printed them and saved them thinking they might be useful at some time.

When I read through the emails, it struck me that these were not necessarily very

emotional or judgmental. I was surprised by the intensity of reactions they had inspired. In my reading of them, without the context or relationships that they represented, they felt like direct and sincere communications of personal experience. Reading the words on paper gave me a greater appreciation of the importance of presence and context in any language practice. When communicating with email, a significant portion of the language practice is either absent or assumed. On a screen, we cannot read faces, body language or feel the history of a story. We fill in whatever blanks we experience in the language with our own assumptions and interpretations. One person's emotional assumption leads to a reaction, which can lead to another emotional reaction in response from another. A chain reaction is ignited, one that is not necessarily grounded in any mutual experience or understanding of meaning. Had all of the emailing participants been in the same room, listening, seeing, and sharing, a completely different understanding of the conversation could have emerged. Meaning created from the language practiced could have created a very different outcome. I felt sad that perhaps an opportunity for building relationships had been missed, simply because of a preference for email communication. I reinforced my commitment to not participate in any email communications that expected to fulfill any purpose other than to deliver facts and figures into the living room of another. Whenever I witnessed communication via email that I thought might lead to miscommunication, I encouraged face-to-face conversations.

Below are excerpts from several email exchanges and related list-serve postings. I include them here to show the congregation's clear progression away from bitterness and toward appreciative inquiry. I begin with an email from one staff member to two members of the Board of Trustees.

Saturday, April 4, 2009, from a staff person.

Hi Michelle and Don,

While reviewing the committee mission statements, one of the things that I discovered was that there are some items duplicated by several committees...and your committees are one of the examples. We have this on the agenda for Sunday's PC meeting, and we hope that you, or a representative, can attend the meeting to help us (PC) work out the details, such as which committee should be responsible for which items. One of the items in question is that each states that undesignated funds go to the respective committee. As you can see, that is a conflict in itself. Additionally, the Remembrance committee mentions procedures for accepting donations, and that contradicts the Board policy of approving donations before committees accept them. I will try to give you more information Saturday, if I have time. We'll (PC) be going over several of the committee mission statements that are contradictory over the next few meetings...yours' just happens to be for this month!

Many, many thanks for all you do to help make UUFW the wonderful place it is!

Peace,

~Sue

Saturday, April 4, 2009, from Michelle; cc'd to Board Of Trustees.

Sue,

Unfortunately I will not be available to talk about this change at the meeting this Sunday. What you are proposing sounds like a change that needs approval from the board, not the program council.

May 5, 2009, posted by Michelle on Board's list-serve, after a budget meeting.

I feel that although it is only one more month before I will be off the board I tender my resignation effective immediately. I cannot in good conscience be party to using a person as a pawn. I feel that is what we are doing by giving up our choir director's position, instead of cutting all positions. People are not toys and this church is not a game where we use people as a strategy for increasing pledges. This is not equitable, it is not right, nor is it prudent... at all.

~Michelle M.

May 6, 2009, posted by Kami on Board's list-serve.

Michelle

I have received your letter of resignation with regret. Just as you wrote a check immediately, you went home and resigned immediately. I am always impressed by you. You are guided by your heart and act according to your principled view of events and are not troubled by institutional needs when people are involved. Paraphrasing E. M. Forrester, given the choice between my country or my friend, I hope I would betray my country.

We, as UUs, respect the dignity and worth of each individual and her opinion. Some of us take the institutional view and others the personal. I, as President of the Board, have a responsibility to the Board and to the congregation to look at what is best for UUFW as a whole. Building the infrastructure of a growing congregation and honoring the vision of the incoming minister falls under that category.

Therefore, I supported the change in the budget.

What I hope, Michelle, is that you will see that we, as a board of congregational leaders, need to hear from all points of view. As UUs, we also operate on democratic principles, which means that we accept the decision of the majority. I hope that you will reconsider your decision to resign and continue to provide your strong, principled voice to this Board.

Kami

Kami O'Keeffe, President

Board of Trustees

May 6, 2009, posted by Rev. Elaine on Board list-serve.

Hello all- thank you for the thoughtful and emotional contributions to last night's conversation. I have responded to Michelle's email, encouraging her to rethink her resignation and to stay in conversation with the Board and Fellowship. How can we encourage the best congregational budget choices to emerge? Is there a way for us all to participate in an inclusive conversation that avoids communicating judgment and tries to understand how difficult the choices ahead are? Let's keep talking. I have attached my written copies of the verbal reports. I encourage as many of you as possible to be at the budget discussion on Tuesday. See you there!

Blessings, Rev. Elaine

May 6, 2009, posted by Michelle on Board list-serve.

There are seven principles that Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Dear Members of the Board,

I found last night's meeting deeply disturbing; in particular the suggestion that we eliminate the choir director's position.

My understanding is that the board intends to approach the congregation with the proposed cut as a means of increasing pledges. The Choir Director was selected because of the visibility of that position and perhaps because of the empathy her situation would generate.

I found this idea disturbing on several levels. First, if the proposed cut is being used merely as a threat to increase donations then it violates our Unitarian principles.

Extorting money from the congregation through the use of coercion is a poor idea.

Second, this action would, I am sure, cause personal distress to the Choir Director. The idea that the church would contemplate making her situation even more difficult is unthinkable.

If the proposed cut is a genuine attempt to balance the budget then there are more equitable solutions. For example, a 10% reduction in all salaries (Cleaning, Program Director, RE Director, Choir Director, Office Administrator) would result in a

savings of approximately \$4,000. This, to my mind, is a much more palatable solution to the problem because it distributes the "pain" rather than singling out one individual. I would like to think that the board is a shining example of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

Respectfully,

Michelle Masson

May 6, 2009, posted by Elaine on list-serve.

Michelle and Kami –

I think the content of this conversation is way past the limitations of email. Would you consider asking the board members to attend a meeting next Tuesday before the open budget meeting? We could talk then and try and resolve these questions.

Namaste, Rev. Elaine

May 6, 2009, posted by Kami on list-serve.

Michelle

Thank you for your thoughts. I appreciate your stating your concerns. I can assure you that those concerns and many others informed the lengthy discussions by the Finance Committee and the Executive Committee which resulted in the budget recommended to the Board.

Kami

Kami O'Keeffe, President

Board of Trustees

May 6, 2009, posted by Sue on list-serve.

I think that is a very wise idea, Elaine. It appears that there are many, many misunderstandings as to the whys and hows, and it isn't something that can easily be discussed via email.

Peace,

~Sue

Commentary

The shift in the UU Fellowship's culture around email is documented by the email from Michelle resigning from the Board of Trustees and in the leadership's response to her concerns. I relate the shift in email styles to the relationally responsible culture we were practicing. Other factors may have influenced the less-aggressive, more-appreciative tones in emails. The Fellowship had an increased awareness of the potential in emails for miscommunication and misinterpretation. This too related to our new appreciation for the potential in relationally responsible choices. The more individually oriented culture and choices in membership behaviors promoted a competitive power stance in most communication styles, not just emails. Following are examples of the more relational, respectful, email exchanges that shared appreciation and communicated in meaning-creating language. I include three sets of communications to document the shifts we experienced.

May 17, 2009, email from a Fellowship member to the Board president about the budget conflict.

Dear Kami,

You asked that I email you after the congregational committee to obtain the information from Tuesday's meeting, which I did attend. I increased my annual pledge

by 30% – my question was, last week, how much did we pledge as a group and finally how much have we increased pledges by overall?

I have been out of town and have just returned - that is the only reason I did not attend the meeting today.

In retrospect I do not understand why information is so carefully guarded. When I was called to once again open my heart and finances (which I was glad to do) and conditions were applied to information - I was somewhat taken aback. I certainly don't think anything untoward as occurred but I believe that information disbursement has been less than transparent.

Conditional financial information sharing has an unfortunate similarity to my corporate experience and is somewhat disquieting. In the long run I do not believe this secular approach, however familiar, will be acceptable in a church community.

I do thank you for the job you have done for our fellowship and am providing my observations in a desire to assure our new, and necessary, beginning in tough financial times.

Sincerely,

Julie W.

May 17, 2009, Board president's response.

Hi Julie

Thanks for your inquiry and the increase in your pledge.

We made the decision to announce all of the pledges at the Annual Meeting so that everyone would get complete information. The numbers On Thurs, Fri and Sat were changing, would have all been partial, and not reflect those who were unable to

attend the Budget Meeting but wanted to make a change in their pledge on Sunday before the Annual Meeting.

The total increase in pledges to date is \$22,000. At the Annual Meeting the congregation voted to approve a budget with the amended pledge income that reinstated staff positions, building maintenance and fair share contributions to the UUA and TJD. Sylvia Quinn was elected President of the Board of Trustees, and Don Wood, Treasurer. The other Trustees elected are Ron Cochran, Tiffany Erichsen, Kate Griffin, Kristine Hancock and Fran Strauss. Returning Trustees are Tim Gugan and Keith Shea. Hope this answers your questions. I, too, am not in favor of secrecy, but want to be sure that everyone get complete information at the same time.

Kami

Commentary

If that exchange had occurred during the previous year, it would have expressed less appreciation and contained more aggressive, blaming content and emotional venting. These emails demonstrate significant developments in relational communication choices. Another indicator is an increase in number of emails and other communications that begin with recognitions of appreciation, as in the following email, written by a member who had previously been described by Fellowship leadership in the past as being “negative” and “prickly.”

May 17, 2009, email from a member whom Fellowship leadership had in the past described as “negative” and “prickly.”

Kami,

Good job today!

The absentee ballots and credentials are due at the UUA by June 17. I assume you will see that Rev. Charles Howe gets his credential & ballot. I do not know what his plans are for GA. He is a member of UUFR.

You've got the ball. Let me know if I can be of any assistance.

I spoke to Rev. Elaine after the meeting, and thanked her for the plug for the denomination. Regarding the latter, our congregation is certainly a “taker” rather than a “giver” – as noted by Dave Morison. This is not a role I admire or respect, and it was very much on my mind amid all the TALK of our “congregational maturity.” Talk, of course, is cheap! I realize Dave's well-expressed viewpoint (and mine) are not widely held by our “country club” congregation. 'Twill be interesting to observe, and be a part of, UUFW's interaction with our new minister, who seems to have come here with a REAL sense of mission. She appears not to want to preside over a comfortable country club of “takers.” We shall see!

Cheers,

Charlie

May 24, 2009, letter of appreciation to me from a member.

Dear Rev. Elaine

You are an inspiration. Thank you so much for all your care when Rich was in the hospital and out of the hospital, when I was in the hospital, and when we needed someone special to do a memorial service for Rich's Dad under stressful circumstances. Your vivacious attitude has shown through all your efforts in our congregation. You got through to so many when they did not know how to rid themselves of the anger over the last minister. You showed us another way to treat each other that works better than

what we were doing. We are fortunate to have had time to spend with you and your expertise. I can only hope that we too have left you with something special to add to your appreciation of life. Life does fly by and it is those special relationships that float our boats. I wish you the very best in your future endeavors. You have added joy to my life. Thank you. I look forward to next week as I stand in community with my UUFW community in celebrating you. Just wanted to personally thank you. I am quite an emotional person and find my best expressions are sometimes best said in writing – but I won't miss giving you a hug goodbye. Best Wishes for a wonderful next phase of your life.

Namaste

– Barb W.

Here is my reply:

Barb,

Thank you so much for these kind words – it was my joy and privilege to work with you and Rich these past two years – as well as the rest of the Fellowship. I feel like you, Rich and I got to share some especially intimate moments – and that is one of the most precious gifts we ministers get to receive. Bless you both for your integrity and strength in managing all the life you have been dealt these past few months – and years. . . . I am grateful that I got to be your witness for even a short time. I hope the ride smooths out a bit for you both in the months to come!

love, Elaine

Commentary

Below, the president of the Board of Trustees communicates via email to the Board. Note that the language used is appreciative and relational in a way that emails during my first year were not.

June 13, 2009

Hi Folks

Please read my report from the Trustees and then stand up and take a bow.

Because of all your energy and dedication, your willingness to delegate and then to make decisions, you leave a legacy of achievement that will benefit the congregation for years to come. BRAVO! and thank you.

Kami

Board of Trustees Report

During our first year of interim ministry, 2007-2008, using appreciative inquiry as our method, we honored our past, determined our vision for the future and selected a Search Committee to seek out our next settled minister.

When the Board held its retreat in July 2008, we established our goal for the year: with the Program Council and Transition Team, to set up policies, procedures and staffing that would enable us to strengthen UUFW as it completed its second year of interim ministry in preparation for calling our next settled minister. That is precisely what we have accomplished over the last eleven months (see Appendix T).

Leadership

Prior to the LEAP weekend there were complaints from members that there were secret “in groups” making decisions. They were requesting more transparency in the decision-making, in the communications and in the way information was disseminated in the Fellowship. Rather

than framing these expressions of concerns as problems, during the LEAP weekend we used the Appreciative Inquiry process of discovery to reframe these concerns and to build institutional structures based on what works well and what people enjoyed doing. What was clearly identified was the large percentage of the UUFW membership who gave significant amounts of time and talent to the work of the Fellowship. They wanted their time to be utilized effectively. Discussions of leadership that followed this awareness were then based on appreciating the generosity and commitment of members. The Board of Trustees initiated a conversation about how to organize and appreciate the volunteer efforts. An organizational development person expressed the willingness and desire to work with the Board of Trustees to review policies and procedures, committee structures and how responsibilities were delegated. She identified new ways of structuring communications; policies and procedures that might be helpful in appreciating and better utilizing volunteer time and resources. The Board, the Transition Team outlined the following questions, guidelines and conclusions for further discussion, introducing them with the comment that “all must be heard – the Minister, the Board, the Committees (our Governance).

How has growth affected our structures?

What is the role of the Minister, the Board, and the Congregation?

What are the different perspectives of lay vs. professional leaders?

What is the relationship between the Board and Committees?

We may need to own and redefine what it means to be a congregation – what it means to have a Shared Ministry!

Consider a fellowship versus a church.

Trust that we are able to diffuse issues and yet be grounded in self!

Use of Appreciative inquiry: identify and prioritize initiatives

Create a book of dreams

Dream a vision with the Board

Use logics, evaluate, and share

Build community and relationship

Note passion in the group

A team was created during the LEAP weekend that was interested in looking at the way committees and communication was developed. They were handed these new discoveries and encouraged to make a plan. They recommended to the Board that a Program Director position be created and funded. This person would work with the organizational development person and committee chairs to create policies and procedures and help volunteers to restructure the shared responsibilities of the fellowship.

One year after all this was implemented, the Program Council invited committee representatives together on a monthly basis to review roles and responsibilities, initiatives, follow-through, and communication. The Program Director facilitates these meetings with appreciative, relational language. Previously, the Program Council met under the management of the Board vice president. Generally, attendance was low and conversations were aggressive, blaming, and ineffective in achieving meaningful communication. On many occasions the meetings inflamed discord rather than helping volunteers to accomplish needed results. The culture of the Program Council has been completely transformed. There are large numbers attending, and the atmosphere is exciting and energized. Those attending express the belief that they are accomplishing good results and that their time is well-used and appreciated. They are encouraged by the content of the meetings and by their decision-making process.

The Program Council has restructured committees and their roles and responsibilities defined by the groups that were formed at the LEAP weekend. That structure is based on people making the connections between different tasks and areas of responsibility, such as buildings and grounds, worship, membership, stewardship, music and administration. The structure now reflects the needs of the community while providing flexibility and room for managing growth. All important tasks are not necessarily being completed on a regular basis, but there is a structure that allows members to raise questions and needs in a safe environment for discussion. Questions are asked rather than accusations made. There is amore collective ownership of responsibility rather than it being placed on the shoulders of the Board of Trustees or the minister. A culture of relational responsibility is emerging. There is now awareness that there are choices when entering into a decision-making process or when a disappointment is experienced. The whole of the community is engaged in and sharing responsibility for the outcomes they want to create.

Decision-Making

Because of the changes in leadership structure, there are changes in language practice that also reflect a more relational tone and process. This has greatly affected decision-making. Prior to the LEAP weekend there were individuals taking responsibility for things that they perceived needed to be done. They would either complete the task without asking how, who or when; they simply acted and accepted the consequences for their initiatives. Or, they would go from one person to another trying to discover how decisions were made, what the process was, and how to follow through. They either got too tired to follow through or got so frustrated that they dropped their initiative in anger. One person told me he had been trying for years to find out how he and his wife could put art up in the sanctuary and had gotten “the run around” and were so angry

about how they had been treated that they were giving up. I had watched how information was communicated about how the “art” process worked. I then watched how the policy decided upon by the community was not followed as directed or modified. I watched while information was more or less clearly communicated and then one unclear option was chosen and acted upon. I continually went to the Board of Trustees, the Program Director or the individuals, asked questions, asked who else needed to be in the conversation, referred people to committee chairs and encouraged communication, conversation and more questions. I appreciated that there was a very old culture of individuals doing what they thought best at the UUFW, what I interpreted as a good example of individualist, unilateral choice. I appreciated that they were trying something new in choosing more collaborative, relational choices but were not necessarily sure of how it was supposed to work. The process felt cumbersome and slow to people who had previously acted alone. I appreciated how hard it had been for me to be relational or appreciative in Bangor. This was a process we were all in, and it was all unfolding. When frustrated or disappointed, I took my stress to the yoga mat or the massage therapist. I remembered how essential self-care was to my relational follow-through.

During the Stewardship campaign, the numbers of members donating decreased, as did the amount they were committing for the next year’s operating budget. When the process was completed the Stewardship team reported to the Finance Committee that there was a shortfall of just over \$32,000 dollars for the operating budget for 2009-2010. When a smaller shortfall had been reported to the Finance Committee the previous year, the first questions asked were: “How many people didn’t pledge? How was stewardship going after them?” Then, the perennial question: “Why don’t we require a minimum pledge to make sure people are giving what they should?” The conversation then revolved around whether a minimum pledge should be required

for membership. The arguments were heated. The aggressive tones silenced some and got others yelling even louder. It was at this meeting that I observed how well they all competed verbally for volume control and for being right. Usually the conversation was between two or three people in a room of 10.

This year the first words spoken to the Stewardship Team were “thank you for your efforts.” The Finance chair acknowledged and appreciated that the economy was hurting everyone. Questions were asked about how to manage the shortfall. Budget line items were discussed and strategies for decreasing the budget. It was decided that a meeting with the Board of Trustees, committee chairs and Stewardship would be helpful to talk about how to respond. The dialogue was emotional but stayed on context with budget options. Feelings were shared and attendees listened. When a next meeting date was agreed upon, all departed feeling reassured that a solution would be discovered if they continued to talk.

At the next meeting, I brought along my expert voice and reassured them with what I understood that they all did well. I reminded them that the members were generous, gave when asked, but did not necessarily like the process of pledging. I asked if they had considered other ways of meeting the shortfall. How else could they think about the money needs, the membership, and how to approach the financial needs of the Fellowship? The treasurer and the Finance chair each presented different budgets based on cuts in different areas. The fundraising team made a commitment to be creative in fundraising and doubled the amount they would bring to the budget. The decision was made to go with the Treasurer’s budget, which would cut two staff positions and half of the amount budgeted for programming. The dialogue was respectful, inclusive and emotional without being offensive or defensive. Each person got to share his or her concerns and perspectives. No one agenda dominated the discussion. No one was shamed

into silence or into agreement. There was no coercion. It was agreed that the budget issues would not be communicated publicly until after the ministerial candidate who was visiting for a week had been called as minister. The discussion for that decision was based on the need for vision and hope in the future to be able to call the minister. They did not want budget issues to deflect the enthusiasm for hiring this new minister.

When the staff cuts and budget issues were announced, there was an emotional outcry from the congregation. A discussion meeting was scheduled, and each person who wanted to express concern or action or opinion was heard. The board initiated the recommended request to the membership to increase their financial commitments. Within one week the congregation agreed to increase the amount they would give the following year by \$22,000. This allowed the staff positions to be reinstated and other cuts to be minimized. The process was the same as the finance discussion had been. It was respectful, inclusive, managed and stuck to content rather than being personalized. At the end of the annual meeting, when the financial results and a new budget were presented, the fellowship members present cheered and were inspired rather than feeling angry and disgruntled. One of the members most resistant to the appreciative inquiry process initiated a challenge grant for ongoing fundraising throughout the year to try and cover the remaining shortfall. He had a twinkle in his eye that I had never observed before and sang the praises of the membership for the opportunities they shared for a vibrant future. (See notes in email communication above for more examples of the relational quality of the budget conversation.)

The decision-making process at the UU Fellowship of Wilmington had been transformed. Dialogue and relational responsibility had kept them on-task and appreciating what they love about each other; and their commitment to one another and their community inspired creativity

and conversation. I felt that our time and work together had produced the results we had all worked toward. They now had a practiced relational choice for their communications and future decision-making.

It works if you work it.

Chapter 5

A God in the Middle

The law of God, of mind, is ceaseless action,

Presence and infinite protection.

