

FP Brookline Board Update to the Congregation

[current as of March 13, 2023]

Contents

- [Board Presentation to participants at March 12, 2023 Congregational Gathering](#)
- Feedback from participants at March 12 Gathering
 - [Questions](#)
 - [Concerns](#)
 - [Hopes](#)
- Timelines Going Forward
 - [Interim Search](#)



Small groups at March 12, 2023 gathering

Board's Talking Points at March 12, 2023 Congregational Gathering

Welcome and Opening

Alfred Brownell, chair

- Welcome to everyone and thanks for their patience
- You have been patient with our inaction. We thank you for that.
- Our internal struggles have gotten in the way of prompt and effective leadership. We are sorry.
- We realize that we need to become better communicators and deep listeners. You are our teachers and your feedback has been invaluable to us.
- We have learned that this group of people — your board — is a microcosm of the congregation. Whatever disagreements we have also exist in the congregation at large. Whatever polarities we experience, the congregation experiences. The conflicts we have among us don't belong just to us — they belong to the whole congregation. Despite our differences, we are committed to remaining a loving community and to working together to model what is possible.

Framing

Meck Groot, UUA congregational consultant

- In working with the board, I have learned that many FP Brookline members are experiencing a great deal of anger, pain, grief and confusion surrounding Rev. Lisa's resignation.

- Some people have told the board this directly. Some of it has come second hand. People have many questions.
- The most pervasive question is, "What happened?" or "How did this happen?" There is no single answer to that question. Each person has their own understanding of that because each person has been involved in their own way and sees things and interprets things through their own perspective and experience.

History

Margaret Williams, Treasurer

- During the 2022 canvass season, the Canvass committee noticed some trends in reduced/canceled pledges and feedback of dissatisfaction with pastoral care and spiritual leadership. This was still during the pandemic, a time when many were feeling disappointed and disillusioned by what the pandemic had wrought. There were questions about how much the pandemic influenced these trends.
- Given these things, last year's board unanimously agreed to create a Ministries Task Force. The goal of the task force was to gauge whether these concerns were anecdotal or representative of the community at large.
- The charge to the Task Force was to find out more and then offer counsel to the board.
- The Ministries Task Force created a survey, aiming for objectivity, with no mention of Rev. Lisa. Over 80 people responded to the survey.

The Task Force also conducted 1:1 interviews with more than 40 people belonging to different constituency groups.

What we know is based on what people reported in the survey about how many years they have been part of the First Parish Community. A specific question about membership was not asked. 45 of the 80 survey respondents identified themselves and are active members, as are the people the task force interviewed. In the question titled "Length of Membership,"

- 1% for 1 to 2 years
- 8% for 2 to 5 years
- 12% have been part of the community for 5 to 10 years
- 79% of all respondents reported that they have been "Part of the FP Community" for more than 10 years

After collecting the data, the Ministries Task Force presented their findings to this year's Board in September 2022.

Survey Results, Their Impact, What to do with Them

Presented by Jen Guillemin and Jody Leader

- The majority of the Board agreed that the survey results provided important data that couldn't be ignored or dismissed.

