

Congregational Conversations – Questions and Responses April 23, 2017

Panel: Rev. Mike Denton (PNW Conference Minister)

Rev. Liz Oettinger (former Plymouth Church UCC, Associate Minister / Consultant)

Rev. Dale Sewall (former Mercer Island Presbyterian Church, Senior Minister / Consultant)

David Anderson (Business Administrator, University Congregational UCC, Seattle)

Additional Plymouth Church UCC Bylaw Revision Team: Al Wallace (Moderator)

Susan Berry (HR Co-Chair), Mike Pierson (past Moderator), Richard Wilson (past Moderator)

Process: Questions were submitted in writing to allow for all persons who desired to participate. Since there was only the hour for this initial conversation, reflections were requested from the various panel members and the Bylaw Revision Team members were invited to share their thoughts as well. As of the printing, these are the responses we have received thus far. Additional questions will be posted from the April 30 Congregational Conversation, as well as from the “Council Corner” opportunities and the Neighborhood Group gatherings.

We hope this allows an opportunity for every person to have information, participate in the process and share in discerning God’s leading for Plymouth Church as a congregation in our governance and in selection of ministerial leadership models and persons.

Questions & Comments

1. I can see many advantages to this format for Plymouth at this time. At the same time, I think we need to take seriously the issues/challenges identified, including the “triangulation” challenge. Could this potential challenge be ameliorated (made better) by appointing an ombudperson from the congregation who could serve as a neutral communicator between the congregation and pastors, and between the pastors themselves?

Rev. Mike Denton – Maybe. I’m not aware of another church setting in which this has been done. I could also see it being just one more opportunity to triangle that could get in the way of open communication.

David Anderson – Many churches do have a Pastor-Parish Relations Committee. At University Congregational UCC, it’s call the Leadership Staff-Parish Relations Committee. Their role is not as neutral communicator but rather to encourage direct conversation. They have articulated a covenant between leadership staff and congregation, and that covenant has been affirmed by the congregation as well as the leadership staff.

Here’s a copy of the covenant: <https://universityucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Leadership-Covenant.pdf>

Here’s a link to an FAQ about the UCUCC LPRC: https://universityucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FAQ_LPRC.pdf Jerry Landeen is current convener of the LPRC. He will be speaking at the 12 noon forum on April 30.

2. There are 12 named committees in Sec. 7.7.2. Perhaps we should consider the difference between Boards and Committees. Do we need 2 ways to run the church? **No Response As of Printing**

3. How can we support the staff from possible over triangulation efforts from our congregation? How can the staff listen to all of us without being overwhelmed?

Rev. Mike Denton – As David mentioned, negative triangulation of staff is best dealt with by staff members' good communication with each other. Triangulation is one way of having conversations in a group and, although often spoken of negatively, it's natural for triangulation to be present as a means of discernment, negotiation and establishing power. Triangulation plus secrecy tends to be the place things start to fall apart.

David Anderson – This is a challenge, to hear from everyone who wants to share and yet also focus on other areas of ministry and management. Community forum and gatherings have been a helpful way for UCUC to hear perspectives in more manageable settings.

4. Has there been any input gathered from Montview Blvd. Presbyterian Church in Denver? They have utilized a co-pastorate model successfully since 1974. I'm confident they have much wisdom to offer at this point. - Wayne Duncan **No Response As of Printing**

5. Why did the idea of co-ministry come about after the Senior Minister's resignation? Is this a reaction or a thoughtful process?

Rev. Mike Denton – The conversation had actually started *before* your previous pastor's resignation. The first time I brought it up as a question/option was during Tom Stier's time.

6. How does the collaborative model empower, include and embrace the gifts of other (non-pastoral) staff and the congregants in general? How do we know that the collaborative model is working?

Rev. Mike Denton – Great question. Collaborative ministry usually starts with the staff and other congregational structures begin to mirror it as new ways of doing things begin to emerge. I think the collaborative model, sometimes, can help staff reduce their over functioning by making space for members to share more of their gifts.

David Anderson – There is indeed a need for intentionality to include others, and to widen circles of participation and involvement. At UCUC, team ministry does also mean including boards, committees, and other staff in the process.

7. 2 related concerns that were touched on but I would like to hear more:

- Easier to say No. How do we get to Yes?
- Negative minority has more power than positive majority.

Rev. Mike Denton – I haven't always seen this. At Plymouth, I've already seen a decent ability to say "no" and the power of groups with a minority opinion. What I don't know is if these would be heightened challenges in a collaborative model or if, generally, these are challenges within the Plymouth congregation that the community is called to address. One thing I'd add? A "no" can sometimes be creating a healthy boundary. Not moving forward until the concerns of those with a minority opinion are integrated into a decision can be healthy.