This day is merely a step in infinite progress.

It is unfoldment not time.

It brings no belief of delay in success, no disappointment.

It adds no fear, no age, no deterioration, no decay, no sin, no materiality,

No belief in matter.

It only adds wisdom, power, dominion, law, and the presence of well done.

My treatment now establishes the law of this day,

And obliterates the supposition or belief in any other law.

Principle governs me and mine this day.

This day is unfoldment

In which every detail and incident is but an illustration

Of divine presence, power, and wisdom.

(Mary Baker Eddy, 1906, p. 269)

The Rev. Jim Robinson was my supervisor and mentor during the early years of my ministerial formation. In 1989 he was serving as the settled minister for a UU congregation on Cape Cod, Massachusetts – First Parish Brewster. He had started in Brewster years before, while studying at Harvard Divinity School. The congregation was small at the time and it was not unusual for students to serve as ministers before finishing their degrees. Like every Unitarian

Universalist ministerial candidate, Jim Robinson was required to go before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) to be credentialed. The MFC is charged with reviewing each UU ministerial candidate for competency in the arts of ministry. One question asked of Jim by a member of the MFC was, “Who is your favorite theologian?” Jim replied that his parishioners were his favorite theologians. He explained that his relationships with them had taught him more about God than any theologian he had studied while at Harvard Divinity School. Jim Robinson was given a less than perfect score by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee and instructed to go back to Harvard Divinity School for another class in theology. The MFC wanted Jim Robinson to be more articulate and academically grounded in his understanding of theology before he could be Fellowshiped. The role of the MFC is to assure the professional competency and public credibility of the Unitarian Universalist ministry. It is required of them to decide if ministerial candidates demonstrate scholarly achievement. Jim’s parishioners liked his theological answer and ordained him into ministerial service even though he was not credentialed by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. He became the Rev. Jim Robinson before the MFC actually credentialed him for UU ministry. He did go back to seminary. He completed the required course of study and then obtained his Ministerial Fellowship credentials. Jim shared this story with me when I was in seminary and serving the Brewster congregation as its fulltime student intern. His story was my first experience of a minister deliberately choosing between the voices available to him in serving a congregation. Jim had chosen a relational stance in his response to the MFC. They wanted assurance that, when called upon, he could choose the minister as expert voice and uphold the professional standard they were charged with upholding.

Ministers often stand in the middle between the academy and their congregations, drawing on their theological studies to impart wisdom as experts in a top-down fashion to inspire congregational life. At the same time we are in relationship with those congregants, appreciating their faith development, human passages and social needs. In this chapter, I develop the idea that an interdisciplinary dialogue between social construction and theology creates ministerial leadership alternatives through the dialogic theology constructed within the relationships between minister and congregation. Inviting social construction into a conversation with theologians directly develops the relational viewpoint in theology. Amplifying the relational aspect of theology can bring academic scholarship closer to the lived experience of the minister in relationship with congregants.

There has been a relational thread in the language of theology throughout the 20th century. In 1923, when Martin Buber published *Ich und Du*, he introduced the world to the I-Thou in contrast to the I-It. His distinction between the two brought attention to the limitations and opportunities being discovered in the modern-postmodern, and individualist-relational conversations. The relational viewpoint that had been present in theological discourse was not an exclusive, differentiated viewpoint but was included as part of the philosophical and theological exploration of meaning and method.

Creating a dialogue, bringing the theological voices of the past into conversation with social construction, brings relationship beyond the theoretical process of “doing” theology and explores the implications of understanding and practicing ministry from a relational stance, expanding ministry beyond traditional individualistic, subject-object leadership choices.

This dissertation auto-ethnographically explores the limits and opportunities in the many different voices from which ministers may choose. It also explores the cultural place in the middle between modernity and postmodernity, individualism and a relational stance. As I have improved my relational skills and language practices, I have also expanded my ability to recognize and choose the ministerial voice that will be most helpful in each unique moment of practice. I am becoming proficient in recognizing and choosing the most relevant voice within my diverse roles and relationships as a professional minister.

Just as there was a professional expectation for Jim Robinson, there is a similar expectation of me. My denomination's professional credentialing committee, my congregants, and my peers have agreed upon a professional standard to which they hold me accountable. The minister as expert is one expectation, a voice dependent upon scholarship, spiritual maturity, and experience. A public component exists in establishing oneself as an expert. Whether our professional reputation comes through public opinion, peer recognition, word of mouth, or publication, the presence and participation of others is necessary. So, even in the individualistic model of minister as expert there is a relational requirement. We do not get to claim ourselves as experts, at least not more than once.

There is a balance to be struck and a paradox to be integrated in order to sustain credibility. It is the same balance being negotiated by social constructionists as they encourage the adoption of a relational viewpoint. When the constructionist's understanding is grounded in the absence of Truth or even truth, she places no authority in being right, but in the discovery of language and relationship that will create meaning and reality. But how does one establish credibility if one does not promote rightness? Credibility is a word that has come to be

associated with expert, with rightness and with Truth. It is dependent upon or attached to the establishment of a truth. When one believes that meaning is created through language and practiced in relationship and that it is the relationship that is the source of learning and knowing, how does one establish credibility? What constitutes legitimacy? In theological discourse, what makes one theology well-grounded or a theologian credible, respected, and authoritative? What language practice constructs the meaning of God?

Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Church of Christ, Scientist, advocated Christian Science as a both spiritual practice and a solution to ill health and moral issues. She was reputed to be a healer. “The law of God, is a step in infinite progress...” (1906) Could it be that Mary Baker Eddy was our very first process theologian, communicating her understanding of God as unfolding?

Process theology understands God, not as static but as an “unfoldment in time” (1906) God is not finished at any given moment but is ongoing. Process philosophy was introduced by Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) in his book *Process and Reality* (1929). His work was built upon by Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) and by John Cobb (1925-), among others. Whitehead introduced the understanding of reality as a continuum of events that are constantly becoming. For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to distinguish between process theology as both an understanding of the relational dimension of God as a process and as the process of theology, that is, the methodology of the study of theology. Theology as a study is also a relational methodology, appreciating, building upon the relationship between the theologies of older eras and the developing viewpoints of today. Theologians carry forward what has gone before to arrive at something new. They are in relationship with one another.

I appreciate the concept of theology as a process, continually unfolding through time towards perfection. “The law of God, of mind, is ceaseless action, presence and infinite protection. This day is merely a step in infinite progress. It is unfoldment not time. Process theology, systemic theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, among others, are building blocks. Each is part of and adds its portion of thought and viewpoint to our understanding of God. Our relationships to the work of these different theologies informs our process. We add our perspective to the ongoing conversations, and new meaning is created. As we, in relationship with theology, theologians and each other, bring forward the stories and add in our own, we build upon each other. Scholars in relationship to an academy of scholars have one language practice. Scholars in relationship to students of theology or candidates for ministry have a different language practice. Ministers in relationship with scholars and ministers in relationship with congregations have uniquely different language practices. Neither is better than the other. None is right or another wrong. Meaning is continually unfolding as we human beings and scholars discover and rediscover the necessary language practice to communicate the meaning and purpose of God and then invite that meaning and purpose to change lives.

My motivation is to expand the relational context of professional ministry – in short, to change lives. My inquiry has led me back to feminist theologian Carter Heyward; Henry Nelson Wieman, philosopher and sometime-theologian; and Martin Buber theologian and sometime-philosopher. These scholars lived, believed, and wrote in different decades. Each offers a different understanding, different language for the possibilities of phenomena uniquely created in relationship. All three have written about, been curious about, and explored their understanding of relationship as a source of meaning. In exploring their different languages for and orientation

to relationship, I have compared and contrasted both the relational aspects of their works and the individualist qualities. Bringing Heyward, Wieman and Buber together onto the same pages in this chapter and inviting social construction into the dialogue has expanded my appreciation of the continuum between modern and postmodern, between individualist and relational voices. Together, we have discovered a creative construction that exemplifies unfoldment, a relational God in process. We can appreciate both the individualist and the relational viewpoints as distinctively different, both offering possibilities, both with opportunities and limitations for the study of God and the practice of ministry.

I think of God as unfolding, in process, as human beings develop the language practices that construct the meaning of God. Heyward, Wieman and Buber initiated relational language that opened the conversation that brings the practice of ministry and the academic study of theology into meaningful collaboration. Buber differentiated between those qualities in a subject-object relationship and those in a celebration-of-the-other relationship. The differences he noted are relevant to our cultural shift from an individualist to a relational viewpoint. Henry Wieman explored the good that can come out of the relational creation of meaning. Carter Heyward more directly makes it about God. The insights these three initiated have moved theology towards the relational, which has increased the choices for ministers beyond the individualistic expert voice. Expanding the intersect and constructing an interface between Heyward, Wieman and Buber invites us into a relational, constructionist view of theology that the three together construct in a way that neither one thoroughly opens alone. The relationship of each of the author's language practices with the others, in dialogue, creates a wholeness that expands what each author wrote

individually. Adding the voice of the social constructionist into the process exemplifies the exercise of doing theology as relationally dialogic.

Fundamentally, religion has to do with the problem of finding meaning and orientation in life, one of the most basic human needs. While this need for meaning is present in each of us, it cannot be addressed exclusively – or even primarily – as an individual matter. Worldviews and other meaning making frame works are always given for us, in the first instance at least by our cultures and our religious traditions. None of us ever starts from scratch. Our religious tradition and practices help us orient ourselves in the world. They paint a large scale picture of reality that attempts to explain the way things are and help us to understand which things matter most in our lives and who we are in relation to the larger world. They help us to make sense of our lives in the grand context of the universe and movement of history. They help give us meaning and purpose. They give us a place to stand. (Rasor, 2005, pp. xii-xiii)

It is not the individual theologians who construct the meaning of God or meaning in theology. Rather it is the relationships between and among them, the unfoldment over time and culture, and how theologians, ministers, and human beings relate to one another and generate conversations. It is the meaning made and shared, not the scholarly analysis, that informs the practice of ministry. Ministers and theologians both carry the voices of the past forward. We enliven the conversations between past and present and then, we bring what is written on the page alive through our relationships with it and with one another.

An historic connection exists between religion and meaning-making through relationships in culture and the reflections of theologians. In his book *In Face of Mystery*, Gordon D. Kaufman discussed the emergence of religion over human history:

Religion gradually became differentiated for the rest of culture and was institutionalized –with distinctive rituals and myths and other traditions, with specialized personnel (shamans, priests, gurus and prophets and healers, and so on), with particular claims on the society as a whole and the men and women who constituted it. Today we can see that what was developing as religion was a sphere of culture with and through which humans would seek and find orientation for life in the world, together with motivation for living and acting in accordance with this orientation – that is, would gain and gradually formulate a sense of meaning of human existence. (1993, p.39)

Kaufman is distinguished as one of the most influential theologians of our time. While Kaufman was a student at Harvard, Henry Nelson Wieman was there as a visiting scholar. Wieman's work strongly influenced Kaufman's development. Kaufman cites Wieman's *The Source of Human Good*; he was referring to Wieman's idea of the creative event in developing his, Kaufman's, notion of serendipitous creativity (1993). I understand Kaufman to be leaning toward, if not directly naming, relationships as the source of meaning. One can interpret what he is referencing as history; culture, tradition and religion are components that go into the development of language practices. Religions can be understood as language practices that create meaning through relational theologies.

The relational orientation of the social constructionist stance, along with a commitment to the practice of appreciation, has moved my theology into a relational understanding of God.

Heyward, Wieman and Buber each discussed their unique understanding of relationships as sources for creating meaning. Each held and described a different understanding of the elements that were essential if relationships are to create meaning. In experiencing both the relational and the individualistic language that each uses for meaning-making, I experienced all three as adding to the historic unfoldment of a relational theology. I have chosen what I consider as an exemplary work from each to begin the dialogue – Buber’s *I and Thou*; Wieman’s *The Source of Human Good*; and Heyward’s *The Redemption of God*.

Martin Buber: *I and Thou*

I begin with Buber simply because his is the earliest of the publications invited into this dialogue. My purpose in including his voice is not to add to the abundance of scholarship on Buber or to engage Buber scholars, but rather to develop the relational aspects Buber brings to the dialogic process of developing my own concepts.

I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something. The life of human beings does not consist of all this and the like alone. This and the like together establish the realm of It. But the realm of Thou has a different basis. . . . When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every It is bounded by others; it exists only through being bounded by others. But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds. (1958, p. 5)

To fully integrate this passage as a voice in a conversation the phenomenology of Martin Buber is relevant. He was born in Vienna in 1878 during the height of modernism. He was educated at the University of Vienna, studying Philosophy and Art. He was an active Zionist,

taught philosophy at Hebrew University, and practiced the mystical movement of Judaism, Hasidism. Buber did not self-identify as a theologian. In this passage he affirmed that there is more than the individual self, more than subject-object relationships and the conclusions drawn by the self, observing the object. He opens the perception of a relational reality. He does not suggest that one is better than the other or that one exists and the other does not. He begins the conversation open to the existence of both and uses – *I* and *thou* – to differentiate between the two. From a relational perspective we cannot read Buber's words without acknowledging the presence of Hebrew history and faith. Their voices and stories are present in Buber's text. They live within the culture of direct access to and communication with Yahweh. There is a covenanted relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people. These voices are included in Buber's language practice. His understanding of his personal relationship with Yahweh through direct access, meaning no intermediary to God required, is an essential language component. He adds this distinction – that as experience the world belongs to the primary word, I-It understood in the modernist context as subject object, the observer, taking in information and concluding, with no relationship. Likewise, the primary word I-Thou establishes the world of relation. We cannot be in dialogue with Buber without appreciating his viewpoint and language as the perspective of a Hasidic Jew steeped in mysticism.

Buber structures his relational world in three spheres – our life with nature, our life with men (sic), and our life with spiritual beings. He wrote:

In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out toward the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal thou; in each Thou we address the eternal Thou. (1958, p. 6)

If Thou does refer to the Eternal, is this, Buber's relational language practice, more theological than a social constructionist viewpoint might be? Does relational for Buber then always carry a component of the divine presence, or does he include human with human in his understanding and writing of I-Thou?? Is it the human-divine relationship what distinguishes the individualist perspective from a relational perspective for Buber? If so, then it would be important in any social constructionist conversation that includes Buber as a participant to include the theological dimension of his Thou. If Buber's I-Thou is included as part of the meaning-making in a relational language practice, then the eternal is part of the language as well. Throughout the text, Buber continued to link Thou to a spiritual, eternal relational realm. He developed the distinction between spheres from a relational I-Thou and the experiential I-It world. "The development of the function of experiencing and using comes about mostly through decrease of man's (sic) power to enter into relation" (1958, p. 43). This passage and the development of it through this section of *I and Thou* seems to indicate that Buber held a preference for the relational world over the experiential and that he associated some negative human experiences and lack of fulfillment with the experiential as an *outside* world. "Feelings are within where life is lived and man recovers from institutions" (1958, p. 43).

Causality has an unlimited reign in the world of It. Every physical event that can be perceived by the senses, but also every physical event discovered in self experience is necessarily valid as being caused and as causing. . . . The unlimited reign of causality in the world of It is of fundamental importance for the scientific ordering of nature does not weigh heavily on man who is not limited to the world of It but can continually leave

it for the world of relation. Here I and thou freely confront each other in mutual effect that is neither connected with nor colored by any causality. (1958, p. 51)

Buber acknowledged that we have a choice of which realm we wish to occupy, which voice we wish to engage and from which perspective we wish to engage. As the result of those choices, our language practice will create meaning, either relational or experiential. He leaves us in the middle of the two realms, relational and experiential, with his understanding of relational that engages the eternal, the realm of the spirit, linking relational to God.

Causality does not weigh on the man to whom freedom is assured. He knows that his mortal life swings by nature between Thou and It and he is aware of the significance of this. It suffices him to be able to cross again and again the threshold of the holy place wherein he was not able to remain; the very fact that he must leave again and again is inwardly bound up for him with the meaning and character of this life. There on the threshold, the response, the spirit is kindled ever new within him; here in an unholy and needy country, this spark is to be proved. What is called necessity here cannot frighten him, for he has recognized there true necessity, namely, destiny. (1958, p. 53)

In this section Buber used a more individualistic language practice acknowledging a better than, a higher truth. His use of the words *freedom*, *destiny*, and *necessity* assert an intention of influence and rightness, against the lesser *unholy*, and *needy*. Buber made a case for destiny and freedom, which he associated, for himself with the revelation of the mystery. Again, there are theological implications in his use of and understanding of I-Thou. We should be conscious of the misappropriation of his meaning and be careful not to assume that we can

directly insert Buber's I-Thou language into any other-centered context and any not-God-related, relationship.

Buber introduced an alternative to the individualism of modernity and its dominant experiential subject-object viewpoint. Buber's second edition of *I and Thou* in 1958 came almost 35 years after the original edition. In between the first and second edition, Wieman had published the first edition of *The Source of Human Good*.

Henry N. Wieman: *The Source of Human Good*

No time or people can cut free of the time preceding or of the times oncoming. What we choose as our good to a great extent determines the good and ill of other times and peoples, and their judgment is fateful in taking from us or in giving to us the sources of human welfare. We cannot extricate ourselves from the consequences of choice made by times and peoples however remote, since they are connected in sequence with others up to our own. Since what any age or culture chooses or seeks as good and evil for itself becomes inevitably destructive or constructive of the good and evil of others, it is imperative to discover and make clear that principle which distinguishes good and evil for each and for all in every age and situation. (1995, p. 11)

Henry Nelson Wieman acknowledged the relational sources of language practice in this passage. He appreciated that we cannot separate our understanding or experience from the social, cultural stories that came before us. He placed his "self" in the process of unfolding. Henry Wieman and Martin Buber were both born in the late 19th century but on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean, so their stories are historically, religiously, and culturally distinct. They are two particular voices adding to the multiple perspectives of a dialogue from which we are

learning. We are making our way out of the middle between our individualist orientation and attachment to persuasion, evaluating and selecting the best perspective toward our moment-to-moment suspension of an anticipation of an outcome, a shift into a relational viewpoint.

To integrate Wieman into the conversation it is necessary to appreciate his social and cultural location, which contrasts significantly from that of Buber and Heyward. Henry was the oldest of eight in his Missouri Presbyterian family. His father was a minister but Henry was not a particularly devout Christian. His taste in literature and study was more philosophical. The intensity of his religious interest changed in 1907 when, just before graduating from college, Wieman had a religious experience.

I came to my room after the evening meal and sat alone looking at the sunset over the Missouri River. Suddenly it came over me that I should devote my life to the problems of religious inquiry. I never had a more ecstatic experience. I could not sleep all night and walked in that ecstasy for days. (Southworth, 1995, p. 13)

Following that encounter, Wieman decided to enroll in a traditional Presbyterian school to study theology and philosophy. After graduation he was ordained and served as a Presbyterian minister until 1915, when he acknowledged that he was much more intrigued with scholarship than he was the practice of ministry. He earned the Doctor of Philosophy degree from Harvard in 1917 and pursued an academic career.

For years, Wieman taught philosophy and Christian Theology in a variety of institutions. While teaching and publishing, he moved through several distinct theological and philosophical phases, developing his understanding of the meaning of religion for the individual to a more

community or cultural emphasis. The consistent thread was the significance of what became known to Wieman as the “creative event or interchange” between individuals and within groups which he understood to “operate in human life with such character and power that it will transform man (sic) as he cannot transform himself, saving him from evil and leading him to the best that human life can ever reach” (Nugent, 2008).

The Source of Human Good was published in 1946. In it Wieman explored value, good, evil and qualitative meaning. He identified and presented the “creative event” as a process of reorganization that increases human good. He developed the creative event in four distinct phases:

- Emerging awareness of qualitative meaning derived from other persons through communication.
- Integrating these new meanings with others previously acquired.
- Expanding the richness of quality in the appreciable world by enlarging its meaning
- Deepening the community among those who participate in this total creative event of intercommunication (1946/2008).

These four phases are relational rather than empirical. The phases are connected, work together, and must all be present for the creative event, as Wieman understood it, to occur. So the relationality exists within the process of creative event, relating one phase to the other as well as within each of the phases. Within each phase, the presence of and relationship with an other, either individual or group, is required to ignite creativity and to discover meaning.

They are locked together in such an intimate manner as to make a single total event continuously recurrent in human existence. The creative event is one that brings forth

in the human mind, in society and history and in the appreciable world a new structure of interrelatedness whereby events are discriminated and related in a manner not before possible. It is a structure whereby some events derive from other events, through meaningful connection with them, an abundance of quality that events could not have had without this new creation. (1946/2008, p. 65)

Wieman utilized the first two chapters of this book to develop our understanding of his use of qualitative meaning and his intention of focusing qualitative meaning to create an understanding of “good” as relational language for capturing the distinctions between our individual experiences of satisfaction and those relational experiences and actions that contribute to ongoing social and cultural significance. The relational quality of Wieman’s “good” is what places it in the realm of process rather than event. His use of “qualitative” in his understanding of meaning likewise invokes the relational realm rather than the individual because there is an ongoingness to this meaning. It must develop on a continuum, bringing, growing out of, and staying connected to what came before, as it simultaneously becomes part of what comes next.