- Among the things we learned from the survey is how much great ministry is happening in the congregation. People reported many good things about their experience as members of the First Parish Community.
- We also learned that some of the data were more than anecdotal and that there were differences of opinion about Rev. Lisa's ministry, especially in the areas of pastoral care and worship. Some of the 80 respondents expressed satisfaction; others expressed dissatisfaction; and some remained neutral.
- As you might imagine, consensus about how to interpret the data was difficult to achieve. There was no clear answer to the question of how widespread the feedback was beyond those who took the survey. Some Board members questioned the validity of the data and whether the negative responses were truly indicative of a systemic problem.
- While not ignoring views of the greater First Parish Community, the board, as per our bylaws, has fiduciary responsibilities to active members of this congregation in good standing — those who have the authority to elect the board and call the minister. That is to say voting members.
- There were no grounds for terminating Rev. Lisa's employment based on her Letter of Agreement with the congregation. That Letter clearly lists just grounds for dismissal. These include conviction for a felony, suspension from UUA Fellowship, misconduct, and serious neglect of ministerial responsibilities.
- The only way to learn more about the extent of congregational dissatisfaction was to conduct a vote by the congregation. That was one of the options the board discussed as it worked through its many questions and divergent understandings.
- Rev. Lisa chose to step down rather than to engage with a painful and highly divisive community vote regarding next steps.
- In January, the board reached consensus about the terms of Rev. Lisa's departure.
- There are differences of opinion on what to do with the survey results. Some want everyone to see the data collected by the Ministries Task Force through the surveys and interviews. Others feel that having the same debates and arguments within our entire community can be even more damaging if not handled sensitively.
- We are in agreement that some of the data in the survey results provides food for thought. The information could be one of the tools to inform how we work together when deciding what kind of church we want to be in the future — especially considering the erosion of right relationships, trust and confidence over time. These are historic and systematic fault lines in the congregation. Therefore, we think the best approach is to wait until the interim minister comes on board to help us discern how the information can be integrated into our planning.

Near Term Action Plan

Presented by Jody, Ed, Nancy, John

Something about each of the following

- worship services after April 14
- staff support (Bob Williamson, Jen Guillemin, Rev. Martha Neibanck)

- canvass
- annual meeting
- goodbye for Rev. Lisa
- nominations and onboarding new leadership
- interim search and interim ministry (a time to address the tensions and hurts in our community — as well as identify the strengths and gifts of our shared ministries and our people)

Burning Questions

Before we break into small groups, are there any burning questions that you need addressed before you can participate fully in your small group?

"Was Rev. Lisa involved in Board meetings and therefore aware of all this?"

Answer by Meck = Yes.

"What was feedback to Rev. Lisa in the years prior to the church year 2021-22?"

Answer by Meck = It cannot be answered, yearly turnover of Board members precludes giving an accurate response.

Closing - An Invitation to the Congregation

Alfred Brownell, chair

- In closing, Meck has told us that anonymous surveys, anonymous interviews, anonymous letters characterize a congregation with low levels of trust. She posed the questions: How has trust been eroded over time — not just in the past five years, but the last ten, the last fifteen? What patterns do we see that need attention and invite greater awareness?
- The congregation must establish mission-centered processes for reviewing the ministries of the congregation — not only the minister's role in the ministry, but the role of everyone participating in the ministry.
- We need to learn together how to tell each other our deepest truth without fear that we will be dismissed, argued with, or marginalized. Rather than debating our truths, can we learn first to really hear each other?
- As we enter a period of interim ministry, it is critical that the congregation learn more about those differences and how they can strengthen us rather than divide us. Our differences are not the problem. In the spirit of shared ministry, they can help us live our mission more fully, more whole-heartedly, more expansively. But first we have to learn more about what those differences are, why they undermine our ministries, and what gifts lie within them.

Questions, Concerns and Hopes Named by Participants at March 12, 2023 Gathering

Note: ✓ indicates a repeat of that item

Questions

- What level of secrecy is normal if there are secret processes that can impact staff?