Rev. Dale Sewall – A significant concern in a collaborative ministry structure, where "Who decides?" has a complex and sometimes confusing answer, and where consensus is a high priority in decision making, is that risk-averse people can refuse permission to act to those willing to risk in order to be faithful to what they believe is God's calling upon the church. Too many "no's" creates a culture of "No" and an embrace primarily of ministries that are considered safe. This gives a sense of security to members who prioritize stability and

minimal change, and frustrates members who want the church to be an agent for change in the world. It also risks becoming a congregation irrelevant beyond internal congregational life.

On a clergy level, if agreement among peers is required before movement forward in a process, then a risk-averse pastor holds the power of “no.” If you have two clergy and both are risk-averse, you will have great pastoral care and rich internal fellowship, good traditional programming, and probably some low risk “missions” in the community—giving some mission dollars, collecting used clothes, working at a food bank, etc. If you have two clergy and both are visionary concerning the church as a change agent in the world, then there will need to be some structural process to prioritize missions, and strong operational support.

On a congregational level, making consensus a high priority gives a negative minority power to hinder or block innovation both within the church and in the church’s outreach. The power of “No” over “Yes” functions in a similar way as within the staff. Other factors exacerbate the negative at the congregational level. Within a congregation there is normally a “loyal opposition” comprising 10-15% of the members. There is also a percentage of risk-taking and risk-averse people. This percentage probably varies according to a congregation’s history. Churches that function as change agents probably attract people who like that model. And vice versa...the one having a higher percentage of members prone to “Yes,” and the other a higher percentage prone to “No.” The wild card factors in congregational governance are the difficult personalities, the dysfunctional members, and the undiagnosed personality disorders. These people can generate a lot of negative energy; and seem to intuitively sense a power or authority weakness and move into it. They can wreck movement toward consensus. The congregational governance structure must have effective ways of dealing with dysfunction. Complex or confusing governance structures are less effective in preventing dysfunction.

Whatever ministry model is chosen, the building of a strong collegial culture is essential: All people respected; all gifts encouraged and celebrated; all staff working collaboratively and respectfully with each other, genuinely valuing the insights and feedback of their colleagues—and held accountable to the governing body for doing so. I have experienced a strong culture of collegiality and mutual encouragement work well in a Senior Pastor model. I believe a culture of collegiality will support any ministry model, and will help any congregation to decide and implement its purposes in a healthy and joyful manner.

8. Setting duties for Senior Minister, essential categories for Associate Ministers. **No Response As of Printing**
9. In the Plymouth model, will the two ministers be “equal,” sharing everything? On equal status, responsibility to the congregation?
Rev. Mike Denton – There are some of these questions that are governance questions and that’s really up to Plymouth.
10. Why would joint ministers be ex-officio, non-voting members of the Council?
David Anderson – At UCUC, the four leadership staff are all ex-officio nonvoting members. We do have voice at council but not vote.
11. I am on board for Collaborative Ministry. My only concern is “cart before the horse”! Because Steve and Kelle are so great, are we skipping dealing deeply with ourselves? If we didn’t have Steve and Kelle, would we be ready for this now? Have we truly engaged in our new way of communicating that can sustain collaboratively?
Rev. Mike Denton – I mentioned this in my comments at the gathering but I can say this another way. I think this is more of a both/and as opposed to an either/or.

12. What can a congregation do to help alleviate “drift”?

Rev. Mike Denton – Focus on mission, mission, mission while constantly evaluating and adjusting. Call in our Minister of Church vitality to talk about some of the things she’s learning. I’ve found it *very* helpful.

David Anderson – Intentionality with goals and areas of focus. Though at UCUCC, this is an area where we continue to need to focus. We like to say yes to all things and all people all the time, and that makes it more difficult to identify priorities and move ahead. Knowing and naming this, and paying attention to it, is a good first step.

Bylaw Edit Suggestions

Sec. 7.3.b. still mentions the “Senior Minister.”

Bill Bumpas edits/questions

Sec. 3.2.2. instead of reading [a “home church”] to read [another church]

Sec. 3.2.3. The Parish Care Board no longer exists. This should read [Community and Care Board].

Sec. 5.1.a. Should this read [Election of a Senior Minister / Ministry Team Search Committee] to accommodate both options of leadership should a search be desired?

Sec. 5.3. Too soon to get reports by January. Why not first quarter of each year?

Sec. 5.4 Could Co-Pastors call a Special Church Meeting? If so, to then read [or by a Minister.]

Sec. 7.3.b. Again, Special Meetings of the Church Council, could Co-Pastors call a meeting? If so, to then read [or by a Minister.]

Sec. 10.2 Senior Minister – Strike [Council] and replace with [members] assuming it is a vote of a Congregational Meeting which is determining which type of ministry leadership is desired, keeping consistent the language of all 3 options as in 10.4.