When good increases, a process of reorganization is going on, generating new meanings, integrating them with the old, endowing each event as it occurs with a wider range of reference, molding the life of man (sic) into a more deeply unified totality of meaning. (Wieman, 1995 p. 102)

We can hear his presentation of information, his telling us, as in *persuading* us, of the validity and importance of his perspective. The content is very relational and postmodern, but the technique of discussing is empirical. Wieman shows us that it is possible to be making this quantum leap in perception and be tied to the traditional dominant discourse to offer this

extraordinary new viewpoint. We can feel both the expansiveness of the invitation to engage while also being the learner watching the problem-solving analysis.

“We are limiting our study chiefly to creative event as it occurs in communication between human individuals, and not even all communication displays it” (Wieman, 1946/2008, p. 77).

Theodore Parker was a 19th century Unitarian minister. He was part of that century’s middle place between scholarship and the practice of ministry. On May 19, 1841, Parker delivered a sermon titled, “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity.” His sermon’s message holds relevance today as we choose among the voices available to us in the practice of ministry. Parker was motivated to speak by the schism occurring in the Unitarian movement at that time over the enduring substance of our faith. His sermon of 1841 marked a transformative moment for Unitarians as once again we were, as a denomination, negotiating the foundation of our faith. We were asking how we might carry forward traditional Christian doctrine while also appreciating the historic role of reason and freedom of spirit in our tradition. The debate of 1841 still continues, not exactly as it was experienced then, but still engaging Parker's bottom line – that doctrines and theologies are transient; they come and go with regularity. One person’s truth is another person’s heresy. God will continue to evolve along with the values and meaning of faith in present times. Are even the core teachings of Jesus permanent? Is there some element, a core, to the teachings of all prophets that is permanent? Or does the suggestion of any permanence in faith contradict the very nature of Mary Baker Eddy’s unfoldment, Buber’s I-Thou, and Wieman’s creative event?

Wieman brought together two very different qualities of creativity. He wrote: “Since

creativity is not readily accessible to awareness, we can speak of creativity as transcendent. But it is not transcendent in the sense of nontemporal, not spatial, and immaterial. It can be discovered in this world by proper analysis” (1946/2008, p. 77). He was establishing that creativity is not accessible to awareness, yet is subject to analysis. We can interpret this as an intriguing intersect of I-It, and I-Thou identities. Wieman was engaging the power of the observer-object problem-solving process, while also acknowledging a relational transformation. What is the relationship between transcendence and analysis? What meaning do they offer when interchanged? This is another example of our middle position between empirical reality and relational reality, needing both to create meaning.

“The human problem is to shape human conduct and all other conditions so that the creative event can be released to produce the maximum good” (Wieman, 1946/2008, p. 69).

If our desire is to sustain relevance, expand qualitative meaning and advance what Wieman defined as human good, a continuous continues shift from individualism toward an increasingly relational viewpoint will offer more opportunity for engaging in transformative dialogue, rather than discussion or debate. This evolution of theology and faith requires a community of cooperation if we are to create the long-lasting shift toward inclusivity, equality, and cooperation.

Any meaning loses depth and richness of quality derived from this unknown depth of structured events with quality determined by noncognitive, feeling-reactions of the organism when is treated as an end instead of as a servant to creativity and all that creativity may produce below the level of human cognition. (Wieman, 1946/2008, p. 67)

The human world in which we live is transient. Dogmas, doctrines, theologies, mini-truths, scientific hypothesis, and sound bytes come and go faster than we can even engage or process them meaningfully. What remains permanent is the need appreciated by the basic religious questions that have challenged humanity eternally. Who am I? What is the meaning and purpose of my living and dying? How do I know what is real? What is truth? We now have additional questions and challenges if we are shifting away from modernity into postmodernity. The I is transforming into a we. How do we relate to one another? To the Earth? To the cosmos? How do we create meaning and purpose in our living and dying? How do we know what is real? What do we have if we do not have truth? How do we create wholeness? Happiness and harmony in this universe is still the human quest. The questions of prophets, ancient or new, are with us still.

Wieman wrote:

Anything is good if it sustains and promotes the release of the kind of intercommunication among men termed the “creative event.” . . . According to this standard, one good is not better than another because it contains a greater quantity of good in itself. One might be much greater in value so far as concerns its content of created good. But if the lesser served to release more fully the potency of the creative event, it is the one to choose. The Roman Empire, with all its culture, may have contained far more qualitative meaning than the little Christian sect. Nevertheless, if the latter could release more widely and deeply among men the kind of intercommunication creative of all good, the latter should be chosen and the Empire rejected. (1946/2008, p. 82)

Isn't the sole/soul purpose of religion to move humanity towards a greater good? In each generation of human development people have constructed a conception of good. In relationship with that concept of good, people have constructed a God who would motivate, control, or create that goodness in us. The human quest for goodness has produced the concepts of heaven and hell, redemption, sacrifice and belief in the death and resurrection of a savior. Religions and theology and God have been part of human culture for all time because we need to be comforted, motivated, and inspired to seek moral maturation. Because we do not readily agree on what constitutes moral maturation, we have different religions and theologies. As yet, no theology has brought us into agreement on divisive issues such as gun control, the death penalty, marriage for homosexual partners, abortion. How do we establish right or wrong and good or evil as the complexities of our global community's values increase in size and number?

When the power of man increases by leaps and bounds, as it is doing today with the intensive industrialization of the planet, when the complexities of organization increasingly demand centralization of authority with delegation of power under a ruling body, some group will surely rise to a height of power that no men ever before enjoyed. It will be tempted to use its power to achieve what seems to it good and refuse to use it to serve the creative event. (Wieman, 1946/2008, p. 129)

In *The Source of Human Good*, Henry Wieman invited us to move past this temptation. He was advocating for the engagement of diverse perspectives for the opportunity of experiencing a creative event. This notion of a creative event carries with it many of the same qualities, motivation, and possibilities that Kenneth Gergen acknowledged in his understanding of transformational dialogue. I believe that Wieman's creative event shares much of the same

that Kenneth Gergen advocates. Both creative events and transformational dialogue are relational. They only occur if people are open to the connection to and appreciation of the other. The other may be natural phenomena or an other-than-human creature. Both create the safe environment for conversation and exchange of viewpoints, information, and experience without the intention of converting or persuading. Sheila McNamee refers to this as a relationally reflexive inquiry, which carries the same qualities and intention that Wieman used to construct value and goodness. Both transformational dialogues and creative events are looking to create new meaning for the future betterment of humanity. There is an appreciation of the learning that happens in relationship when both are celebrating the other as opposed to convincing or changing the other. In the creative event and in the transformational dialogue, all participants come away changed.

Isabel Carter Heyward, PhD: *The Redemption of God*

The Rev. Isabel Carter Heyward, PhD, adds a distinctly feminist voice to the constructionist-theological dialogue. Heyward was born August 22, 1945, one year before Wieman published *The Source of Human Good*. Having been raised in North Carolina, she has credited her gentrified, segregated southern upbringing with much of her motivation to push into the Episcopal priesthood, academia, feminine liberation theology, and activism.

On July 29, 1974, Heyward, along with 10 other women, confronted Anglican Church canon and was ordained. It took two years before the church officially sanctioned the ordinations of the “Philadelphia 11.” Heyward moved to Cambridge, MA, to teach theology at the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS), where she has “transformed consciousness, proclaimed the possibilities for women to be priests, for lesbians to be theological, and made way for new

approaches to connecting the divine to the erotic, justice, activism,” according to an online biographical posting at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Religious Archives Network. Rev. Dr. Heyward is presently retired, writing and lecturing, from the hills of North Carolina.

Heyward’s voice as an out lesbian priest and scholar is that of a constructionist who is constructing mutual reality discovered in relationships and discovering meaning from the language practices developed in relationships. She was one of the first to promote and practice the concepts of right relationship in a theological educational context. Her classrooms modeled the relational creativity Wieman described. She, as a professor and theologian invited relational dialogues engaging students in theology, in relationship with each other, the reading and process participating in and appreciating the same relational qualities as McNamee’s relational responsibility. Heyward is an advocate for a theology of mutual relationship.

I attended three different classes in theology at EDS taught by Dr. Heyward. Her classes engaged students in dialogue. Our contributions were affirmed and included in a community-building experience of learning and discovery. Our experiences were part of a dialogue about what constitutes theology. There were no exams. Goals or expected outcomes were mutually developed in conversation. There were no grades or evaluations other than what we agreed upon in relationship with one another. We discovered what it was we were learning as we participated in the process. Meaning and relevance of scripture, theology and church history unfolded as we integrated multiple perspectives, looked for any missing voices and affirmed the experiences and contributions of the marginalized. Students were continually asked to self-reflect, be aware of language, and uncover and examine assumptions. In 1990, Heyward opened me to the

possibility of a postmodern perspective. In her classrooms she framed this relational shift as feminist liberation theology.

When Heyward submitted her unrevised doctoral dissertation, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*, to several publishers, it was rejected for being both too academic and not academic enough. Heyward was experiencing the subjectivity of credibility and authority in the academic voice. It was suggested that Heyward rewrite her dissertation and either increase its academic voice or make it more widely marketable to non-academics. She refused. Instead, she maintained its integrity and withheld publication until her academic credibility made it marketable in its original form. In 1982, *The Redemption of God* was published. By publishing it as originally written, Heyward maintained the integrity of the voice and context of its creation. She wrote poetry, story, and auto ethnography at a kitchen table, inspired by the urgency of injustice she was experiencing and witnessing in the world around her. The following is from the preface to *The Redemption of God*:

Yes, there is a dream, a vision. I have dreamt it. I have seen it. You are in it. You have told me. Together we are at home, alive in the world. There is nothing still in the movement between us. No apathy. No security to dull our senses to change. We will transvaluate values, converting the minimal benefits of isolation to the possibilities of love. We will see that *philia*, *eros* and *agape* are different words for a single act of love.

We will co create the world for in the beginning is the relation. (1982, p. xvii)

Rev. Dr. Heyward promoted process and dialogue as the context for learning and practicing theology. She believed in and practiced a theology of mutual relationship. She did this in an academic environment that was looking for measurable goals, expected outcomes, and

documentation of learning. Relationships are taking on new importance. Social construction sees value in being, without needing to be right. Social construction offers humans a choice of being right or being in relationship. It is in relationship, in dialogue with another person, that ideas and reality can be constructed, shaping the experience of those in relationship, through language or dialogue, into a new awareness that neither could have understood alone. This achievement offers win-win situations where win-lose was once the only option. Discovering, collaborating and intimacy replace debating, convincing, and victory or defeat. In that shift, God too must shift, as our need for motivation, protection, certainty, and answers shifts. As human beings have evolved, so have our needs for the power and presence of an omnipotent. In introducing this viewpoint in *The Redemption of God*, Heyward wrote:

This book has its origins in my search for the answer to a single question: to what extent are we responsible for our own redemption in history? The operative theological assumption throughout is that God and humanity need to be understood as relational and co-operative, rather than as monistic or dualistic. Christian theologies have tended to foster loneliness, separation, division estrangement as the human condition. Our underlying assumption has been that human bonding in the world is less good than our worship of a lofty deity who needs our isolation if he is to be God. (1982, p.1)

Spirituality is theology. Theology is spiritual if engaged in as a process of personal and/or institutional maturation that involves the range and depth of one's ability to love, to develop consistency in moral and relational integrity, and to integrate diversity without feeling defensive or insecure. Spiritually mature people and institutions are able to encourage others to sustain more complex and enriching tensions. (Bernard Loomer from a sermon preached by Scott

Alexander at the ordination of David Hutchinson, June 3, 2001 Houlton ME.)

Spiritual maturation supports people in their motivation and ability to engage in transformative dialogues and develop skills for relational responsibility. We construct our understanding of spiritual maturation, how it is experienced, and the reason for motivating it. Like theology, it too is in process, developing relevancy over time, through generations and cultures. What is appreciated as relationally responsible today may have been unnecessary decades ago.

God is in the middle, the creative event, the something new that emerges from a conversation, from the connection between seeing something, hearing something, thinking something and the creation that is emerging out of word, music, photo, oil or clay. Mona Lisa, the Sistine Chapel, Adonis, the gas chamber, and Napalm all came out of the space in-between, the middle of human thought and motivation. Their conception and creation was individualistic in original orientation, but relational to us now, as we make the shift toward recognizing that we are connected to and in relationship with all that is in the past. Mona Lisa and Auschwitz are a part of us as we carry forward history.

Good versus evil are constructed in our relationship to that God-place in the middle. I do not believe that God is inherently good or evil. It is that creative ignition of newness that is God. What we do in relationship with one another, with that creative moment, constructs good or evil. When we use our creative impulse to align on the side of beauty, compassion healing, and connection, we create good. If we use that creative relational moment to maim, destroy, hurt or oppress, we create evil.

“My interest is not in any notion of a love or justice, which is postponed or withheld or veiled as characteristic of a sacred realm to which we have no immediate access” (Heyward, 1982, p. 17).

God is the conversation, the transformative dialogue, ever-changing, creating meaning in every moment, time in every relationship, never complete, but unfolding in time. As it is written in the Gospel, “Wherever two or more are gathered in his name” (Matthew 18:20), the potential for God is present. When we silence the other or dominate the other, we do not allow God to be. The transformative dialogue is thwarted. Only with relational responsibility, celebrating the other, do the love and justice that Heyward claims theologically emerge, or the I-Thou of Buber become known, or Wieman’s creative event occur. God is present in whatever voice we choose, as long as the voice makes room for the other, engages in relationship with the other, celebrates the learning, and allows the creativity to be sustained.

Heyward acknowledged that “there is always the danger of subjectivism in assuming the authority of our own experience in doing theology” (1982, p. 30). This is the lesser danger, she wrote.

There is danger in assuming the authority to do anything, a danger of becoming self absorbed, limited, and parochial, dogmatic, irrational, and so forth. . . . It is less of a danger, I believe, than that which is inherent in a theological refusal to admit that she is both subject and authority of her own work. (Heyward, 1982, p. 30)

Creativity happens in the middle. Hydrogen and helium come together and a big bang occurs: God? Creation? Slime and water, cell to cell mutation: God? Creation? What is that something new created in the middle of what has already been and what will be? God? Human

beings are not wired to feel comfortable with ideas that move, grow, shift. We are comfortable inside our skins knowing where we stop and someone else begins. We have felt comforted by individualism and its predictability and familiarity. We are achievers looking for ways to define right from wrong and good from bad, so that we can achieve competency in a measurable way. Competency, skill measured in comparison to others, is one way in which human beings can understand success, create security. We are also experiencing the limitations of that security and familiarity in our rapidly changing social cultural environment.

One of the first experiences human beings wrestled with and sought explanation for was their vulnerability to death. Humans were vulnerable to natural forces, famine, draught, sickness, and injury from attack or predators. They wanted and sought something or someone who could protect them. They wanted some way to protect themselves and control their destinies. Gods were constructed. Through the ages, gods and God evolved with more or less human awareness and understanding of nature, science and the human body. From many gods to one God, from sacrifices to bring the rain, to the Upanishads, human beings have been trying to understand life, death and the meaning of human existence.

Relational theology is incarnational. It has to be. Relation is in-carnate, between us, in the physicality of all that we do: breathe, move, think, feel, reach, touch. The God of whom I speak, the resource and power of relation, that with whom we image ourselves in relation, is in flesh, alive in human beings, active in human life, on earth and in history. (Heyward, 1982, p. 31)

Heyward is making a case here for Jesus and does so throughout the text. Her Christian orientation informs the connections with God, love and relations as well as redemption. In this

passage, she is individualistic in her bodily functions, flesh and thought orientation as the source of reality and authority. Just as I have done with Buber and Wieman, I engage Heyward as a beginning of the conversation and shift toward the relational. She advocates the primacy of relationship as a source of meaning, but remains rooted in the body as a source of knowing. She does not engage language practice in her writing as she did in her classrooms. I wonder if this is due to the need for academic rigor to establish credibility. Also, Heyward's dissertation was written long before she began to teach; since then, her orientation toward the relational has continued to shift and construct.

Understanding God as a construct is not intended to diminish the validity or relevance of any one theology or faith, but to invite a dialogue among faiths and theologians, scholars and practitioners, so we can appreciate the significance of our beliefs in meeting our own unique needs for an understanding of the purpose and meaning of our existence. We, relational theologians, and perhaps constructionists past and present want God and each unique understanding of God to enhance the quality of our relationships across cultural differences, rather than to continue resorting to competitive violence to establish the "truth" about God's existence, in a subjective, individualist voice, and about "his" personal relationship, which either includes or excludes. An appreciation of God as a construct holds the possibility of diffusing one of the main sources of conflict on our earth and of establishing the language practices for deepening faith while at the same time enriching relationships among differing faiths.

A relational understanding of God can deepen the theological authority of congregational life and the notions of a practical theology. By exploring a balance between the academic and the practical in theology, we increase the choices for leadership in congregational ministry.

Leadership is then appreciated as dialogic, as nurturing, and as deepening the relationships that are a source of sustenance in congregations. A commitment to communal relational responsibility then becomes a community practice as well as an individual practice, simultaneously opening possibilities for spiritual growth within individual congregants. The implications of intentionally choosing a relational viewpoint in which to ground ministerial roles when working with communal and individual spiritual maturation can promote a relational orientation to theology. The role of the minister can be continually transformed through the practice of appreciating these relationships as a source of human and institutional growth and the construction of God. These congregational relationships are then understood theologically as ongoing acts of dialogically constructive theology. By carrying forward the relational language opened for us by Buber, Wieman and Heyward, communities of faith can begin to appreciate the relational process of theology in spiritual maturation.

The addition of a relational view to the choices available to those in leadership positions is a subtle but important distinction for religious institutions. By relieving the pressure on ministers to know the answers, the polarity of right and wrong and of good and evil are diminished. Martin Buber, Henry Wieman, and Carter Heyward have offered us the beginning understandings upon which we can build a relevant relational understanding of ministry and theology, while providing resources for congregational ministry and the means to deepen theological understanding of the role of ministry. Such a dialogical theology offers opportunity for theologians and social constructionists by opening interdisciplinary alternatives and regenerative ways of engaging human resources for social transformation.

“In the Midst of a World,” a poem by Rebecca Parker, author, professor of theology and president of Starr King School of Theology in Berkeley, CA, is a fitting contribution to this ongoing dialogue.

In the midst of a world
marked by tragedy and beauty
there must be those
who bear witness
against unnecessary destruction
and who, with faith,
stand and lead
in freedom,
with grace and power.

There must be those who
speak honestly
and do not avoid seeing
what must be seen
of sorrow and outrage,
or tenderness,
and wonder.

There must be those whose

grief troubles the water
while their voices sing
and speak
refreshed worlds.

There must be those
whose exuberance
rises with lovely energy
that articulates
earth's joys.

There must be those who
are restless for
respectful and loving
companionship among human beings,
whose presence invites people
to be themselves without fear.

There must be those
who gather with the congregation
of remembrance and compassion
draw water from

old wells,
and walk the simple path
of love for neighbor.

And,

There must be communities of people
who seek to do justice
love kindness and walk humbly with God,
who call on the strength of
soul-force
to heal,
transform,
and bless life.

There must be
religious witness.

Conclusion

I began this project in the fall of 2004 with the minister as expert voice and the intention of using appreciative inquiry and relational responsibility to help congregations navigate through size transitions. I intended to use *my* work with the UU Society of Bangor to show that these applications of social construction would – not *could* but *would* – provide the necessary motivation, awareness, and skill within the congregation for *them* to grow successfully past a size plateau and achieve a cultural change. I made slow progress towards a relational voice, which is noticeable to me in that I started out “knowing” that the UUSB needed to grow from a pastoral to a program size church. I learned to appreciate that I could not make them recognize that, or make the growth happen for them. The letting go that was a necessary step toward my becoming more relational in my leadership. I moved from “knowing what was best, to my appreciation that the membership, of the U.U. Society of Bangor needed to believe in, talk about and choose to make that size shift on their own. I still used the language – *on their own* – rather than feeling a part of a *we* that could come to that shift together. It was a slightly less Machiavellian approach to leadership, but I never engaged in a relationship with the Bangor congregation in the way we were able to in Wilmington. In Bangor, I was able to recognize and appreciate the limitations of my intentions and depart. That was progress. No progress would have been to stay and push, shove, whine and judge *their* lack of movement.

My experiences in the last five years have taught me what I did not know about my use of and need for an individualist orientation. After stumbling through my beginner’s practice of relational responsibility and appreciative inquiry, I have been able to shift the dominance of one voice in my ministerial language practices to an increased skill in choosing from multiple voices.