- Was Rev. Lisa given the opportunity to get coaching on the issues presented in the survey?
- When were these issues first communicated to Rev. Lisa? What process was provided to address them?
- Was Rev. Lisa asked or suggested to resign prior to the survey?
- What's the story about anonymous letters?
- Was the survey sent to more than voting members and why was it anonymous?
- Why don't we use a microphone at every meeting?
- What was the impact of Covid?
- Can we get a road map that outlines practical issues going forward from April 14 when Rev. Lisa is done?
- Is it a UUA sanctioned practice to do anonymous surveys? Can we avoid them in the future?
- Why not hire/partner with an outside/neutral UUA partner to do survey when anecdotal dissatisfaction/feedback is identified?
- Why allowing surveys that people can answer anonymously isn't that an invitation to break with our covenant of right relationship? If people/members want to provide feedback shouldn't they identify themselves?
- What is the search process for a new minister? ✓
- how long till we start the new minister search?
- Is there a congregation vote on a new minister?
- Does the congregation need to heal from pandemic and ministerial change? ✓
- How do we avoid this happening again?
- We seem to know how to hold our ministers to account. How do we hold ourselves to account?
- How do we rebuild trust in the congregation?
- How do we become a place that is attractive to the ministers we want?
- Given the level of conflict amongst board members, how do they expect to provide effective leadership?
- Was worship not perceived as inclusive?
- Can board clarify its role in a UU church?
- What does the congregation need to do to ensure success of a minister?
- Do we need to follow UUA guidelines for search?
- What do we need to do to support differing opinions?

Concerns

- How to determine when a ministry is not healthy.
- Because the board turns over so quickly, can we institutionalize things so the new board knows (example: D.E.E.P. workshop)
- Some UUs are officially secularizing as to ascribe very novel roles and responsibilities of ministers.
- Rev. Rebecca wasn't trained and didn't intend to be an interim.
- That people who are very attached to Rev. Lisa will move on.
- Our current by-law about requiring a congregational vote to terminate a ministry may not be a workable process to honor the will of the community.

- Will the community work together to come together and make a future?
- There's lots of bitterness — can we get through it?
- Can we heal the split?
- I observed a mediocrity with ministerial leadership and that gets lost and not shared.
- I am concerned about the split in the church.
- Please destroy this set of survey results so that confidentiality is not inadvertently broken and results aren't used in ways respondents never intended.
- There was a mention of the Deacons helping to lead the transition. Who are they? How do you become a deacon? That sets off "old guard" alarm bells for me. Can they partner with newer members for whatever they do? Can we pair wisdom and institutional knowledge with new eyes and needs of newer members?
- How can we ensure 1) that people who stop coming to First Parish are reached out to and asked why or if there's anything we can do? 2) new people are not burdened with too many committees.
- The congregation needs to heal from this process and Covid
- Restore right relationships; confront conflicts directly, not behind backs
- We do the hard work in the interim that we didn't do five years ago. We don't go for charisma in an interim but the skills and training to help the congregation do the hard work.
- Feels like there is finger-pointing going on within the congregation.
- The excessive use of indirect communication within the congregation.
- There is not sufficient board training for onboarding new board members.
- How do we hear each other? ✓
- Which voices have been listened to?

Hopes

- For those who have drifted away, to find ways to help them re-engage in this process going forward. ✓✓
- That for new people, this is an opportunity to help shape ministry together
- For the board to communicate the interim period as an opportunity to help shape who we are going forward— in community, love and trust.
- Reinstate the Committee on Ministry.
- That we have a process that helps the board determine when a ministry is not healthy. ✓
- That we enter into this in a spirit of trust even if we didn't agree before.
- Strong hope for a two year interim who is trained as an interim and wants to be an interim and will set a path for settled ministry. ✓✓
- That we enter into covenant with the next minister about how to stay accountable, how to be supportive and explore concerns as they arise, and to do this before there is concern.
- That we will get an experienced interim who knows what the job is. ✓
- That there be continuity from board to board — example: diversity work, decisions from prior years, institutional history, standard procedures, covenant to work through things ✓✓