Sec. 10.3 Associate Ministers – Strike [Council] and replace with [members] assuming it is a vote of a Congregational Meeting which is determining which type of ministry leadership is desired, keeping consistent the language of all 3 options as in 10.4.

Sec. 10.5 Music Director – Amend from [The Music Director shall] to read [A Music Director may].

Sec. 10.7 Other Employees – Question as to how the “supervising” Minister is selected. Do we need a section describing this?

Question for David Anderson (University Congregational UCC)

How has the team ministry at University UCC evolved over the years? Has it gone in unexpected and surprising ways?

The “technical change” was easier than the “adaptive change.” The ways we relate to each other as staff, and between congregation and staff, continue to evolve and continue to need attention. We have found it important to re-commit to the team and our vision and ministry each time there is a change in leadership. We know we need to be intentional in hearing differing perspectives. And we have found we need to be able to make decisions

and move on at times, and to trust that once that perspectives are shared and heard and the decision is made, we move forward together. We have to be willing to stay in relationship with each other and work through the hard issues. We have learned to call in a coach when we're getting to a stuck place. And we know we need to put the ministry of the church first, ahead of our egos or personal wants. That doesn't mean we ignore our own needs but rather we look for God's call and the common good, and "how to get to yes" when we're in a tough spot.

How is the style of worship/music in particular services decided at U Cong? Is there more than one worship service each Sunday morning?

We have one worship service and intentionally have blended elements of traditional and contemporary worship in one service. The worship staff – Clergy, Music Director, and periodically our Liturgical Artist in Residence collaborate together to make decisions about style and form for each worship series and service. (Rev. Peter Ilgenfritz, UCong UCC Clergy)

Question for Rev. Mike Denton (PNW Conference Minister)

How many congregations in NW Conference use collaborative ministry model?

Collaborative ministry is a broad model so there are lots of churches that have moved in this direction without naming it as such. We have 5 of our congregations that I think, currently, fit the broad definition of collaborative ministry.

Of those congregations, have any returned to senior minister model?

There were two others that tried it, backed away from it, but seem to be moving in that direction again. It's a newer/renewed model so we're still learning.

If so, why?

In each case, it was an instance of Senior pastors moving into and leading the idea without a wider conversation in the church. They didn't have the same sort of church wide discernment process that you're having. It is interesting to note that, years later, both these congregations are considering this again and their structures are still more collaborative than they were previously.

A response to Collaborative ministry questions from Liz Oettinger

First of all, thanks to Steve, Kelle, and the Church Council, both for arranging the conversation last Sunday and for all their efforts to move Plymouth thoughtfully towards a consideration of collaborative ministry. Rather than address the questions Steve sent out to the panel members individually, I would like to respond to several of the questions together. The questions I hope to address in a coordinated way are questions 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, and 12.

I have been visiting Plymouth regularly since last September and during that time have spoken with about 60 members of the congregation. The staff, both clergy and lay employees, have also been exceedingly generous to me with their time and their honest reflection. My answers to the questions posed about collaborative ministry are based primarily on my time over the last seven months talking with Plymouth people, my study and experience of collaborative ministry, as well as my experience in the more prevalent Senior Minister model.

First, just as there are no perfect ministers or congregations, there is no perfect model of ministry that will ensure harmony, forward motion, and active positive congregational engagement. In the Senior Minister model, much (and some would say too much) of the responsibility for congregational health, direction, and engagement are set

by one person—the Senior Minister. This brings with it a set of potential problems with which we are all familiar. In a model of collaborative ministry, responsibilities are more diffuse and the work of consensus more demanding. In my experience, however, I would not say that the possibilities for triangulation, drift, and “getting to yes” are significantly stronger in one model or the other. They just are manifested differently in the two models. And like all theoretical statements, the particular gifts, deficits, and external circumstances of the actual humans involved in any one particular congregation at any given time do a lot to determine outcome, regardless of model.

Getting away from the theoretical, churches exist in particular times and places, with a specific history that brought them to that place. I appreciate the questions asked about whether Plymouth has adequately dealt with its past and spent enough time truly understanding what it means to move into a collaborative ministry model. I have asked those questions myself. However, in spite of those “in the best possible theoretical worlds” questions, Plymouth finds itself in the actual position now of having two strong ministers who are excited to work collaboratively with each other and a congregation in which many are interested in pursuing a new mode of ministry. There is indeed a real impatience for moving forward in the congregation. I have been impressed with the openness and transparency the Council and clergy are trying to bring to this process, the desire for questions to be asked and to continue to be asked. Because of these “real world” factors, I have come to believe that moving forward to call Kelle and Steve and to affirm the by-law change now is in the best interests of the congregation if:

1. The church continues to view collaborative ministry as a work in progress after the votes have been taken and the decisions made. In other words, it is important that the congregation be an active partner in continuing to develop and practice collaborative ministry if it votes to move forward in that way, just as there should be a process for continuing feedback, explanation, fine tuning. I believe that the ideas of creating an ombudsperson kind of position or a pastoral relations committee are great potential ideas if they are needed. Probably Steve, Kelle, and the congregation need to live into this some months longer to see what exactly would be most helpful.
2. If Steve and Kelle and the Church Council continue to foster through this process a culture of openness, mutual respect, and careful honest dialogue. Plymouth has significant recent history with the issues caused by triangulation, careless speech, and, some would say, outright bullying in its conflicts in congregational life. Living into this new model, it is an excellent time to create, model, continually practice a new way of being together as a congregation. And I don't mean that in a romantic “magic wand” kind of way. It is hard deliberate work. For collaborative ministry to work, not just the staff but also the congregation has to be more patient, more disciplined, more willing to rest in the uneasiness of change, and practice grace to each other in the process. Kelle and Steve have been actively modeling that new way of being since they began to work collaboratively together. The Church Council as well, out of the conflicts of the recent past, has been working intentionally to listen and communicate more fully. And, I believe, there is significant, albeit tentative commitment in the congregation to model a different reality within itself. In short, this journey to understanding and practicing collaborative ministry may as well become a journey that allows Plymouth to heal from the past, and grow into a more gracious, careful community.

A response to Collaborative ministry questions from Mike Pierson (former Moderator / Bylaw Revision Team member)

Q1 (ombudsperson?): My first reaction to this was a concern about adding another layer of interface that might be both inefficient and actually get in the way of fostering “the building of a strong collegial culture” that as Rev. Sewall says is essential. I do recall, though, that for many years Plymouth had a Pastoral Relations Committee that to some extent may have served the function of an ombudsperson. I was never on that committee and don’t recall its specific tasks, but I believe that among other things it confidentially handled a variety of sensitive matters that came up that involved one of the ministers or issues between ministers. And I believe its purpose was mainly to help support and nurture our ministers and to help them resolve special issues. I don’t think we want to create an ombudsperson who becomes a new “routine” contact for congregant-minister or minister-minister matters. But the Council and the ministers might consider whether it will be sufficient (and not too time-consuming) to leave these kinds of issues to be dealt with by the Council, its officers, and the ministers or whether instead a person or small group should be tasked with being available to help with special or difficult issues that may come up if Plymouth decides to go down the co-ministry path. (And if so, maybe just for a certain period of time as we feel our way into the model.)

Q2 (committees vs. boards): Good question! We have had committees of the Council and separate boards for a long time. I assume the notion is that the committees report to and are accountable specifically to the Council in a way that isn’t so true of the boards. But I’m not sure that it really works that way now (if it ever did), and at times I believe some committees have operated without anyone else much paying a lot of attention to them or overseeing what they are doing. One man’s opinion. The question is probably a useful prompt for the Council to consider whether we have a good rationale for the committee-board distinction at this point, what it is, and whether it leads to other problems. (For example, we have six year term limits for board membership to help provide for turnover, fresh ideas, etc., but at least in the past we have had committee members who remain on committees well beyond six years.)

Q3 (support staff; prevent triangulation/overwhelming staff): My hope is that, whatever our ministry model is, it will be pretty clear who on the non-ministerial staff is responsible for what. We want congregants to know who to contact, not to go from one staff member to another, and to have a sense of accountability — and ability to figure out what has happened to a given request/idea (e.g., status of decision, who decision-maker is/was, etc.). As was discussed on Sunday, we will be adding some inefficiency with a co-ministry model; we don’t want to add a lot more inefficiency by having unclear lines of responsibility/authority when it comes to the non-ministerial staff. And my own hope is that co-ministers will also try to divide at least certain ministerial responsibilities to reduce the number of items that require both ministers to be fully involved.

Q10 (co-ministers ex-officio members of Council?): I believe our ministers already have been ex-officio members of the Council. The Council acts on behalf of the congregation in a way that in my mind makes a minister vote a bad idea — and in certain instances particularly inappropriate. In my experience, the ministers’ voices still carry a lot of weight in matters considered by the Council, even though they don’t vote.

Q11 (cart-before-the-horse): Well, we are where we are, and fortunately we find ourselves with two people who can ably step into co-ministry. Of course we have work to do (again, “the building of a strong collegial culture is essential”); we will just have to do it as we go, in my view, because delaying the ministerial call(s) seems ill-advised and I think the congregational appetite is for moving boldly ahead and not for stopping the trains while we work on ourselves some more. Maybe we should call the glass half full — we now have a great opportunity to practice and build collegial and gracious being-together with each other and our ministers and church leaders.