Together, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington and I discovered that a congregation can and will shift its culture when its core identity is discovered and appreciated. I was able to appreciate the significant differences in the two ministries while reviewing evaluations from each congregation. (See appendices D through W.) The language in each is noticeably different. In the exit interview conducted after my departure from Bangor, the choice of language is predominantly individualist – I, she, they, this, that, the minister, the chair and the committee. In the interim evaluations and reports during my ministry in Wilmington, the choice of language is predominantly plural – we, us, teams, members, and all. The relational plural is predominant. Comparing the two ministries through these reports and the exit interview from Bangor reveals the differences in language practices. The language practices appear different because the orientations of the congregations/ministries are different. Bangor remains more individualistically oriented, while Wilmington has experienced a shift towards a more relational orientation.

Uncertainty surfaces in the environment of questions. Rilke invited us to be patient with our questions, to resist the headlong tumble into anxiety that precedes our premature decision and action. Not knowing an answer, an outcome, the future, takes us out of the secure independent competence of the individualist realm of the mind. It destabilizes the familiar, and we have not been socialized to appreciate instability. Our individualist, cognitively sourced ability to problem-solve is not always, or necessarily, the best response. It may be useful, but it does not need to be our first and only choice. Our ability to be patient, to remain in the middle without asserting power or authority, long enough for something new to be discovered is aided by a relational viewpoint. It is easier to be patient when one has the companionship of others.

Stuck in my own muddied mind, and hoping to discover how ministry can best be practiced, I invited theologians and constructionists into a conversation. In integrating a relational language practice, patience was discovered and appreciation created. What was once desired – patience – is not patience at all once we actually “live the questions.” What is necessary is appreciation, from which emerges trust in the relationship. Trust in the relationship grows relational skill and deeper appreciation for the possibilities of relationships.

We all find ourselves in middles. There is the middle in-between the minister as expert and her congregation’s expectations; the middle between scholarship and practice; the middle between knowing how to facilitate an appreciative inquiry process and sincerely practicing appreciation. In each middle, a conversation between what has been and what can be is possible. The conversation I have initiated is about choosing the voice of creativity in human relationships, with each other, with our environment, and with what we do not yet know, rather than being right.

Western culture sits in its middle – between its dominant tradition of individualism, reason, and debate, and the relational orientation of social construction. We are engaged in a process of shifting the dominant viewpoint toward relationship. If we can be patient with all that is unresolved in our hearts, if we can remain in relationship as we minister to congregations, then we invite a creative event, a transformative moment that may bring us to discover a new and unexpected dimension, a relational reality no one could have predicted or communicated. Too often voices on both sides of this middle are strident, pulling, predicting, debating, striving to convince, when the essential elements of the middle are the relationship, the process, and the learning that comes from building upon the discoveries in each moment and each conversation. It

is our commitment to the middles and to our relationship with one another while in the middle that brings curiosity, creativity, and integrity to the process. This brings continuity and relevance to the discovery that can lead us to the other side of the middle. If we are to carry forward the gods and stories of our past, creating good as we go, then our relational responsibility is to remain in the middle until we are not. When we are able to remain in relationship, something new, and generative can be discovered.

The intersection between the individualistic and relational understandings of ministerial leadership supports a concept of theology as socially constructed through dialogue. I have applied the concepts of appreciative inquiry and relational responsibility to congregational leadership as a professional minister. As specific applications of social construction, appreciative inquiry and relational responsibility suggest that meaning is constructed relationally, through the process of dialogue. Their utilization encourages multiple approaches, intentional choices of behaviors and the adoption of different voices in relational engagements, thereby avoiding absolutes, exploring complexities, and appreciating diversity.

Ministers are often expected to fulfill extraordinary expectations for productivity, care, and inspiration. The practical application of their academic theologies involves balancing those expectations with their own resources to create viable and sustainable professional choices. Choosing a more appreciative and collaborative role in ministry, both models and encourages a more sustainable, relational, shared ministry. The position of minister as expert is sometimes a necessary and appropriate response to fulfilling the responsibilities of leadership roles and institutional needs. This paper explores alternatives to the minister as expert voice, alternatives that are developed by processing needs and expectations dialogically, in right relationship with

members of the congregation. Dialogue, as practiced in appreciative inquiry and in right relationship, between minister and congregation not only develops more sustainable patterns of behavior, it can deepen the relationships and experiences of a lived theology.

Henry Nelson Wieman's principle of creative interchange, Carter Heyward's relational theology, and Martin Buber's notion of the I-Thou relational encounter expanded social construction, adding a theological facet to the relational prism that moves us out of our empirically deduced aloneness into connective discovery. Meaning-making conversations, available at the heart of congregational life, are theological in nature. An ongoing practice of relational responsibility can reveal directly the dialogical theology already implicit in the life of a congregation.

The Upper Case *I* Versus the Lower Case *i*

In e. e. cummings' poem "i thank you god for most this amazing day," the use of the lower case *i* recognizes and affirms that the dominance of an "I" and its parallel assertion of the existence of Truth adds boundaries and limitations to our fulfillment of human potential. It makes a dimension of our humanness unavailable to us. When we choose to appreciate that we are all, together, a sum total of what has gone before us, our attention shifts. Sustaining and appreciating the connection of our story, our moment in time, to an ongoing human story avails us of new dimensions in creativity.

We each carry in us the Peloponnesian War, Ghengis Khan, the Holocaust, the discovery of radioactivity, and the extinction of the dinosaur. We did not arrive at this moment, to our own unique construction of reality, without the genes of our fathers, the wombs of our mothers and all their cultural stories. Our births and our development are relational. We are no less than and no

more than the magic that millions of eons, miles, and moments in the universe has contributed, danced, and delivered. The spark of creativity that ignited sperm and egg into conception is relational. What possibilities unfold when we appreciate how much love, lust, violence, science, and seduction made us who we are? How much time, talent, tragedy, or tempest? How many generations of conception went into our own arriving together at this moment, that moment when time, talent, diversity, homogeneity, victories and defeats ignited into an *us*?

Foundational to all our unfoldment are the stories of relationships – mother with father, family with society, past with present; kingdom with phylum, genus with species; earth with air, fire and water. In these eternal and universal connections lie the possibility of transformation. When we appreciate each moment's connection with the ones before, each moment invites a spark of newness that grows out of the middles. Middles are our relational connection between what has gone before and what will come next. Nothing new is created without the place in-between, the relationship between past and present, person and environment and person-to-person. The middles conceive newness whether it is a thought, an action, or an embryo. To appreciate the middles, to be able to make use of their unique fertility, we must learn to be, like a lotus, at home in muddy waters. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke expressed the middle's special fertility this way:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps

you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (1934)

In the original draft of this thesis, I wrote:

History, theology, identity, and mission are elements of religious communities that can keep the institutions confined to limited policies and procedures, overt and covert, that prevents the most effective utilization of resources. Much of what plagues church efforts towards organizational maturation is an attachment to the past and a fear that if they change somehow “God” changes. (2004)

My language was conclusive, judgmental, and not very appreciative of relationship, learning, or what is not being celebrated. I was looking for a solution to what I perceived as a problem. I wanted to explore the possibility of finding a solution to the problem by intentionally framing a religious community’s process of change in theological terms. I was using partial knowledge without a relational or appreciative practice. I *knew*, in my non-relational awareness, that creating God language that makes social construction, relational responsibility, and appreciative inquiry available to communities of faith might be significant. I held a theory that people in religious institutions may be afraid to change relationships with each other, with their minister or with their understanding of God because of an assumption of loss. I had experienced what I conceived of as fear. I thought that members fear that if their faith community changes in significant ways, members will lose relationships and faith, rather than gain a deeper experience and understanding of either or both. I was actually on the right track but in the wrong voice. This is how I have learned to appreciate the possibilities and choose an alternate voice.

Learning a more theological language practice invites God to be in the middles places with minister and congregations, past and present, creating a faith-based appreciation of unfolding possibility. When we offer an opportunity for people of faith to appreciate an I-Thou bigness and goodness that they can recognize and be inspired by, we support and sustain the momentum of energy necessary to achieve a shift.

If, for example, we appreciated the discomfort, judgment and conflict that some communities of faith express about homosexuality, perhaps we could encourage a transformative dialogue. What changes when we appreciate that many people are in the middle, somewhere between an historic, scripturally-attributed belief that there is one normal expression of human sexuality and a new understanding that there may be another interpretation? How can we engage in a dialogue? Who needs to be included? What relationships would be helpful? Being assertively pushed out of the middle too quickly has not worked well. Would transformation in the middle be possible if the dialogue created relationships among people who believe differently? If we shared language practices that celebrated God as the process of connecting and celebrating the other, could we then share the creative, transformative moment that shifts the stance from judgment to appreciation? I believe that God created, loves, and accepts homosexuality. When I am attached to being right, then I cannot relate to or appreciate people who believe that God rejects homosexuality as an abomination. They also believe they are right. When we are in our being-right place, we are individuals locked into our skin and separate from the other. Here, fear and resistance are constructed, rather than relationship. Transformation is not a likely option. We are unfolding in our awareness of the many ways in which love can be oriented. When we can understand that God is the process of being in the middle, we can create

appreciation for not knowing, rather than fear of uncertainty. Letting go of the old and engaging in new ways of thinking and behaving could be understood as an expression of faith. If we had an understanding and appreciation of God's presence in us as the process that brings us through the middle to something better, congregations might be reassured that faith is strengthened and appreciation is deepened when we stay put in the middle and celebrate the community middle and the relationships within communities.

We have always known this. We have always had our oneness, even in our story of separateness. We have always had the option to choose the sources that come to us through our individual bodies or the sources that come from our relationships to our environment and to others. There exist in our world cultures that have no sense of separateness or individual authority. It is not a question of Truth one way or the other. It is a choice. In her poem "Choose to Bless the World" Rebecca Parker invites us to use our gifts to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world
Can take you into solitude
To search for the sources
Of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,

The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth,
Its chorus of life
Welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.
Together – that is another possibility,
Waiting. (2006, p. 164-165)

My conclusion is of course not a conclusion but a continuation, as I will continue to grow in my understanding of, and capacity to be, relationally responsible and to strengthen my relational stance. To close this particular process of discovering and growing, I look to Paul Rasor. His words express my current understandings nearly perfectly.

Our religious tradition and practices help us orient ourselves in the world. They paint a large scale picture of reality that attempts to explain the way things are and help us to understand which things matter most in our lives and who we are in relation to the larger world. They help us to make sense of our lives in the grand context of the universe and movement of history. They help give us meaning and purpose. They give us a place to stand. (2005 p.xii-xiii)

To Rasor's last sentence I would add one word – together. They give us a place to stand, together.

Our religious traditions do give us a place to stand together. In that togetherness lies the possibility to choose new collective strength and wisdom, the possibility of aligning our lives with larger purpose, to exert energy greater than our own. If we are ever to fulfill the profound potential of creation we must utilize all the choices given to us. We are created with bodies of skin, organs, and minds. We emerge into this world as perceptibly individual bodies. We have a choice with every new birth to affirm the individualism of that birth or to affirm the story that connects that birth to all others, bringing us into community, together with all relationships and cultures. Within each life, within each entity, the fiber of a deep and stirring confidence in the worthiness of being is offered. As life weaves a fiber of her essence within us, faith is ours by grace. Discerning our faith, what it is exactly that we believe, and sustaining our faithfulness to it, is our life purpose. This discernment is a communal act – social, planetary, and personal. The social systems that we create, though they cannot destroy this essence, either honor and enhance it or deny and suppress it. As Parker wrote in her poem, “Choose to Bless the World:” “The choice will draw you into community,/ The endeavor shared, /The heritage passed on.”

As I emerge from this particular middle, I hold on to the words of songwriter Carolyn McDade to sustain my momentum from what has been to what comes next. The following quote was retrieved from my ministerial file of readings and quotes, yellowed with age and without a source. Yet the language had to be included here. The article timelessly shares the relational creativity generated through the solidarity of growing our best practices and relationships into meaning and transformation (see Appendix A).

Over the years I have witnessed songs accompany people in giving shape to their living. Songs live and breathe and form relationships. Where there is trust and willingness, they call us into conversation and we go deeper in the terrain of our heart's formation. What is stored is revealed – our bounty of resource, that by which we create and re-create life. To lay the curve of our heart into the world is one measure of what it means to be alive. To do this with awareness and understanding deepens personal and collective wisdom. We live poised in the universe, in a time desperate and ready for the wisdom that leads our species into a change of human consciousness – from domination to mutuality, from human-centered to cosmic, from separateness to relatedness. We cannot do it alone. (1996)

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Table 1

UU Society of Bangor Timeline

July 1999	Rev. Elaine Beth Peresluha called to serve the UU Society of Bangor, Bangor, ME.
September 1999	Rev. Elaine Beth Peresluha arrives in Bangor to serve the congregation.
May 2000	Rev. Elaine Beth Peresluha attends the Maine Professional Woman's Annual Meeting in Portland, ME. Diana Whitney is the Keynote speaker and introduces Rev. Peresluha to appreciative inquiry.
September 2001	Terrorist attack, World Trade Center, New York.
September 2002	Kay Gardner, choir director, dies suddenly of heart attack
November 2002	Beloved member's son, age 50, dies in tragic auto accident.
December 2002	Member's newborn daughter dies of crib death.
January 2003	Rev. Peresluha diagnosed with ovarian cancer and has surgery twice.
February 2003	40-year-old member dies of heart attack. Rev. Elaine briefly returns to perform memorial service.
March 2003	United States invades Iraq.
April 2003	Rev. Peresluha returns to work part-time.
October 2003	Appreciative inquiry summit with David Sanderson.
September 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UUSB hires its first full-time student intern. • The Rev. Grace Bartlett, the Rev. Konnie Wells, the Rev. Elaine Hewes, and the Rev. Elaine Peresluha receive grant from Boston University. • Rev. Elaine Peresluha is accepted to the Taos/Tilburg PhD program in the Social Sciences and begins documenting the UUSB size transition.
March 2005	Workshop for church leaders, March 5, 2005.
September 2005	UUSB Council Leadership Retreat.
April 2005	Rev. Peresluha goes on sabbatical for three months.
July 2005	Rev. Peresluha returns from sabbatical.
May 2006	Rev. Peresluha resigns as minister of the UUSB.

Table 2

Comparing Leadership Choices of Behavior and Language

Situation & Behavior	Voice Chosen	Other Options	Limitations	Opportunity
<p>“My perception as I walked by the facilities, arranged scheduling or attended meetings was that I had difficulty finding a place to meet” (Peresluha, Field Notes).</p>	<p>Observer of subject; minister as expert.</p>	<p>Ask others about their experience of the building and its use. In my written assessment, choose more relational plural pronouns: Our perceptions; as we walked; we experienced.</p>	<p>Use of first person singular pronoun keeps ownership of the observations with me, individualistically limiting possible interpretations and perspectives. This closes the conversation and eliminates possibilities for relational discoveries.</p>	<p>Seeing the choices of pronouns makes clear that voice is a choice that has relevance, both in reflecting and in creating. The subject-object expert voice can be expedient, speeding acceptance of conclusions and implementation of solutions and making management easier to coordinate.</p>

Situation & Behavior	Voice Chosen	Other Options	Limitations	Opportunity
<p>I lost my temper when I discovered there was no toilet paper in the UUSB bathroom. My notes reflect frustration and judgment: I should not have to replace the toilet paper; I had other things to do!</p>	<p>Minister as expert, subject-object relationship. No self- reflection, only judgment.</p>	<p>Appreciative, relational, self-reflexive. Use this as an opportunity for dialogue on roles clarification. Simply fill the empty roller! See my self-talk in a relational context, not merely as my internal state.</p>	<p>I reacted independently rather than responding relationally. As expert, I felt frustrated, misused, and overwhelmed, that my time should be used for more meaningful tasks appropriate to my expert role. I did not use the situation for learning; failed to let go of the view that the “problem” was a symptom of what was not working well.</p>	<p>Observe and reflect on my expectations and responsibilities. Initiate dialogue about what does and does not work well; also about my needs, the congregation's needs, and our relational responsibilities. Replace the toilet paper without reacting. Appreciate my attachment to power and authority, and explore the meaning in</p>

my not wanting to refill
the toilet paper roll.

Situation & Behavior	Voice Chosen	Other Options	Limitations	Opportunity
<p>I suggested to the Board of Trustees that an appreciative inquiry summit would be useful in the decision-making.</p>	<p>Minister as expert; subject-object relationship. I researched, concluded and then suggested a solution.</p>	<p>Ask appreciative questions. Engage a dialogue exploring what would be useful. What do we do well?</p>	<p>I worked alone. I lacked energy, trust, a grasp of what worked well and relationship. This choice reinforced the conditions, rather than encouraging something new to emerge.</p>	<p>Own my subjectivity and ask for help. Offer a relational perspective. Find others to engage in dialogue, refreshing the process and providing space for self-reflection.</p>
<p>I researched and found a facilitator for the appreciative inquiry</p>	<p>Problem-oriented; not appreciative. Dominance of subject-object, minister as</p>	<p>Self-reflexive, relationally responsible inclusive</p>	<p>While expedient, my working alone did not show trust in,</p>	<p>Develop trust, strengthen relationships, and discover strengths</p>

summit.

expert.

voice.

**appreciation for, or make present in the
use of the skills of others. community.**

Situation & Behavior	Voice Chosen	Other Options	Limitations	Opportunity
<p>I attempted to work with my Committee on Ministry to reevaluate my job description and restructure my time, while continuing to address the pastoral-program church questions with the size transition team.</p>	<p>A relational gesture from a self-centered view and self-motivation.</p>	<p>Ask members of Committee on Ministry about their experience. What did they want or feel? Join a we. Ask who was missing in the conversation. How would we proceed?</p>	<p>Limited voices and perspectives engaging the issue. Reality limited to preconceptions and existing beliefs.</p>	<p>Minister as expert can initiate and inspire dialogue, inclusion, and expansion to begin and sustain relational growth.</p>
<p>I planned and executed a five-month sabbatical, taking the month of February, returning in March to lead a leadership retreat, plus</p>	<p>Dominance of subject-object, minister as expert.</p>	<p>Be self-reflexive. Choose a voice that is relationally responsible and inclusive of others.</p>	<p>Continued dominance of I language and absence of we. Process is limited to one participant's observations and conclusions; I decided.</p>	<p>Expert as leader has more control of process; can move and adjust more efficiently. Speaking and acting alone requires less</p>

**four months beginning
in April.**

This limited creativity.