- That an interim minister can help us unpack ways some of us see social justice and spiritual work as different. Hope we can bring those two things together. ✓✓
- A two year interim ministry that will do a deep dive into the issues of the congregation and that the effort will be successful — we will have positive clarity of where we want to go as a congregation.
- That this strengthens the congregation and we find a great minister.
- That it brings more families and new people.
- That before we get too far along the ministerial selection process, we communally review 1) the traditional duties of our minister and 2) the general content/syllabus of seminary because some of us have forgotten what ministers are called to.
- That we can get a new minister we are excited about.
- That our new minister is more spiritual than Rev. Lisa.
- I hope we can heal the split.
- I hope we have no more anonymous surveys in the future.
- I hope we continue to keep centering racial, economic, spiritual, environmental healing in an intergenerational community.
- I hope our musical ministry continues with its wonderful strength and diversity.
- That we use our wonderful choir to perform and grow the congregation!
- I hope for adequate support for Jayleigh and other staff. That they will not be pulled in too many directions. Let's do whatever we can so Jayleigh stays!
- I hope that congregants going through a hard time turn towards the church and not away. (Of course, the board can't fix that on their own.)
- That we use this moment of change to make other changes: 1) move to a more affordable building that does not use as many fossil fuels; 2) merge with another congregation.
- A committee to guide the minister.
- A team to help interface minister to congregation.
- I hope we do targeted work on staying in "right relationship" in our congregation, among ourselves and with the minister — now and in the future (a standing practice) ✓
- I hope we create a circle of support of folks for the next minister.
- Given that there is potentially disparaging feedback about Rev. Lisa in the survey, I hope it isn't widely distributed.
- That we can use a transitional period to tend our relationships within the congregation — to build empathy, compassion, love towards each other.
- That we are able to be welcoming to someone we haven't met that needs this place.
- To re-engage folks who have stepped back from the church.
- That interim ministry will provide an opportunity for everyone to contribute and shape us together in community, love and trust
- That we have a spirit of trust.
- That the board goes through diversity training every year.
- We are better and have insight so we choose more intelligently
- Hope there will be more transparency
- That we debrief with past Search Committee to learn what they didn't see and why.

- We as a congregation would offer support to help Rev. Lisa be successful.
- That we learn from what we were upset with so we can work on those things.
- Gratitude for the transparency.
- That small groups have support.

Timelines Going Forward

Interim Search Timeline

Board reads Transitional Ministry Handbook	February-early April
Board appoints Interim Minister Search Committee	February-early April
Interim Search Committee asks Transitions Office to Initiate Interim Search	February-early April
Interim Search Committee prepares Interim Search Documents Packet	March/late April
Earliest publish date for Congregational Interim Records	Thursday, April 6th
Congregational Interim Record Sheet (application) Deadline (highly recommended for maximum exposure)	Thursday, April 20th
Transitional Ministers Chapter Meeting (open to all UUMA colleagues)	April 24-28th
Ministers' deadline to submit interest for the first offer date	April 29th
Names of interim ministers released to congregations	May 1st
Interim search committee submits lists of yeses/nos/maybes to Transitions Office	May 15th
First offer date/Offers extended by search committee to interim ministers	May 17th noon EDT
Consultations with congregations interested in preparing for the second offer date	May 17-19th
Interim Search continues/Names of interested ministers released to congregations	May 22nd
United States Memorial Day (UUA closed)	May 29th
Interim search committee submits lists of yeses/nos/maybes to Transitions Office	June 5th
Second offer date/Offers extended by search committee to interim ministers	June 7th noon EDT
Consultations with congregations unable to find an interim minister	June 7-9th

Worship Services Timeline

Worship Services after April 14:

4/16: Ethan Loewi, Chaplain, MGH

4/23: Erin Scott

4/30: RE Sunday, Jayleigh and the RE teachers

5/7: Sanctuary Boston/Matt Meyer (Keith's first Sunday of sabbatical; Adrian Jones will lead the choir, through 6/11, with guest accompanist, Siyu.)

5/14: Rev. Cindy Davidson, Executive Director, MA Interfaith Power and Light

5/21: Coming of Age (Jayleigh, with Erin)

5/28: Family Camp Worship (organized by RE Families and others)

6/4: Jud Wolfskill

6/11: Erin and Jayleigh (Flower Communion)

Pastoral Care

By Erin Scott together with a member of the Pastoral Care Team.

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