**emotional challenge and
self-reflective adjusting.**

Table 3

UUSB Appreciative Inquiry Action Plans

Programming

Action Step	Person Responsible	Materials Needed	Group	Deadline
Participate in Worship Committee	Kathy Yanny			August
Participate in DRE Search	Paul Grosswiler			ASAP
Improve member retention with programming	Paul Grosswiler		RE, Small group ministries, etc.	Ongoing
Work with Tom Bickford on RE staffing	Cathy Elliot			
Complete work of Hersey Bequest TF: Trustee approval of recommendations	Program	Financial plan for endowment, summer program plan; RE plan	RE, Trustees and task force	August
Adult RE History program	Carolyn Kinnard Ziffer			2005-06
Adult RE Bible Study UU style	Connie Huntley	Money for materials		2005-06

Outreach

Action step	Person Responsible	Materials Needed	Group	Deadline
Add 1 or 2 extra days serving at the Salvation Army	Kathy Yanny		Soup kitchen volunteers	August
Organize extra day per month at Salvation Army	Johneen Eckardt		Soup kitchen volunteers	August
Expand bag lunch program to other churches	Emma Macaillen		Soup kitchen volunteers	August
Supply new socks, underwear & possibly other personal items to needy	Paul Little	Supplies, funding methods of purchase and distribution	Soup kitchen volunteers & any one else interested	August
Engage Baptist church in helping with Soup Kitchen 4 th Saturday meal, & bag lunches	Natalie Gregory		Soup kitchen volunteers	August
Develop method for people to actively fulfill their needs	Paul Little		Soup kitchen volunteers	August

Membership

Action step	Person	Materials	Group	Deadline
Improve communications	Responsible Kathy Yanny	Needed Plan/strategy	Will work with anyone else interested in improving communications between committees	Ongoing
Talk to 2-3 people every Sunday	Kathy Yanny			Ongoing
Bulletin Board identifying committee members.	Kathy Yanny	Camera, board, information		
Chairs				
Shared ministry- assigning different tasks to members & friends	Susan Wishkoski Phyllis Havens Judy Sims	Plan to equitable share ministry needs of congregation, greeting, coffee hour, flowers etc.	Worship Committee, Membership Committee	August

Organize a crisis response team	Emma Ma Cailen	People/process	Committee on Ministry	August
Create Booklet for tracking members in service to community/ministry	Susan Wishkoski			August
Read and Summarize internet info from UUA on membership	TJ Goetting			August

Finance

Action step	Person Responsible	Materials Needed	Group	Deadline
Long Term financial Plan	Marie Tessier Mark McCollough	Long term goals form committees		August
OK for Budget for Kitchen Committee	Michelle Baillergeon			August

Table 4

Examples of Choices in Leadership Voice

My Story	Others' Stories	Intentions	Contributions	Impact	Feelings	Comment
I arrived in Wilmington, NC, as the interim minister with more skill and awareness than I had in Bangor, ME.	UUFW has just lost their settled minister and an interim minister arrives.	To connect, listen, learn and develop trusting relationships and safe environment for conversation.	The members all told their stories, expressed their needs, reservations and emotions. I asked for help, asked questions, stayed still, listened, and learned.	Relationship was initiated, trust was established. I learned that the UUFW members did not like being told what to do. I packed away my expert voice.	We all relaxed. I did not feel the pressure to perform or produce. They let go of their fear that I would scold or want to change them.	My professional understanding of Fellowship identity versus congregational identity was helpful. I did not need to present as an authority. I recognized that I needed to

**simply be
present.**

My Story	Others' Stories	Intentions	Contributions	Impact	Feelings	Comment
I quickly recognized	The Fellowship did not express	To listen and learn.	I asked questions about	An appreciative	Excited, enthusiastic,	My feelings of being tired

My Story	Others' Stories	Intentions	Contributions	Impact	Feelings	Comment
<p>Emails were often fast, frequent, and furious. I was told that email was at the heart of the previous minister's departure.</p>	<p>Emotional email communication was expected and was considered appropriate.</p>	<p>To evaluate email as a method of communicating, to review emails sent during last ministry, to use my expert observer tools in making an assessment.</p>	<p>Members shared their stories; one member had and shared hard copies of all the emails sent to the Board of Trustees about the previous minister.</p>	<p>I learned how volatile reactions to email could be when the content of the emails was not so volatile.</p>	<p>Curious, surprised, and encouraged.</p>	<p>I learned that the reactions to the emails by those involved were disproportional to the content and intention. I learned that emails are not a predictable method of communication.</p> <p>.</p>

My Story	Others' Stories	Intentions	Contributions	Impact	Feelings	Comment
<p>I did not want to be the one, the expert, deciding teaching or communicating on my own.</p>	<p>Members were suspicious of ministers. The Transition Team (TT) wanted to establish new ways of relating.</p>	<p>The Transition Team and I wanted to build a relationship that would model new tools and choices to the UU Fellowship.</p>	<p>The Transition Team volunteered time, effort, trust and commitment to process. I offered the same plus knowledge and experience.</p>	<p>The relationship between me and the TT offered a working model to communicate the possibilities present in dialogue versus debate, relationship versus subject-object stance.</p>	<p>Anticipation, appreciations, trust, inspiration.</p>	<p>Momentum and energy grew. We all felt energized to do more and more, as we discovered and dreamed. Others joined in the process.</p>

My Story	Others' Stories	Intentions	Contributions	Impact	Feelings	Comment
<p>Rev. Cheryl M. Walker told a staff member “When it is my head, I decide.”</p>	<p>I had not necessarily considered my own safety or credibility when choosing my voice.</p>	<p>To choose the most effective leadership voice in each interaction/opportunity</p>	<p>I appreciated Rev. Walker’s reminder to consider personal/professional credibility and safety as a criteria for choosing a leadership stance.</p>	<p>Rev. Walker established and communicated very clear and measurable boundaries for her decision making process. which communicated predictable behavior and established authority.</p>	<p>Rev. Walker is very competent and confident about her ministerial identity. I am less confident about my own professional competence.</p>	<p>Confidence can expand our ability to be relational and appreciative. It directly influences how vulnerable we are willing to be and how authoritative we need to be.</p>

My Story	Others' Stories	Intentions	Contributions	Impact	Feelings	Comment
<p>I was able to see changes in people's skepticism and cynicism.</p>	<p>Members expressed relief, a need for leadership and appreciation for leadership.</p>	<p>I still did not want to be the expert, but did want to teach relationally responsible communication .</p>	<p>We practiced going direct with our communication , being timely with expressions of disagreement or concern as well as appreciation.</p>	<p>Trust built, more members became involved in planning and conversations.</p>	<p>Gratitude, hope and stronger commitment to process.</p>	

Appendix A

“Spirit of Life” Reflection –Waning Moon, Midsummer ’96

by Carolyn McDade, Wellfleet, Mass

It was morning. Asked to reflect on ‘Spirit of Life,’ I am drawn to the immediacy of the day around me. Fog, still resting, lies soft and fluid among the trees. Dawn is a growing luminance in this womb of water lifted and floating in a sea of air. Moisture upon the pine collects and slips in random rain upon the bush, each leaf shaped and placed to gather sun and turn it green. Young cardinals, who days ago sat chattering noisily to busy parents providing food, now fed on their own. All that is closest around me—grass, pine, and birds—are held in mist. As I enter this day, my country is caught in the useless habits of vengeance against a neighboring island, Cuba, and the greater struggle to let ‘manifest destiny; give way to an opening consciousness of inclusivity and mutuality.

One night some years ago in a time of intense social activism, I drove a friend home from yet another meeting. The night was cold, winter sighing into spring, the season of regeneration close at hand. We drove through the quietened streets, two thoughtful and practiced activists, between us years of deepening feminist consciousness, insight opening upon insight—our womanspirits enlivened and fresh, yet shaken by the patterns of oppression becoming visible to us—systems of power and the jaundiced human assumptions that fostered and maintained them.

At her home, I pulled to the curb. As she opened the car door, I spoke from m depths of the dryness engulfing my life.

‘...I feel like cardboard that has lain in an attic for years. The slightest motion of air and I will disintegrate into dust.’ We sat quietly for a time, two women holding the unflamboyant power to be present with one another, staying in the weight of witness without disappearing or moving too quickly to soothe, bringing one full being, vulnerability and strength, to a reality

frequented by hope, frequented by despair. In this deep recognition—knowing and being known—we parted.

Arriving home, I found the houses in my neighborhood dark and settled. By habit I moved without light through my home to the piano, knew its keys by touch. Through my desperate numbness, I sang—my voice a flood of appeal to all that is generative in life—all that pulses through this universe with confidence in its worthiness. I sang this simple prayer. My ardent desire was to remain faithful to the social movements that I so deeply loved—an imperfect a stunning stream of people who through the ages have sought to live love in this world—love that mingles humbly with wonder to form reverence; love that over and over declines immutability and status, a tenacious journeyer intent on a direction more than a destination; love that honors the formation of just and limber social systems as vital acts of deep spiritual purpose, hovering close to the heartbeat of the Whole.

The uncontainable of my heart sang forth. It sang within the immediacy of what I and others were living. All within me that will not lie down came forth and touched what matters in life. Though the world remained as it was, in singing I knew that I could continue on.

Over years I continue to return to this prayer—to realign my life with a larger purpose; to live with an energy greater than mine, to affirm the profound strategy of Creation, which has woven within each life, within each entity—the fiber of a deep and stirring confidence in the worthiness of being. As Life weaves a fiber of her essence within us, faith is ours by grace. This discerning of faithfulness in our life purpose. This discernment is a communal act—social, planetary, and personal. The social systems that we create, though they cannot destroy this essence, either honor and enhance it, or deny and suppress it.

Over the years I have witnessed songs accompany people in giving shape to their living. Songs live and breathe and form relationships. Where there is trust and willingness, they call us

into conversation and we go deeper in the terrain of our heart's formation. What is stored is revealed—our bounty of resource, that by which we create and re-create life. To lay the curve of our heart into the world is one measure of what it means to be alive. To do this with awareness and understanding deepens personal and collective wisdom. We live poised in the universe, in a time desperate and ready for the wisdom that leads our species into a change of human consciousness—from domination to mutuality, from human-centered to cosmic, from separateness to relatedness.

We cannot do it alone. 'Spirit of Life,' come unto me...

Editor's note: Found on page 123 of the new hymnbook, *Singing the Living Tradition*, this song by Carolyn McDade is a favorite among UU congregations and is sung at many UU gatherings.

Appendix B

Questions for Appreciative Inquiry Interviews

1. Looking at your entire experience in this Fellowship, recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement. What made it a significant and fulfilling experience? Who was involved? Describe the event in detail.

2. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself - just as a person, with no special role in mind?

3. When you are feeling best about your part as a member of the Fellowship, what do you value about your participation?

4. What is it about the Fellowship that you most appreciate? What is the single most important thing that it has contributed to your life?

5. What do you think is the heart or essence of our Fellowship?

6. Think back to a time when we the Fellowship was able to achieve an important goal. What was happening - what were we able to do? What benefits did we realize? And what allowed us to have that level of success?

7. If you had three wishes for our Fellowship, what would they be?

Appendix C

Visionary Design Statements

A visionary design statement bridges the best of "what has been and is" with your own desire and intuition about "what might be." It is a *provocative*, short, clear word picture as it stretches the realm of the status quo, challenges common assumptions and

routines, and describes the *ideal* state of the area/topic your table has selected. Such a proposition is a positive image of the ideal organization. An effective Visionary Design Statement:

- Expresses what people truly want for the Fellowship
- Imagines our preferred future, a LEAP from where things are today
- Presents a bold, affirmative statement about UUFW.

Visionary Design Statements

- Are motivating, compelling, exciting, and ideal
- Are grounded in the best experiences of UUFW members
- Are written in the present tense, as if they are already happening

Sample visionary design statements:

Our organization is poised for a positive future because all members share a, common vision about our core mission, intent, and direction. We share a challenging and meaningful direction with all our members feeling significant purpose, pride, and unity. We use whatever time and resources are needed to bring everyone on board to continuously cultivate individuals who feel themselves to be valued members of an outstanding organization.

At Seacoast Institute we have set a new standard for involving *our* membership and developing our leadership. Members contribute significantly to defining the direction of the Institute and proposing new programs and services. Our programs for leadership development

among teenagers and young adults contribute to their growth and learning and also provide the Institute with continuously emerging leadership.

At NHS, all our communication systems work exceptionally well - our schedules are in Synch. Everyone has access to the same information at the same time, and we communicate creatively and intensively across disciplines.

Appendix D

Ministerial Column in UUSB Newsletter, June 2003

Prior to Appreciative Inquiry summit facilitated by David Sanders

There comes a time in your life's journey

When a chasm opens up before you.

Make the leap.

The chasm is not as large as it appears.

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor is positioned at the edge of a chasm. The annual meeting revealed pledges at a lower amount than last year and endowment income has dropped. At the same time we have record attendance on Sunday mornings, new members, expanding small groups meeting regularly, a church calendar that is so full it needs extra boxes to keep track of events. What is our reality?

Do you remember these words?

With change comes opportunity and celebration as well as fear, resistance and challenges. There are new faces everywhere! Names to learn. People to get to know. Our traditional ways of managing committees and finances creak and groan under the strain of new people and programs..

I wrote that in our January newsletter! ...and here we are- right in the thick of it. Change. Do we back up, run in fear or leap with faith?

Human beings move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive our image of our future the more positive the actions we choose will be. Not having a music director is moving backwards. Cutting programs is running in fear. The momentum for any large scale change is determined by the percentage of people involved. The more people actively engaged in the process the more relative our decisions will be and the more likely they are to succeed.

We need to meet in the same room to discover how to support our programming. We need to remember all that works well here to ensure a vibrant music program. The resources we need are within us and amongst us. Now is the time to mine them and establish what The Unitarian Universalist Society will be, today and tomorrow. To be genuine and dynamic that determination requires the vested interest of our whole congregation. Each of us is important now, an indispensable part of the spirit and power of this church. The words we share- the questions we ask- reflect the future we are building. Be creative. Be positive. Hold on to what is good. The rest will take care of itself.

“With a critical mass of angels... heaven is assured.” Step up angels. It’s time to leap.

Appendix E

Ministerial Column for UUSB Newsletter, September 2004

Welcome home! September marks the beginning of an exciting year of opportunities for the U.U. Society of Bangor.

- We have a full time student intern! This is the first time this institution has taken on the responsibility of being a teaching institution. This is a vital demonstration of our growth into a new level of understanding and acceptance of our role in the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.
- We have been selected, along with Rev. Grace Bartlett and Grace United Methodist Church, Rev. Konnie Wells and The First Congregation Church of Brewer and Rev. Elaine Hewes and Redeemer Lutheran Church, as the recipients of a grant from Boston University, Supporting Urban Pastoral Excellence Program. We will be working through the year on an expanding interfaith collaborative initiatives in Bangor .
- I have been accepted to the Taos/Tilburg Ph.D. Program in the Social Sciences offered by the Taos Institute in conjunction with Tilburg University in Belgium. This program is built around a thesis project, with all readings and preparations designed to allow me to continue in a full time ministry with the church while completing my dissertation. I have chosen to apply social constructionist theory and research to analyze and facilitate our successful transition from a pastoral ministry to a program ministry. Over the next three years, we will continue with the strategic planning initiated with our appreciative inquiry workshop last fall. As we move ahead with the process of fulfilling the vision we created I will be recording, facilitating and evaluating our progress for my dissertation.
- I will be going on sabbatical from March 1st through July 30th to be able to rest, renew and complete my research in social construct theory . This sabbatical time will be a

opportunity for me and for the congregation. I will gain new insight and energy by taking a distant view of our congregation. The congregation will benefit from the opportunity to grow confidence in its ability to make critical choices and implement initiatives. My sabbatical will provide a timely affirmation of the strength and maturity of this congregation to effectively share the ministry, and to take ownership of its future.

Celebration and pride is in order as we enter into a year of teaching, learning, growing and maturing. Celebration and confidence will be our themes as we stretch into the fulfillment of our vision to expand our role of spiritual leadership in the community, and to be together, have fun and connect while we grow. What an exciting opportunity for us all. I am thrilled and grateful to be able to share in this ministry with you.

Appendix F

Boston University Supporting Urban Pastoral Excellence Sabbatical Plan

Mission, Ministry And Growth: Discerning Our Call**THEME**

A congregation clear and passionate in its mission will grow in numbers, spiritual maturation, effective stewardship and in its ability to fulfill its mission. A church which is ambiguous in its mission needs strong and effective leadership in discerning its mission.

Ministers are most effective in leading congregations when mentally, physically and spiritually centered and appropriately bounded in their role. A congregation grows in spirit and faith with leadership that understands and organizes and raises the congregations appreciation for the fiscal resources, human skills and faith development of the congregation.

RATIONALE

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor is at a critical juncture in its development as a community of faith. Ten years after the historic merger of the Bangor Unitarian Church with the Universalist Church of Bangor into the U.U. Society of Bangor they are still not clear about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist Congregation. They have not claimed their liberal Christian roots or articulated their relationship to Jesus or God.

The demands on my presence have grown over the past five years. I need time and distance to renew mind, body and Spirit to effectively take the pulse of this ministry, to reflect on what comes next, and to gain the leadership and management skills necessary to serve this congregation. The U.U. Society of Bangor needs leadership right now that possesses passion and vision; whose long term thinking is congruent with the congregation's values, commitments and aspirations.

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor 's (UUSB) ability to unequivocally state its mission is crucial to its maturation as a community of faith. The UUSB has all the right stuff, with committed, talented membership, a substantial endowment and a large, historic and pleasing facility. Currently we are more focused on what we don't have rather than our assets. We are operating out of habit with moment to moment crisis management rather than passionate engagement with our mission. Like an adolescent, the church is poised for independence and responsible decision making, aware that it needs to push away from me and take ownership of its identity and ministry. At the same time, the church relies on my energy and enthusiasm in making its way.

Over the last five years, the congregation has grown in numbers and in health. They have let go of some long term dysfunction, communication challenges and habitual low self-esteem. Unresolved budget and staff challenges as well as faith development issues, remain. They have made strides spiritually and institutionally. In the fall of 2003, we created and initiated a long-range plan to strategically grow our membership and service to the community. We have simultaneously grown our operating budget. All this without a clearly stated mission. Without the congregation's ownership of and clear understanding of its mission, our ability to fulfill our long range plan is limited. The congregation is ready and capable of claiming their place as the liberal religious voice in Bangor if that is *their* mission.

I believe I was called to this congregation because I could articulate the vision and mission they were missing. I was passionate about the potential in the people and the facility to serve the needs of a downtown neighborhood, to be the liberal religious voice in Bangor and to serve Unitarian Universalist students attending the Bangor Theological Seminary. I am concerned that the congregation simply bought into my enthusiasm and my vision without truly discerning their mission separate from me. I need to step back and allow them that opportunity. I

need time and distance to nurture my own mind and body and to renew my Spirit. I need to hear God's voice, supporting and guiding me as this ministry grows and changes so that I can best serve God- not my ego. Here, in my office, with the phones ringing, juggling the care of my aging mother, the needs of my family and the latest church crisis calling for my pastoral presence, I am unable to care for my soul and to discern my role in this ministry. This congregation deserves better. They need me to *let go and let God*- to gain the skill necessary to support them in identifying and fulfilling their mission or move on.

My leadership in Bangor has inspired several projects and ministries such as a Caring Committee, building and grounds renovations, a weekly religious column in the local newspaper and small groups for spiritual growth as well as local social justice advocacy projects. Some initiatives have sparked enthusiasm and new initiatives while others lacked the follow through to be fulfilled. Some members only attend worship if they know that I am preaching. I am called about everything from no dish detergent in the kitchen to the death of someone in our neighborhood. Too many decisions are contingent on my directions. To me, this reflects a congregation growing from a pastoral size community to a program size church. It also may reflect my own ambivalence about letting go of control. I need time, distance and new information to understand the challenges we are facing. Is there something else I am not seeing that may be crucial to this community moving ahead? Perhaps we are not meant to grow any bigger in size and therefore need to focus on growing in faith. Perhaps the U.U. Society of Bangor can best fulfill its mission as a pastoral congregation. I do not know how best to serve this congregation that I love. At this critical time we need time and distance from each other to discover how to be the best we can be.

PLAN: *To nurture mind, body and spirit to more effectively lead and choose*

I am renting a condominium on the beach in Melbourne Shores Florida, nine miles from my mother and far away from my congregation, husband, children, cats, birds and multiple civic responsibilities. I am bringing my water color supplies, my bike, my bathing suit, sunglasses and sunscreen. I will escape Maine's mud season, drink ice tea with my Mom, tan, swim, read, walk, bike or paint, eat and pray, slowly, mindfully, savoring each moment of opportunity to pay attention to God's creation, God's voice and my Soul's reply.

Mind;

- Read (Bibliography attached)
- Attend an Appreciative Inquiry workshop sponsored by The Clergy Leadership Institute
- Begin study for my Ph.D in Social Construct Theory through Tilsburg University, Tilsburg, Belgium. Social Construct theory will deepen my appreciation and understanding of the resistance to change and give me tools for managing the process of change.
- Begin playing with a manuscript/structure for a children's book, "That's God Cate" based on conversations with my daughters and our experiences of God's presence. I plan to informally talk with Jewish Lights Publishing Co. in Woodstock VT. (Children in the congregation I served in Woodstock contributed to two books published by Jewish Lights, God's Paintbrush and The 11th Commandment)

Body

- Attend yoga classes and deepen my daily practice
- Take long walks on the beach
- Bicycle.

Spirit

- Move slow and listen long

- Reflect through silence, prayer, journal and paint.

BENEFITS:

Congregational:

I believe that with time and separation the congregation will develop a new confidence and ownership of its identity as a community of faith. The U.U.S.B. will learn to differentiate between their roles and responsibilities and the minister 's roles and responsibilities for a shared ministry. Upon my return, the congregation will be better able to receive what I have learned so that together we can clarify the mission of this church and its vision for fulfilling that mission. We will then be better prepared to create a long term strategic plan grounded in our mission.

Professional:

I will return from sabbatical with a better understanding of my leadership and management skills, as well as a recognition of characteristics/ habits I need to let go of. I will be more effective in modeling the practice that I preach in terms of self care, spiritual practice and attention to Self. I will know whether or not I am the right minister to lead this congregation into the future they discern. I will be sufficiently renewed, able to make a commitment to our shared ministry.

Personal:

I will have had enough distance and time away from my life to be able to understand where I need to adjust my time commitments to my work, husband, daughters, friends, pets, and home. I hope to make peace with the sense that I am always neglecting someone or something because there is just not enough time to go around. I want to shift my perception of my commitments and time to allow for joy in experiencing it all or have peace with letting some things go. I will be clearer on my mother's needs for care, my responsibility in caring for her and how best to fulfill those responsibilities.

TIMELINE

February 2005: Our full-time ministerial intern will be preaching each Sunday during February to gain an understand of the time commitment required for weekly worship preparation. I will supervise her and utilize the time normally delegated for worship preparation to complete sabbatical plans.

March 1-12, 2005: I will attend and complete the Avatar Master's Course in Altemont springs Florida. The source is an intensive in self understanding and management skills

March 13-31, 2005: I will be taken somewhere nice and far away, as a surprise for our 5th wedding anniversary with my husband. We will spend time together and with our children playing.

April 1- June 30, 2005: I will live in a condominium in Melbourne Shores Florida nine miles from my mother until my return to Bangor July 1, 2005.

Appendix G

Elaine's Agenda for UUSB Council Retreat

SEPTEMBER 24, 2005

MORNING: CREATING CONTEXT FOR WORKING TOGETHER

9:00- 9:15 WELCOME

- Thank everyone for arriving
- Explain logistics of food, breaks, and self care- may get up and get something to eat, drink or go to the bathroom as needed
- Invite them to get something now

I know that going away on a retreat with the council is requiring a lot from each of you at a very busy time of the church year so we all want the time spent on retreat to be valuable in that we will gain skills and understanding that will maximize the effectiveness of our leadership throughout the year. As I reflected on all that I have observed and learned from each of you since returning from sabbatical and anticipated how we can best spend our time today, there are two specific topics I would like you to consider.

First, if we are going to make great headway in our understanding of how best to serve this congregation, we must develop effective ways for working together. Second you must be deliberate about the direction you are going to lead this congregation into its future. By 5:00 pm it is my hope that you will all feel connected, energized, focused and committed to leading this congregation in a year of learning and deciding to be either a great pastoral church or a great program church.

9:15 OPENING READING

Light the chalice

9:20 COVENANT (40 minutes)

The most important goal we can achieve today is to feel committed to one another , respectful of one another and trusting of the work and behaviors of this group. I would like you to break into two's and discuss the questions you will find on the green paper- find a quiet spot- take fifteen minutes each to have a conversation- take a minute or two to just pass through each question- reflect on each one and begin sharing until you feel the one that most touches you- and how you feel about being on this council, then focus there.

- How did you come to be on the council? What captured your imagination about this choice?
- What drew you to the idea of working with others on the council?
- What ideas did you have about working with church members?
- What attracted you to the UUSB?
- How would you describe your overall leadership objectives and goals?
- How would you describe your leadership style? Methods? (be specific here... talk about how *you* lead... in other words, how do you realize your objectives and goals?

10:00 What did you learn about one another? (share partners info for 15 minutes)

10:15- 11:00 discussion / each person contributes

1. As you think about the retreat, what could happen here that would lead you to feel that your participation was worthwhile and what could happen afterwards that would make you happy to have been part of the group discussion?

2. What do you most care that I keep in mind during the retreat? From your perspective, what topics are most important for discussion during the retreat to make it successful?

3. What might be set in place to enable you to speak as fully as you wish at the retreat? Can you suggest any guidelines for communicating that represent your own commitments to speak and listen in ways that support the general purpose of the retreat?

4. What do you want your fellow council members to understand about who you are and what you most care about around the issue of leadership and practice? What questions do you hope that others might ask you? What do you really want to understand about your council colleagues and their concerns? What might you ask others in order to get some clarity about these things?

11:00-12:00 Write on flip chart- make a behavioral covenant review and revise

BREAK FOR LUNCH

AFTERNOON: DELIBERATELY CHOOSING

1:00 INTRODUCE VIDEO & DISCUSSION:

PASTORAL VS. PROGRAM CHURCH

2:00 VIDEO & DISCUSSION:WHERE IS THE UUSB

Have participants fill out church description form and discuss

3:00 STEPS IN DECIDING

5 Steps – listed on foam core

Circles: Differentiation of roles and responsibilities

Review handout- where the church is and each fill it out and discuss

Draft of plan

Projected time line

4:00 DISCUSSION AND DECISION

Assign a learning team

Set date for first meeting with learning team and council

CLOSING

Appendix H

Council Commitment

- Formal endorsement of the whole learning process.
- Holding members accountable for adhering to the behavioral covenant.
- Exploring size transition through personal reading, thought and reflection.
- Making this time of learning a priority among activities of the congregation.
- Assigning excellent leaders to the learning team.
- Spending regular or special Council meeting time discussing the concepts and findings that the learning team brings forward.
- Participating fully in the events for a wider circle of leaders.
- Anticipating some congregational anxiety about the outcomes of the process.
- Sticking to the established steps and avoiding premature decisions.

Appendix I

Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor – Agenda for Workshop for Church Leaders

March 5, 2005

We are most passionate about:

- Worshiping together in a trusting, welcoming environment
- Being a welcoming, intimate, caring community who work together toward common goals
- Forming friendships and connections by working together in positive, energy-giving relationships
- Providing a growing and welcoming liberal religious presence in the greater Bangor community
- Serving our church and community

We feel best about giving by:

- Working together on projects and participating on committees, religious education, music, and small group ministries
- Teaching our youth
- Feeding the hungry and clothing the poor

We feel best about receiving through:

- Spiritual renewal and nurturing that we receive from worship
- Emotional, spiritual, and material support at times of need
- By giving to others

UUSB Ministry Goals for 2005-06

(NOTE: Highest priorities as identified by the workshop participants are in bold)

Program goals:

- **Establish stable leadership for Religious Education programs**
- **Develop and expand adult RE programming (e.g. book discussion groups, film groups, café, Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, more women's programs, intergenerational programs, OWL, Hersey/summer programming)**
- **Continue children's choir and outreach to nursing homes**
- **Increase financial support for RE (Hersey, Pledge)**
- **Increase involvement of congregation, especially new members, in teaching RE programs, choir, and other programs**
- Increase the visibility of all our RE programs
- Grow music program to be a more vital part of worship and the RE program
- Record services and distribute to those who can not attend church
- Increase special events (e.g. Halloween, New Years)
- Continue to support Women With Wings

Programming needs:

- A full-time, year-round RE Director
- Vibrant, energetic RE Committee (which we already have!)
- Successful FY06 pledge campaign and support for RE from Hersey and General
- Endowment Trustees
- Increase funding for the music program to pay music students to participate, adult and children's bell choir, support, enthusiastic RE committee

- Volunteers to teach classes, organize and participate in special events, participate in adult RE and choir, and record services and distribute to the home-bound

Finance and Governance goals:

- **Increase organizational stability by developing clear lines of communication, policies, and procedures**
- **Develop descriptions of committees and leadership positions**
- **Develop a long-term financial strategic plan**
- **Develop closer relationship between Trustees and Council**
- Engage members more in financial matters
- Create a comprehensive database for members and friends (pledge history, addresses, involvement in committees, etc.)
- Reduce reliance on endowments for operating expenses and build a capital reserve (Hedge Fund)
- Have Trustees control all endowment funds
- Increase our endowments through a planned giving campaign

Finance and Governance needs:

- Open discussion of money
- A successful FY06 pledge campaign
- Put the “fun” back into fundraising – vigorous canvass
- Council spend time on governance and improve communication
- New fund-raising ideas – e.g. cook books

Outreach goals:

- **Increase our programs to feed the hungry and work with other churches (e.g. ecumenical food cupboard, UUA social action programs, Manna, Bangor Area Homeless shelter)**
- **Increase public awareness of our community outreach**
- **Have church services focused on social-justice (e.g. Hunger Communion)**
- Increase political activism and involvement
- Increase activities with other churches (e.g. film series)

Outreach needs:

- Increase funding for outreach, innovative use of Deacons Fund
- Increase advertising and articles about our social-justice programs
- Increase interactions with other like-minded churches

Membership goals:

- **Initiate a membership campaign (goal to increase membership 10-15% in the next year – 15-20 new pledge units/families/individuals)**
- **Retain current members**
- Understand why people leave

Membership needs:

- Unified database for all members
- Develop better ways to identify, track, and communicate “friends” of UUSB
- Support the work of the Membership Task Force

Facility goals:

- **Restore the narthex and front entrance (landscaping and interior)**
- **Improve safety and security of the building**
- **Develop strategies to improve parking (or a shuttle for bringing people to church)**

- **Increase accessibility (moving office downstairs, elevator between floors)**
- **Make significant improvements to the Dorothy Memorial in FY06**
- become involved in the UUA Green Church program
- improve the quality of the downstairs bathrooms (vestry)
- expand bulletin board space in the Dorothy Memorial
- continue renovations and improvements throughout the building

Facility needs:

- Increase funding for the building by freeing the endowments from supporting operating expenses
- Match the Guild “challenge grant” of \$4,000 and make significant improvements to the narthex in FY06
- Continue to seek innovative cooperation from the Guild and Trustees to support capital improvements.

Appendix J

UUSB Appreciative Inquiry Summit October 2003 – Questions for Interviews

1. Tell me about the best times that you have had as part of the UU Society of Bangor. Looking at your entire experience in this congregation, recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement. What made it a significant and fulfilling experience? Who was involved? Describe the event in detail.
2. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself — just as a person, with no special role in mind?
3. When you are feeling best about your part as a member of the Society, what do you value about your participation?
4. What is it about the Society that you most appreciate? What is the single most important thing that it has contributed to your life?
5. What do you think is the essence or heart of our Society?
6. Think back to a time when we enjoyed abundant finances. What was happening – what were we able to do? What benefits did we realize? And what allowed us to have that level of abundance?
7. If you had three wishes for our Society, what would they be?

Appendix K

UUSB Ministerial Exit Interview

Congregation: Bangor UU Church

Date: June 7, 2006

Contact Person:

Charles Boothby, Phone: 207 942-5984, Email: judyboo@quixnet.net

Participants and their roles:

Charlie Boothby – Council Chair; JoDee Creighton – Vice Chair (Liaison –Music Committee, Personnel Committee); Donald Parsons – Interim Search/Building & Grounds; Mark McCullough – Council member/Growth & Learning Team Leader; Bill Carlin – Committee on Ministry/Welcoming Congregation; Michele Caitlyn-Strout – Clerk (Church officer); Marj Lawrence – Council member/Ways & Means; Rosemary Parsons – Treasurer; Sue McKay Membership/Budget Finance; Phyllis Havens – Council member/Interim Search/Liaison to worship

Date the minister leaves: August 31, 2006

Name of Interviewer: Rev. Dr. Judith Smith-Valley

1a. What do you see as the three most significant accomplishments in this ministry?

Appreciative inquiry work--bringing congregation together on issues/Strategic planning

Great strides in improving governance—running selves during sabbatical

Elaine brought topics of controversy to the floor and discussion – hot topics

Creative exciting music program – excellent worship

Decision to become Welcoming Congregation

Elaine helped expand Small Group Ministry/Welcoming Congregation/Caring

Committee

90 volunteers involved in preparing food for Bangor fair

Sold Hersey Retreat Center in 2002. Organized a program to continue “summer camp” for the congregation through Ferry Beach Camp & Conference Center.

1.b. To whom or what do you attribute these accomplishments?

Elaine’s PhD work is based on Appreciative Inquiry – she led two sessions with entire congregation two years in a row.

Dramatic change – built sense of community. Appreciation/set tone in worship

Other accomplishments came from Elaine’s desire to help us be better.

2. What were your frustrations and disappointments during this same time?

Caring Committee crashed & burned. Tremendous loss to this congregation

Ways & Means crashed & burned.

Two issues council chair wants to work on: pastoral care – Are we really a “pastoral” church?

3a. How would you characterize the working relationship between the minister(s), the staff, the board, the committees and the congregation?

Elaine told us from day one that she wasn’t particularly good at staff/personnel issues. Communications not the best. Staff meetings a disaster.

Congregation has incredible strength in leadership. One or two people carrying the ball.

Elaine did lots of work building links between her and council. Communication

No similar link between council and committees. This needs work.

3b. What are the patterns of power and influence in the congregation?

Treasurer had conflict with Elaine over authority to sign contracts. Needed better

clarification of relationships. (Feels the minister is “employee” of the congregation and has no right to make decisions about personnel issues.

Board of Trustees control the endowment. This group often in opposition with Church Council (program)

90 % of members of congregation serve in some capacity—strength

Communication is not strong point.

Power of spiritual guidance, Elaine.

Core groups are devoted to the work they do.

No big issues of discord

RE significant group within this congregation.

Power in church is in the committees – no built in rotation.

Over the years ministers come and go – the congregation endures.

Facilities/for better or worse. Curse of the large endowment.

3c. Does the congregation feel like a healthy, cooperative and open set of relationships, or do some people feel cut out of the decision-making process?

It is healthy.

4a. Is toxic behavior - such as implicit or explicit ultimatums, a raised angry voice, or more serious acting out - a feature of congregational life?

Amenable--Solid group

4b. What strategies has the congregation adopted to deal with such behavior or put limits on it?

Disruptive Behavior Policy

5a. Do you have and use a Committee on Ministry?

Yes, but not very effectively.

5b. How effective has this committee been?

The COM representative wanted the COM meet with Elaine before she leaves. The COM declined. It has not been a good relationship in recent years. Committee spent hours going through Elaine's contract (from seven years ago--almost line by line) to update document just before she announced she was leaving. COM members felt "egg on face."

Ad hoc committee set up to best way evaluate. At first meeting she arrive 1 hour late. She said she got confused about the time. Second meeting she was 45 minutes late. This committee felt she would have the time nailed down after being late the first time.

Another Council member was on COM first 3 years and felt they were extremely effective. They worked on sensitive issues.

5c. To what do you attribute its effectiveness?

Minister and committee

Elaine spread very thin in recent years. The ministry-insight into visitation – identify where a person is stuck. Down to earth pastoral care.

6. What has been the history of relating to ministers (length of pastorates, number of negotiated resignations, manner in which former ministers departed and known reasons as to why they left)?

Elaine is the first called minister of this consolidated congregation (1994) Rev. Sue Jamison served the joined church after having served the Bangor Unitarian Church before merger. The interim between these two ministers was not particularly effective.

7. What provisions do your by-laws make for the following aspects of ministry?

Not asked

- a. Calling a minister?
- b. Terminating a minister's call?

c. The committee on ministry?

8. What are your expectations and priorities for the next ministry of this church?

Need to grow – more money & volunteers

Pledging units are down but pledges have grown. We need help here.

Welcoming? A better sense of who we are and how to make visitors want to return.

Help increase our presence in larger community/Bangor/Maine.

Ministry at University of Maine in Orono – relationship with seminary?

9a. What currently attracts people to your church?

RE program, with its emphasis on peace and justice

Sunday service – wonderful worship/good preaching

Music program

The people here who feel accepted and not judged.

9b. Are there obstacles that keep this congregation from becoming a more vital center of liberal religion in this community?

Limited parking.

The lack of our visibility in the larger community.

Little community outreach--it could be better

10a. What are your primary fund-raising methods?

Pledging – increased since Elaine came 60-70-90-95-current 105

Auction, Plant sale, Building rental

10b. How are budget allocations determined?

Finance/Treasurer put together budget (including amount extended from Trustees)

Board recommends after canvass finished. Congregation votes approval.

11. How do you assess the current spiritual and institutional health of the

congregation?

Stronger since Elaine has been our minister.

12. If you had one wish on behalf of this congregation, what would it be?

Commitment – every person sitting in the sanctuary on Sunday could feel comment to the church like every person in this room. Come together and find out who we are as a congregation in Bangor, ME.

13. If you had one gift to give to the departing minister, what would it be?

Peace of mind. Don't think she is not settled in herself.

Have her feel proud that she made a very significant contribution. Gave a tremendous effort to shift us into a new mode--program from pastoral size church.

A deep heartfelt thank you for caring.

A gift of appreciation.

Wish her happiness and contentment.

14. May a copy of this interview be furnished to the outgoing minister?

Yes.

15. Is there any reason you would not expect to hire an interim minister for the next year or so?

No. Currently trying to get the process going.

16. Will the Search Committee be selected after the MSR visit as is recommended?**Are there any special accommodations you need in order for this to happen?**

Yes. We are worried that it is already past time to elect the Search Committee for a settlement in 2007.

17. Do you have any further observations?

Elaine brought a well-read diversity to her sermons.

Would like to see one of the goals of this congregation get past bigotry--

18. District Executive's recommendations for scheduling the search process?

This congregation had a late start because the minister's formal resignation letter went to the board on 5/17/06. The compensation level, location, and lack of available interims are not conducive to easily finding a good interim. They haven't yet focused on beginning a search for the next settled minister. I suggest a two year interim (with perhaps different ministers) or self lead the first year and an AI or AIT for the second. This congregation needs skilled leadership and direction.

Rev. Dr. Judith Smith-Valley

Northeast District Executive

cc: Board of Directors

Rev. John Weston, UUA Department of Ministry

Rev. Brad Greeley, Ministerial Settlement Representative

Northeast District Office

Ministerial Exit Interview

(To be done with departing minister by the District Consultant)

Date of Interview: 5/23/06

Congregation: U.U. Society of Bangor

City & state/province: Bangor, ME

Name of Departing Minister: Rev. Elaine Peresluha

Date of minister's departure: August 31, 2006

Name of interviewer: Rev. Dr. Judith Smith-Valley

Interview**1. What do you see as the three most significant accomplishments during your tenure?**

Acknowledgment of peace – laid most ghosts and anxiety to rest while establishing a culture of respectful communication.

Improved functioning of Council (Board) less micromanagement and more vision/policy focus

Healthy RE committee and a really fabulous DRE

Growth in personal professional ministry skills--preaching, work on PHD—facilitating appreciative inquiry for long-range planning

Learning Team that Elaine initiated – around pastoral/program church issues

2. What were your frustrations and disappointments during this time?

Continued judgmental dialogue process that is not about issue, but about people's need to "right" (The "I'm right/fear based – he or she who can hurt the most wins" used to be major mode here.)

Not able to articulate and sustain an effective vision – why are we here? Decisions are made based on saving money.

Limited leadership clique. 10-20 people cycle through the positions with no strategy to welcome new people onto the team.

3a. How would you characterize the working relationship between the minister(s), the staff, the Board, the church committees, and the congregation?

C+ (B in some areas) still pastorally centered. Less so with Elaine's departure as a catalyst for change. Three to four antagonists resist change/disagree/ are aggressive saying "That's just the way we are." Some don't want Elaine to leave,

Most – good relationship. No resentment. No toxicity around the departure. Really appreciate reason for leaving – available to family.

3b. What are the patterns of power and influence in the congregation?

Limited leaders. Several strong voices—devoted to congregation, but fear-based decision makers. “The sky is falling!” Crisis centered. Committee structure ineffective requiring much attention from board/council

Interim issues: How do we open the doors/widen the circle/visitors/vision?

3c. Does the congregation feel like a healthy, cooperative, and open set of relationships, or do some people feel cut out of the decision making process?

See #2 & 3a/3b above.

4a. Has toxic behavior—such as an implicit or explicit ultimatum, a raised, angry voice, or more serious acting out—been a feature of congregational life?

One or two persons have potential to be toxic. One has always been in RE. Behavior addressed last year by Committee on Ministry using Disruptive Behavior Policy

Elaine has counseled the new DRE, “Go to interim, if there’s a problem.”

4b. What strategies has the congregation adopted to deal with such behavior or put limits on it?

Disruptive Behavior Policy – used to manage this person’s behavior and set boundaries.

5a. Describe the congregation’s Committee on Ministry or Ministerial Relations Committee, if any.

5 people. Has been very helpful in past- not so effective this year. Presently one “curmudgeon.” (perhaps going off.)

Agreed to evaluate the congregation as a whole as opposed to the minister. Look at how committees work and council (Board) works.

5b. How effective has this committee been?

Does the work. Negotiated new letter of agreement for minister.

5c. To what do you attribute that?

Effectiveness totally dependant on who is on the committee

6a. What currently attracts people to this congregation?

Elaine has a good reputation in town.

Liberal religious history/political identity/Religious Education

Great space/great program

Outside of building looking more welcoming

6b. Are there obstacles that keep this congregation from becoming a more vital center of liberal religion in this community?

They need to “grow into building” because it overwhelms their real size.

Lack of parking is big issue.

7a. What are the primary fund raising methods of this congregation?

Auction in fall (6-8 thousand \$\$\$) could be double if more organized - no limits

Event leaders not receptive to critique by intern with ideas to make better.

Annual plant sale (2 thousand \$\$\$)

Pledge campaign – average \$1000 this year (# of pledges down but more \$\$\$) – more than doubled size of pledges since Elaine came

Rentals

7b. How are budget allocations determined on this congregation?

By the Treasurer and then the cong votes but in reality Treasurer ignored the Council this year. After canvass, Treasurer made announcement about \$25,000 shortfall – (really \$9000 down to \$7500 before end figures). Issue wiggled back from the Council to the

Treasurer with Council deciding “Don’t cut program!” Treasurer then estimated 2006-07 \$26,000 short fall because of rising heating costs. The Treasurer brought the Annual Meeting a balanced the budget (her budget) by cutting minister/APF/no NED dues. No one objected before the vote.

8. How do you assess the current institutional and spiritual health of the congregation? That is, how would you characterize congregational life and health?

6.8 on a scale 1-10.

Classic UU, not living up to potential. Seven years preached about healthy behavior.

3 nay-sayers in the key positions.

Leaders belittle people with initiative by talking about them behind their backs. Membership Committee meetings and Budget/Finance meetings used as format to critique and judge minister and other committees

Though painful – need to hold people accountable for their behavior and language. No triangles. No anonymity. No second guessing council decisions publically

9. In what ways does your congregation work to counter racism and oppression, both with the congregation and in the surrounding community?

Host NAACP meetings. Support Martin Luther King breakfast.

Does take a stand public on Gay/Lesbian issues.

10. What are your plans after leaving this position?

Finish PHD – complete first draft of dissertation for January defense.

Interim training. If okay financially will wait until 2007-2008 church year. If not will be available in January 2007.

Consulting around Appreciate Inquiry/hopes to work with congregations ready for transition to larger church size.

11. If you had one gift to give to the congregation, what would it be?

Belief in their abundance! Claim a vision and purpose.

12. May a copy of this interview report be furnished to

the interim minister-to-be? yes no

the successor minister? yes no

The chair of the governing board? yes no

13. Do you have any further observations?

District Consultant's observations and recommendations, if any, to the Settlement

Office for assisting in the minister's development.

May 15, 2006

Appendix L

UUSB Resignation Letter May 2006

Dear Members and Friends of the U.U. Society of Bangor

It is with a wide range of emotions that I have decided to end my settled ministry with the U.U. Society of Bangor. As in a death, there is never a “right” time or a “good” time to say good-bye. There are always more words to share, tasks to complete, challenges to meet and joys to celebrate. The angels and I have wrestled, trying to find a gentle, eloquent way to communicate my decision to leave, in person, not in person, sooner, later. None felt easy, honest, or clean. Most felt contrived. How does one say good-bye to a way of life? How can we close a relationship that marks our most human moments with respect, intimacy, and learning? How do I express my appreciation for everything we have shared over the years?

Simply, it is time for me to go. I want more time; time with Tj, my daughters my mother, and cherished friends. I want more time to write, explore and learn. I will be moving to Lubec this summer and letting what will unfold from there begin. Over the next few days the Council and I will decide the details of my departure to assure a smooth transition to the very best next place for us all. We will share those details at the annual meeting and in the June newsletter. I hope you will be there to laugh, to cry and to begin saying good bye.

Namaste,

Reverend Elaine Beth Peresluha

Appendix M

Project Supervision – September 20, 2005

Hi Sheila-

After about 6 hours of work on the leadership workshop I am more aware of the alignment of Social Construction theory, Appreciative Inquiry strategies and relational responsibility with Alice Mann's understanding of the factors influencing pastoral to program size transitions in churches. My prep for today's supervision revealed several needs:

- A better working understanding of theory vs. praxis i.e.: "big picture" theory with the "little picture" action plan.
- Feedback on my revised project statement, the use of Social construction theory and relational responsibility as the foundation for the strategic planning at the church and the intersecting of Appreciative Inquiry with Alice Mann's recommendations.
- I need your feedback on a way to intersect some of the cutting edge revelations in scientific research (What The Bleep Do We Know, Blink, and AVATAR Belief Management strategies.) with Social Construction theory without misrepresenting myself as a Quantum physicist
- Time for a committee?
- Feedback on several instances of reactions to change both to improve my response and how to document for research
- Review agenda for council retreat

Project Statement: Towards a Theology of Change

My thesis will document the convergence of cultural quantum physics insights, spirituality, Social Construction Theory and relational responsibility in defining a theology of change. I will demonstrate how social construction theory; the cultural influences of quantum

physics, spirituality and relational responsibility together provide tools for experiencing change as a spiritual opportunity. I believe that by observing an individual and community's response to change through the lens of social Construction theory the maturity of individual and communal spirituality can be measured and advanced.

I will utilize social construction theory's understanding of self, truth, and language, relational responsibility and the dialogue process to facilitate and document the U.U. Society of Bangor's process to deliberately choose to remain a pastoral size community or to grow to a program size community. I will document how that process reflects the spiritual maturity of the community and how that maturity can be advanced.

Appendix N

UUFW First Worship Service – September 2007

MORNING CELEBRATION

SEPTEMBER 16, 2007

GATHERING IN COMMUNITY

SOUNDING OF THE CHIMES

WORDS OF WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Begin unpacking the interim bag. Discuss conversation with the worship committee to re-arrange the order of service- We discussed moving the sounding of the chime to after the announcements to create a more quiet contemplative beginning to the Sunday service- would that be OK? WE can try it – get your feedback and make any other changes based on your suggestions and feedback.

And candles of joy and concern- I would like to have them right after the offering- trusting your ability to keep them short and relevant so that I can incorporate their content into the service rather than have any jarring disconnect between the candles and what I have offered in the sermon and readings. Would that be OK? Then note these changes for today- next week they will be printed in the order of service.

SOUNDING OF THE CHIME

PRELUDE

UNISON CHALICE LIGHTING

May the kindling of this flame remind us of

The mission of this faith:

To teach the fragile art of hospitality;

To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;

To acknowledge the Sacred in everyday epiphanies;

To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;

And to witness to all that we must

Hold the whole world in our hands.

OPENING WORDS: *Self Portrait* by David Whyte

It doesn't interest me if there is one God

Or many gods.

I want to know if you belong or feel

Abandoned.

If you know despair or can see it in others.

I want to know

If you are prepared to live in the world

With its harsh need

To change you. If you can look back

With firm eyes

Saying this is where I stand. I want to know

If you know

How to melt into the fierce heat of living

Falling toward

The center of your longing. I want to know

If you are willing to live

Day by day with the consequences of love

And the bitter

Unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have been told, in that fierce embrace, even
The gods speak of God.

– David Whyte

OPENING HYMN #368, *Now Let Us Sing*

OFFERTORY

SHARING OF JOYS, SORROWS, AND PERSONAL MILESTONES

This is a time to share personal joys, sorrows, transitions and passages with the congregation. No announcements please. You may also place a seashell or river stone on the fountain during the time for sharing Joys and Sorrows or before the service begins. Prayer cards are also located by the fountain and in the foyer. The Tuesday evening Prayer Circle will include these prayer requests.

READING: *The Place In the Ways* From Muriel Rukeyser

Having come to this place
I set out once again
On the dark and marvelous way
From where I began;
Belief in the love of the world,
Woman, spirit, man.
Having failed in all things
I enter a new age
Seeing the old ways as toys,
The houses of a stage
Painted and long forgot;
And I find love and rage.

Rage for the world as it is
 But for what it may be
 More love now than last year
 And always less self pity
 Since I know in a clearer light
 The strength of the mystery.
 And at this place in the ways
 I wait for song.
 My poem hand still, on the paper,
 all night long.
 Poems in throat and hand, asleep,
 And my storm beating strong!

MEDITATION MUSIC

FOCUS ON THE SPOKEN WORD

Unpacking The Interim Bag Rev Elaine Beth Peresluha

L.L. Bean Bag- not a tool box- because I am from Maine- so what else would I have...

Hammer for constructing- Social constructionist

Gun – for you – so you can shoot the messenger'

Ruler to measure success

Books/degree on wall- Knowledge expertise-

Mirror for reflection because it will be important for you when you are really really happy with what I am doing to know I am reflecting back to you who you are... and then- when you are really upset with what I am doing? Remember then too that I am a reflection of you.

Gardening tools

Band-Aid & Care Bear: 20 years of nursing experience - presence

Needle and thread:

Mary Phipper writes, "... most of us are no longer menders. We are K-Mart shoppers who discard objects at the first sign of disrepair. Mending takes time, skill, and personal attention. It is cherishing, having an I-Thou relationship with something. Object you are mine so I will fix you." Staying in relationships is to be a mender. Marriages that last do so because of a commitment to cherish... we mend what we value. We value what we mend. Mending hallows objects and gives people depth of character."

Janus Book – read interim goals as printed. Discuss the creation of a covenant- an agreement between us- I can tell you now what I promise you- but I would not ask you to promise me anything –yet- not until you have some experience of who I am and what you can trust about me- because a covenant is about trust- trusting your safety to take risks- be vulnerable- be honest and not be hurt, manipulated, shaped or taken advantage of in any way. I do not expect you to believe yet that you can trust me. So I will earn that trust and then, I will ask you to make a behavioral contract with me. So today, we begin. I open my heart and my hands to you- I come with these tools and I promise you to heal and not to harm this beloved community. I promise to earn your trust and to not betray the trust that you offer me I will share my portion of truth with you so that together we can grow in wisdom, vision and understanding.

GOING FORTH

MOMENT OF SILENCE AND MEDITATION

CLOSING HYMN: #1 *May Nothing Evil Cross this Door*

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE with words from Barbara Kingsolver

"I don't expect to see perfection before I die. What keeps you going isn't some fine destination, but just the road you're on, and the fact that you know how to drive. You keep your

eyes open. You see this damned-to-hell world you got born into, and you ask yourself . . . what life can I live that will let me breathe in and out, and love somebody or something, and not run off screaming, into the woods? What to believe in, exactly, may never turn out to be half as important as the daring act of belief . . . a willingness to participate in sunlight, and the color red, an agreement to enter into a conspiracy with life on behalf of both frog and snake, the predator and the prey, in order to come away changed.”

Shalom (please join hands) Shalom, my friends, Shalom, my friends, Shalom. Shalom.
'Til we meet again, ' til we meet again. Shalom. Shalom.

Appendix O

Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a simple, effective tool for organizational learning and change. It helps individuals discover everything that gives life to them and the organization then builds the future on a foundation of shared meaning. People and organizations move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive the image the more positive the choices will be.

The momentum for any large scale change is determined by the percentage of people involved. When people are feeling appreciated, confident, and inspired they are more likely to accept an invitation to add their portion to discovery and creativity. The more people actively engaged in the transitional process the more relative to the whole the decisions will be and the more likely they are to succeed.

AI is most simply, a process, which gets people into the same room to ask each other what is most important to them, what excites them, what brings them joy and what their dreams are. Rather than talking about what needs to be fixed, what is going wrong or what crisis has erupted, attention is focused on listening and learning what they do best. AI brings people together engaged by all that works well to discover a future inspired by dreams.

AI is one approach available to congregations to unite the membership, claim a vision for the future, and begin to move toward that vision. It is based on the belief that the words we share, the questions we ask, reflect the future we are intentionally building. When we are creative and positive, that is what life in the community reflects. AI asks us to intentionally be positive, hold on to what is good and appreciate the best in one another. AI teaches that when we focus on what works, what doesn't will take care of itself.

Appendix P

Follow-up Letter to the UUFW Board of Trustees President

July 17, 2007

Dear Ellen,

Thank you for your warm and generous hospitality during my visit to Wilmington. You and your home provided the perfect accommodations for me. The rental company has assured me that the repairs to my vehicle are minor and easily resolved. I hope your mailbox has fared as well!

I enjoyed getting to know a few of the Fellowship's members and look forward to working together over the next year. As I reflect on all that I learned from each of you, I am thinking about how best we can begin our interim year. I know that Annette Marquis will be scheduling a start up retreat for the Board, committee chairs, and me. I have enclosed several copies of a small book I have found helpful in introducing members of congregations to Appreciative Inquiry. In anticipation of the workshop with Annette would you please let trustees and officers know that I am aware that this workshop and our interim year will ask a lot from each of you. I appreciate your time, efforts and the depth of commitment they indicate to the success of the Fellowship. If people find it helpful, please pass these books to members of the board for their use and/or to pass on to the Transition Team.

I have included some questions that may be helpful for you to think about prior to the start up retreat and our conversations. Annette and I hope that our retreat time will help us to fully understand the needs of our interim time together, to help the Fellowship move towards calling a new settled minister and to encourage the health of that new shared ministry. I believe in your ability to discover and build that future together.

Namaste,

Rev. Elaine Peresluha

Appendix Q

Second UUFW Worship Service September 2007

MORNING CELEBRATION

WORDS OF WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

SOUNDING OF THE CHIME

PRELUDE: *Hine Mah Tov* (Hebrew folk song based on Psalm 133:1) with Martha Tabor

- French horn, Bob Kurowski and Bruce Dillard - tambourines

OPENING WORDS: Rev. Elaine Beth Peresluha

Welcome to this church of the free spirit!

We worship in the spirit of truth

And the fellowship of love;

We serve one another and others

With faith in the right

And hope for a better day for all.

Ours is a religion for the modern world.

Acknowledging the heritage of human faith

As it has passed down the centuries and

Through the cultures of our ancestors and our neighbors;

Ours, too, is an ancient religion.

Honoring truth and the human quest

For justice and peace, despite our differences.

Welcome to this church of the free spirit.

Where religion does not shy away from present quandaries

Nor ignore the discoveries and possibilities of modern times.

We freely gather with one another this morning and through out our week,

To share our talents and abilities,

Our diverse perspectives and opinions

Our hope and our love.

Seeking that which we cannot attain alone.

Community.

UNISON CHALICE LIGHTING

OPENING HYMN: #38 Morning Has Broken

OFFERTORY: *At Last* (Glen Miller standard) with Bob Kurowski - alto saxophone and
Bruce Dillard - mini-drum set

READING: *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That sends the frozen ground swell under it and spills the upper boulders in the sun;

And makes gaps even two can pass abreast!

The work of hunters is another thing.

I have come after them and made repair where they have left not one stone on a stone,

but they would have the rabbit out of hiding to please the yelping dogs.

The gaps I mean- no one has seen them made or heard them made,

but at spring mending time, we find them there.

I let my neighbor know beyond the hill

And on a day we meet to walk the line and set the wall between us once again.

We keep the wall between us as we go- to each the boulders that have fallen to each.

And some are loaves and some so nearly balls we have to use a spell to make them

balance-

“Stay where you are until our backs are turned!”

We wear our fingers rough with handling them.

Oh just another kind of outdoor game, one on a side.

It comes to little more.

There, where it is, we do not need the wall.

He is all pine, and I am apple orchard.

My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

He only says, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Spring is the mischief in me and I wonder if I could put a notion in his head.

“Why do they make good neighbors?”

Isn't it where there are cows? But here there are no cows!

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out and to whom I was like to give offense.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall that wants it down

I could say “Elves” to him, but it is not elves exactly

And I 'd rather he said it for himself.

I see him there bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top in each hand, like an old stone
savage armed.

He moves in darkness, as it seems to me, not of woods only and the shade of trees.

He will not let go his father's saying

And he likes having thought of it so well he says again

“Good fences make good neighbors.”

REFLECTIONS: Community Relationships Rev Elaine Beth Peresluha

Something there is that doesn't like a wall wants it down –

There are good walls – and there are bad wall

The boundaries we establish – the laws of right and wrong- respecting ones space- walls of good manners- respect – good walls – maintained by mending – together – getting out there – our hands are rough with the work of mending – caring – *good fences make good neighbors*

But what of the walls created to keep the other out – the walls of prejudice, hatred – fear of losing – hoarding walls that keep too much for some – not enough for others – bad walls – the walls that tear the fabric of our cultures our worlds – apart

What about when the walls themselves become the idols to be worshipped forgetting the purpose that they were created to serve.

Reflect on our UUFW “rules.” Announcements – Going direct with our communications – Walls –

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall that wants it down

Walls – Boundaries – Mother’s Day is a good time to talk about boundaries – Mothers know about boundaries – the one they built, hard and fast only to have them dismantled by a tear or a plea – Just one more Please???????

Or the ones so rigid so indestructible – that perilous resistance to authority brought- dangerous confrontation. “No – you cannot date until you are 16.”

Boundaries – we need to know – what is it we are walling in – or walling out

When is a wall necessary – a boundary to be maintained so that something precious and unique survives?

I have asked the Board of Trustees to consider implementing a Disruptive Behavior policy – Congregational leaders and members have the responsibility to provide a safe and welcoming environment for children and adults – both regular attendees and visitors.

Developing a Disruptive Behavior Policy (DBP) indicates a commitment to creating a safe and

welcoming environment by confirming a list of expectations for everyone's behavior. A DBP establishes behavioral guidelines that consider the community's well being first and foremost.

Disruptive behaviors may impact perceived safety of any adult or child, the disruption of church activities, and the diminishment of the potential and existing membership. When any person's physical and/or emotional well-being or freedom to safely express his or her opinions is threatened, action must be taken. The guidelines provided by a DBP mean that all are held to the same set of standards. The DPB provides a process that leaves less room for singling out a person based on stereotyping or personality conflicts.

How do we decide what is disruptive, acceptable or marginal behavior? How will we hold one another accountable?

Tell Ellsworth Candle story; Tell Punching Out the Congregational President Story.

What makes our walls good walls is democratic process. We discuss, debate and then propose a policy – the policy is taken before the congregation at a congregational meeting and we vote – Yeah or Nay – and we abide by our covenant as a member of the UUA of congregations that the democratic process – majority rule that if a majority of the congregation votes to implement a policy a by law change – or any decision for the congregation it is binding-

Good fences make good neighbors.

A majority vote is conclusive. It is a decision and it is binding. That is the way we of diverse perspectives and opinions can actually be in relationship with one another without constant tumult and debate over the things we disagree on – whether it is to have curtains on the windows to the office – or to require a minimum pledge for membership. These are important decisions – and there needs to be a way to bring debate to an end – Tell sanctuary movement story – Viet Nam War story describing the essential divisiveness and resolutions.

We must pay close attention.

If we are to remain open and pliant in our maturing we must continue our learning and growing to accommodate a dynamically changing world. Minds, young and old, must be equipped to deal with new and unpredictable problems. Doors must always be left open to new truths. Spirits must be free from fear and guilt if they are to continue unfolding.

Disruptive Behavior Policies

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DANGEROUS: Establishing the policy requires a thoughtful discussion about who and how a situation or individual is considered as the source of a threat or perceived threat to persons or property. A gun and shooting in the sanctuary requires immediate, expert response, not a dialogue. How do we prepare and decide in situations not quite so clear?

DISRUPTIVE: The dialogue is initiated and the level of interference with church activities is evaluated by those chosen to be in the conversation. One dialogue involves the

decision about who would we want to be involved is this process.

OFFENSIVE: Is the behavior likely to drive existing members and visitors away?

In addition to developing a policy for addressing disruptive behavior, it is recommended that the minister(s) and congregational leaders are diligent in keeping accurate and timely records while approaching a problem and resolution. Written records provide context and continuity should similar issues arise again either involving the same individual or someone different. Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The goals of the Ethics in Congregational Life program are to support leaders in creating safer space within their congregations, encouraging right relations among persons who are part of the congregation, and encouraging just relations between the congregation and the larger community of which it is a part. Addressing disruptive behavior calls upon us to create fair and sensitive policy in a less than perfect world.

PRAYER/MEDITATION: Reflected appreciation for relationships, for honesty, for vulnerability and the potential for healing we all felt.

CLOSING HYMN: # 131 *Love Will Guide Us*

Appendix R

Participant Response to Appreciative Inquiry Summit

Sat 3-15-08 2:40 PM

Rev Elaine. I got anxious toward the end. You see I come up a little short on *Sunday* part. I am often criticized for being toooo long. I liked the experience I wrote about (but might soon be embarrassed by the writing) and there is a gain in appreciating it by simply hanging with it during the writing. If the writing goes out what I thought about and valued stays with me – that’s plenty OK. Of course I hope it is good but as they say “The above is not necessarily the opinion of.....”

I will be rereading for some polishing after sending this.

Of course I missed stuff that others would see needing the kind emphasis I placed elsewhere. This is more to do with the feelings, place and intentions in what happened than an accounting of it. I thus could have missed things that an attendee would want in. But again I’ve heard about how reporters seem often to mishandle what the interviewed thought was taken away

UUFW LEAP Weekend

The Process and Results and the Future

For months the Cottage meetings have been taking in the statements of the dreams and wishes of every individual in our congregation of members and friends. It has been satisfying and encouraging for you to see what you said be actually written down to take its place with all the others. You knew there was an intention to do something more than just politely hear and acknowledge you and then let you wait to see what might happen, soon or someday – or not.

You saw the possibility of the many different things that this church of belief and action could do and stand worshipping. Or how you could work to the ends of ethics and justice here and in the community. Or what you could do to fix something that needed it.

”To dance and see dance as part of worship.” “To make the sanctuary look like something we have loved and appointed with art and objects rather than a space we just moved into.” “To offer my heart, my soul to row the boat, I itch to do this.” Those were some of the statements.

Despite our recent times of mixed rewards, disappointments and good works we have maintained a place to gather and a membership looking to the promise. We have the right ingredients. We are discovering more of the meaning of the words:

“We are what we have been waiting for!”

If we were a different church we might call our Cottage expressions a “spiritual awakening” and this past LEAP weekend our “Tent Revival.”

LEAP WEEKEND

It began at 7 pm on Friday evening, Feb 29-08. All of us separated into couples to begin an Appreciative Inquiry discussion of our experiences. We took turns in encouraging talk on the part of the other before switching the roles of talking and listening. We each chose the other to talk to as one that we did not know that well. It was an opportunity to broaden and deepen the sense of who we are collected here at UUFW. It worked!

Some of the questions were: Recall the first time you came to a service or activity here? What did you discover? What inspired you to come back again? What is it about the Fellowship that you most appreciate? What is the most important thing it has contributed to your life?

I am writing freely and will take a moment with the idea of ‘Appreciative Inquiry’.

You’ll notice that there weren’t questions like: What do you least appreciate? What attitude or social policy doesn’t respect your need to have a grievance worked out?

We love our diversity. I think that we have to know that this diversity in some way can often border on disparity. I believe that one of our big spiritual challenges is finding out how to live with it make it smaller and ultimately make the safe and secure containing of it the result of a triumphant love. (I know there are experiences waiting just off stage to prove that what I just said is only the naming of an area of study and practice.) Wikipedia says: “The basic idea is to build an organization around what works rather than trying to fix what doesn’t.” We got this from Rev. Elaine and she got it from the virtual library that began forming years ago. I want to know more about it; maybe in personal study and maybe in UUFW training. We’ll see.

Back to Friday evening. We regrouped into one body and took turns recounting what we talked about. Some described the tenor and some gave specific quotes. The conversations took much more time than the groups recounting.

After that we all went to Dobkin Hall to vote on the eight different newspaper size presentations of the cottage statements. The transition team had taken all the statements and logically arranged them into eight different categories of interest. One area (I forget which) took two such pages. Each voter had four stickers of four differed colors to affix to the poster headings. They were to show their ranking of the various headings from one to four. The votes were:

1. LEADERSHIP	55 POINTS
2. WORSHIP	53 POINTS
3. PROGRAMS	43 POINTS
* Outreach	<20 points
4. STEWARDSHIP	38 POINTS
5. SPACE AND FCILITY	34 POINS

6. NURTURE/SELF CARE 20 POINTS

* Growth and membership <20 points

*The two above designated * received less than 20 points each and were merged under the heading as shown above.

Under the headings were the individual statements as gathered from Cottage meetings. There were fifteen or so under each heading. The voters were also given seven (curious, seven is a Biblical number) red colored sticky dots to affix to whatever individual statement appealed to them. There was no ranking there (except that a voter could place more than one dot on a statement) and it could be under the headings they voted for or not. More diversity.

We went home about 9pm and the transition team stayed to make the vote count and prepare a printed sheet (as you see above) for inclusion in our packets of instruction and weekend agenda.

Saturday morning at 9:30 am we reconvened with coffee and pastries and concentrated on coffee and pastries until 10:00 am. The posters were hanging with all the stickers in place; the votes for the headings and the votes for the individual statements.

Now was the time to make something out of what we had just discovered about ourselves. Each of the six members of the transition team stood holding over their head one of the six headings we voted on. We all chose freely what we were interested in doing something more about and we headed off with that person to a space where we *would do* something about it by *talking* -- at least for the time being. So there were six separate groups that the sixty or so of us separated into, talking; trying to put together a concise meaningful statement out of all that had been in front of us. We did. They had to do with practical intentions for us right here, beginning right now. I was in the Space and Facility group and we prepared a statement on what we would do about: parking, new space, new separate buildings or adding to these, new land

acquisitions. (Elsewhere in this Beacon or in another space we soon will see in more detail this and the other five statements of long and short-term goals and commitments) Also but less vivid in my memory were the future “Yes we can” acknowledgements and commitments. To me being able to say, “Yes we did” is the footing we need to say the other with more confidence. We are doing.

Here is a list of what some of what has happened:

A Stewardship brunch has been planned.

A ministerial compensation package has been proposed and been voted “up.”

A parking lot has been secured next to the fellowship at 4311 Lake Ave.

A Roland Grice date of parking availability has been secured.

Leslie O’Connor’s restructuring recommendations are developed.

The settled minister search process is initiated and a search committee slate has been selected.

And, typical of seeing what to do immediately and doing it, a group of volunteers stayed to clean up after the weekend.

Note:

During Saturday we stopped all the talk and activity in shaping up our statements to go into a silent time (no talking to get the job done) of creating a piece of artwork. For thirty minutes we were, as a cooperating group, to put together something consisting of objects, not words, but inspired by and representing what we had begun to put together in words. In looking ahead to it during lunch I felt confused, unprepared, and inadequate and wasn’t inclined to anticipate much meaning that could be taken from it. A ‘shopper’ who had gone during lunch in the church office turned into ‘the store’, brought back an armload of incongruous objects for the piece. What happened then was kind of a mysterious unfolding. Someone did a first something.

And because of that someone else had a something to add: yet another part to the totally unplanned final appearance. I placed something but didn't and couldn't see it as precedent or a sure sign to be taken by the next contributor of what was to come next. It was an experience of uncertainty, tentative conception, cooperation, action, acceptance, and fruition. And so it went. These have been in the sanctuary and there are photos of them. They are remarkable. We started them because they were on the agenda and we finished them because we wanted to. We leapt into this little activity with you might say the same kind of feelings that surround the big LEAP this weekend and what we think we are going to do about it. There are videos of children at play, studied by the scholars to take real learning from this kind of thing. I wish we had our videos.

Sunday was the "We did it" time. A memorable time was when 20 or so spoke up to say what they saw needed to be done and what they wanted to do about it. These were things that were already started or what was going to be done in the next few days. I can't recount all these and hope to see them repeated somehow. The list above is some of them

Was LEAP: The end of a beginning? The deep breath and the holding of it before the weight is lifted? A nice weekend that stands now like a bronzed shoe of our younger days? A pause and a making of the 'monument middle' between what we have done and the promises we have made? The thing that helped us see that we are the 'container and the contained'? We surely are the ones we have been waiting for. I hope this summary helps those who were not able to be present to feel enthusiastic and included in our process. It is ongoing and is welcoming to any input you are inspired to share.

Appendix S

Collated Responses from Members of the Transition Team

Transition Team (TT) Answers to Questions of Appreciative Inquiry

For you, what has been the most significant accomplishment our TT Has achieved?

Is there another way you would have accomplished it?

It was the planning and pulling off of the LEAP Weekend, as this energized change that needed to happen in the Fellowship. I don't think it could have made such an impact any other way.

Learning, using and disseminating the appreciative inquiry/sharing process.

Our TT took full ownership of the Appreciative Inquiry process as outlined by our Interim Minister. Over the course of a year, that process, along with other actions by the Board and others, successfully readied the Fellowship for a new permanent Minister.

The job was well done. Was there another way to do that same job? You bet. In fact, there were other ways, in my opinion, which could have accomplished the same goal. And probably with considerably less effort. That in no way denigrates what was done. Perhaps the effort undertaken made the results at the end better. I personally doubt that. And finally, that process should never be used by anyone not totally committed to its efficacy as was the interim Minister.

For me, using a positive approach to overcome a time of conflict and pain without covering over the issues was not only comfortable but influenced my personal perspective of a way to continue to overcome conflict. It is difficult to engage a group of 200 people but this was done by training a handful of participants to reach out to the large membership and to include all who were interested as well as some who did not know they were interested but for the experience. I'm sure there are other tried and true ways of creating change but I think this

appreciative process created a more natural way of connecting one to another; it gave opportunity to both individual and group to speak, share and discover; it enhanced the “right relationship” theme of District and UUA.

I think the greatest accomplishment was LEAP Weekend and what came out of the weekend, the Program Restructuring.

In your mind, what work is left undone? Why do you think this is?

I cannot think what is left undone, perhaps some individuals are not satisfied with their line agenda item not being completed, but given the overall picture the Interim Minister has done an excellent job.

The TT And Fellowship had 5 tasks: Coming to terms with history; Discovering a new identity; Allowing needed leadership to emerge; Renewing Denominational linkages; and Committing to new directions in Ministry. I think the Denominational linkages seems to be the slowest moving because we haven't yet much of a committee (to my knowledge)

Nothing was left undone that I'm aware of. I think we are totally ready to call a new Minister.

I believe we made a great impact on reaching our goals, especially in making ready to engage a Settled Minister. Having said that, I think our work (the congregation's) has just begun. Leadership needs to continue the reorganization work of the Program Council and the congregation needs to be ready to share in an additional view and dream with the new Minister. It will take a readiness of the membership to volunteer and expand leadership. Once again, I can envision Appreciative Inquiry Process of Training for leadership a great advantage. The TT Must hand off the gauntlet to appropriate leadership.

I think strong ongoing communication and educating the congregation on the new structure of the committees is a very important need. I'm not sure this is the work of the TT

Continued conversations should occur to educate the congregation, strengthen communication, improve membership committee focus.

What would be the most important work that still needs to continue? How can this be done in the best way?

I would like to see an emphasis on continuing the Appreciative Inquiry process, as it appears to really motivate people, thinking about what they love, what they connect to, and therefore where their energy is.

Continuing practicing and encouraging the process. Continuing lighting appreciative candles.

The lasting value of the whole transition period of two years might well be the mood of appreciation for the work of all members of the church community which this time has tried to magnify. It will take continuing effort to keep this in mind.

Keeping in mind that if we as a church have right relationship with each other, with our community and with the world, our work will continue in a most natural way and that in return we will have gratitude for ourselves and remain that Beacon of Liberal Religion that drew each of us to UUFW.

This would be a good question to brainstorm when we are all together.

Appendix T

Transition Team Annual Report 2009

The Transition Team was transformed from the members of the Committee on Ministry; in 2008 two men and four women served on the team; in 2009 one man and four women served. The function of the Team was to assist the Interim Minister and the congregation in the transition work of preparing for the calling and arrival of a Settled Minister.

We perceived our five tasks to be: coming to terms with our history; discovering a new identity; allowing a new leadership to emerge; renewing denominational linkages; committing to new directions of Ministry. We accomplished these goals by being trained in and using the Appreciative Inquiry process which created change by helping us to discover who we are, by sharing the visions of our dreams, by taking action together to design how we help our dreams come true and by planning for the future to sustain our endeavors. Communications were vital to the work so that we could include as many of our congregation as possible in the process of healing, sharing and changing. Beacon articles, News @UUFW, personal mailings and Cottage Gatherings were vehicles used in communicating and working the process.

The major event of LEAP (Launch the search for a new Minister; Envision the future; Appreciate our talents and; Promote our passions) Weekend summarized work done in our first year of transition and launched us into a new time of changing how to administer the work of committees and leaders and to search for a Settled Minister.

Examples and more details of the Transition Team's work will be filed with the Program Council for future reference. The team will be dissolved with the arrival of our new Minister and the formation of the Committee On Ministry.

Respectively Submitted by

The Transition Team

Appendix U

LEAP Retreat Report of Leadership/Ministry Project Group

Introduction: During the L.E.A.P. Weekend Retreat the Transition Team presented 8 key concerns generated during the Cottage Meetings. The votes of the participants resulted in 6 top priorities for the fellowship. Leadership/Ministry was the top vote getter. The participants on Saturday then chose which priority/concern topic they wished to work on. Each subsequent team then developed the following:

- Using the “flip chart” material from the cottage meetings brainstorm the issues raised
- Build an *Art Project* which reflected the groups vision of the future
- Create a Visionary Design Statement and Strategies to allow implementation
- Develop on going Action Plans to ensure something GETS DONE.

Members of Leadership/Ministry Project Group: (Note: the final name for this group is a work in progress). Robin Gugan was our Group Facilitator.

Kate Griffin, Wilma Kuzmuk, Kami O’Keeffe, Penny Patterson, Sylvia Quinn, Keith Shea

Transition Team’s Flip Chart Contents Presented to Leadership/Ministry Project Group

- Find and attract an experienced, competent and caring minister who is a good fit for this congregation to move us forward with our dreams
- A settled minister who:
 - Is like Elaine
 - We can relate to
 - We can expect will be long term

- Is very involved with the congregation
 - Can work with our diversity and move forward
 - Can assist in focusing us for success
 - Provides a welcoming atmosphere
- Who touches you (tears in your eyes), is inspirational, insightful, dynamic, and motivational
 - Clearly understands the fellowship's expectations
 - Is effective at unifying us
 - Is true to the 7 Principles

Art Work Results:

As a result of our brainstorming we developed the concept of a branching tree. The trunk contained those attributes/character we felt were required to meet the priorities, which the branches represented—Worship, RE, Pastoral, Outreach, Leadership. The goal of the tree was for the members of the Fellowship to pick the fruit or both our labors and that of the settled minister.

Leadership/Ministry Visionary Statement:

Our new minister is an experienced, visionary leader who prepares and delivers dynamic sermons on diverse topics and inspires spiritual growth in tandem with our Religious Education Programs.

The minister provides a nurturing environment for pastoral care. He/she manages and supervises staff, delegates responsibilities and coordinates and communicates with lay leadership.

The Minister is a wise teacher who is a consensus builder and effective communicator within the congregation and in the larger community.

Our new minister is a passionate, articulate, confident individual who is comfortable with her/him self.

What we ask of our minister, we MUST ask of ourselves.

Leadership/Ministry Visionary Strategies

1. Select a dedicated search committee (all participants present on Saturday were asked if they wished to be on this committee). A list was generated that was presented at the Congregational Meeting on Sunday, 02 March 2008).
2. Recognize that we must have more money to achieve this vision.
3. Revisit this vision at regular intervals to evaluate our progress as a fellowship and as individuals.

Closing Comments:

1. The original members will be meeting on 11 March 2008 to further discuss action items yet to be implemented and to determine what role we play in assisting the Board and the Fellowship with regards to leadership both of the fellowship and the minister.
2. Any members or friends of the UUFW interested in this undertaking are welcomed to participate. Call any of the members listed for details.

JBN 03/10/08

Appendix V

UUFW Board of Trustees Report

During our first year of interim ministry, 2007-2008, using appreciative inquiry as our method, we honored our past, determined our vision for the future and selected a Search Committee to seek out our next settled minister.

When the Board held its retreat in July 2008, we established our goal for the year: with the Program Council and Transition Team, to set up policies, procedures and staffing that would enable us to strengthen UUFW as it completed its second year of interim ministry in preparation for calling our next settled minister. That is precisely what we have accomplished over the last eleven months.

We addressed the need to strengthen the Board of Trustees by proposing modifications to the bylaws, which the Congregation enacted at the November meeting. We will now elect trustees in classes of three, for three year terms; and the officers, in their second and third years, will be elected by the trustees, thus assuring that the President and Vice President are the most experienced trustees. The immediate past President of the Board will now serve as the Chair of the Nominating Committee along with four other members for a one year term.

We recognized that as we now have more than 220 members in the congregation, we needed to strengthen the structure for programs and provide accountability. Last spring, we proposed a new position, Program Director, to coordinate the overall operations of the Fellowship, from office procedures to Board assistance to working with all our programs and committees. With the committee chairs, the Director is also to provide a Policies and Procedures Manual with written descriptions of the functions of each committee and the procedures for executing them. This year we added to that job description, coordination of the Program Council.

Continuing further the implementation of accountability, we also approved the establishment of Board responsibility for revenue as well as expense. The Treasurer with the assistance of the Finance Committee has overall responsibility for expense and the Vice President with the assistance of both the Stewardship and Fundraising Committees has overall responsibility for revenue.

Finally, we adopted a new policy of supervision of contract maintenance personnel by the Chair of Building and Grounds; new rental policies and procedures; emergency evacuation procedures; and a disruptive behavior policy.

Therefore, by the time the Search Committee reported that they had selected a candidate, we felt that we had achieved our goal of strengthening UUFW in preparation for the conclusion of interim and the beginning of settled ministry.

Kami O'Keeffe, President

May 17, 2009

Appendix W

UUA: Interim Progress Appraisal

Congregation Information

Name of Congregation: Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington

City and State/Province: Wilmington, NC

Name of Interim Minister: Rev. Elaine Beth Peresluha

Date Interim Ministry Began: September, 2007

Date of Appraisal: May 5, 2009

Your Email Address: keithshea@mac.com

Evaluation Details

This appraisal is by the governing board or its designee

Convener: Keith Shea - Trustee

Daytime Phone: 910-383-3636

Email Address: keithshea@mac.com

Were others involved in the appraisal process in addition to the governing board? (*e.g.*

Transition Team)

Yes, both the interim minister and the Transition Team will submit appraisals, in addition to this appraisal from the Board of Trustees.

Brief description of the process:

Having completed an appraisal only 3 months ago, we simply brought the previous responses to the May Board Meeting and discussed how to modify our responses where necessary to more accurately reflect our congregation's status at the end of our interim process.

Note to convener: Please seek to arrive at a consensus appraisal, in which the assessments of the individual appraisers are blended into statements with which all can agree.

This evaluation is: at the end-of-ministry:

Have you shared this appraisal with your partner in leadership? (i.e. has the leadership shared its appraisal with the interim minister and vice-versa).

Yes

Appraisal

The purpose of this appraisal is to provide a picture of the congregation's progress to date toward its interim goals. The lay leadership and minister are each asked to complete an appraisal independently, to discuss the completed appraisals with one another, and to submit both to the Transitions Office. The Transitions Office will share the appraisals with the District and with the successor ministerial candidate. For the sake of the greatest possible candor, distribution of these appraisals is restricted to those authorized to receive them.

Instructions: In connection with each of the interim tasks, please appraise the congregation's progress to date. Where progress is less than satisfactory, please note the steps to be taken, and by whom, to get up to speed?

1a. The congregation has claimed and honored its past.

Progress to date: Excellent: developmental task completed.

1b. The congregation has engaged and acknowledged its griefs and conflicts.

Progress to date: Excellent: developmental task completed.

2. The congregation recognizes its unique identity and its strengths, needs, and challenges.

Progress to date: Well on track.

3a. The congregation has a clear understanding of the appropriate leadership roles of minister(s), church staff, and lay leaders:

Well on track.

3b. The congregation has successfully navigated the shifts in leadership that may accompany times of transition.

Well on track.

4. The congregation makes appropriate use of District, UUA, and other outside resources.

Well on track.

5. The congregation is in proud possession of a renewed vision and strong stewardship, prepared for new growth and new professional leadership, ready to embrace the future with anticipation and zest.

Well on track.

6. Have there been difficulties experienced with or constraints put on the interim minister's carrying out the normal tasks of ministry, i.e. preaching, teaching, and pastoral care?

No, with the exception of supervising a staff member whose family has extraordinary pastoral needs.

7. Has the interim minister been attentive to self-care and to a spiritual practice of choice?

Yes.

8. Are there other areas in which the leadership has specifically requested assistance from the interim minister, either as the ministry began or later on? If so, please describe the requests and appraise the progress to date on each.

We requested assistance from Rev. Elaine in managing difficult personalities within the congregation. She helped develop and implement a Disruptive Behavior Policy. She has also emphasized along with lay leadership the need for direct communication within the fellowship to minimize conflict due to misunderstanding. She has successfully continued the integration of children into our 1st service with a "Story For All Ages," while presenting a quieter, more contemplative tone for our 2nd service.

9. To what degree does the congregation reach beyond the dominant culture to include the multicultural world in social service and social justice?

While our congregation is mostly Caucasian, we welcome people from beyond the dominant culture and integrate them fully into the life of the Fellowship. We are a Welcoming Congregation, and have been visibly active in social justice issues throughout the community (for example hosting a Global Warming Conference and an Antiracism Conference).

10. In your perception, how fully did the leadership inform the congregation about the Interim Ministry Program before the interim minister arrived?

Very well.

11. *If a mid-term evaluation:* What would you like to see happen during the remaining months that differs from what is now occurring?

n/a

12. Please comment on the Interim Ministry *Program* (as distinct from the interim minister) as you have experienced it so far.

Our experience with the Interim Ministry Program has been excellent. It was an effective program which provided useful goals, structure and resources to help guide our congregation through this transition. Rev. Elaine's leadership in this program has been exemplary.

13. Recognizing that congregational leadership is in its truest sense a shared undertaking, what other satisfactions and dissatisfactions do you, as minister or as lay leaders, have about your role in leading the congregation during the interim period?

As congregational leaders we are highly satisfied with the excellent results of our congregation's work during the interim ministry. The Board nominated talented, energetic and enthusiastic people for our Search Committee who were voted on by the congregation. We appreciate their tireless efforts to present the Fellowship accurately and positively and to seek out

and select superior ministerial candidates.

Additionally, we enthusiastically endorse the Beyond Categorical Thinking workshop, an invaluable resource which nearly half our congregation attended. It would be easy to assume that a mostly white congregation in southeastern North Carolina would not consider selecting an openly gay, African-American woman from New York as their new minister. Yet in a period of uncertainty, when it would be easy for people to seek out the familiar, the opposite happened. Our membership came together, looked inside themselves, listened carefully to one another, and began to truly understand what brings us together. Our fellowship emerged with a clearer picture of what we are seeking and what we have to offer. As a result of this workshop, and the Search Committee's diligent and detailed polling of our membership, we have called by a unanimous vote with over 2/3 of our congregation present, our outstanding new settled minister, Rev. Cheryl M. Walker.

The Board could not be happier with the end result of this interim period. We are thankful for the resources provided to us by the UUA, Thomas Jefferson District, and Transitions Office that guided us through this challenging time. We are grateful to Rev. Elaine for her never-ending support, encouragement and inspiration. We are proud of the members of our fellowship for participating fully and enthusiastically in this process to bring it to its conclusion. Most importantly we feel we have called the right minister to inspire and guide our congregation moving forward. As the Trustees of this fellowship, we appreciate the opportunity to have played a role during this very important time, and look forward to what the future brings.