

How do We Hire a Pastor? How do they Choose Us? Where do we Go from Here?

I chose the scripture from John 13 this week because I saw the main message of that scripture being servant leadership. The COH finds itself in a place where most likely we will soon be searching for an interim pastor and eventually a settled pastor. I say most likely, because after coming off three years of lay leadership at Hope and in the MCC, I and others also in leadership, think we have some work to do before we find ourselves in the role of hiring.... the role of employer.

As I prepared these remarks, I thought back to the four times I was applying for jobs, beyond summer jobs as a student. The first was when I applied to be a clerical employee in a financial services firm at twenty when I was working my way through college. They'd had some bad luck with employees so decided to give aptitude tests. I aced the math and verbal parts but got a paltry 20 words per minute typing with a fair number of errors (never took a typing class). The employer asked me if I thought that would improve. I said I thought so, and they took a chance and thus began the entre to how I have spent my working life. That employer saw a shortcoming but one he thought could be overcome and put his faith in the strengths he saw. *A valuable lesson for hiring.*

The next one with that same employer is when he thought I should become licensed to market financial vehicles. I had to take a psychological profile to qualify for a subsidy program instead of straight commissions. The firm admitted they had never tested a woman. This was the early 1970s and this role was held almost exclusively by men. In fact, the profile was based on the top hundreds of successful men in the entire country in this role. I needed to be acceptable to qualify. I came back Low Acceptable.... good enough for the subsidy but scary enough for my boss who did not want to steer me wrong. He called the firm and asked why saying "I think she'll be great." Ahhh, "she," they said, "we forgot it was a woman. She was off the chart for empathy." Yes, using 1970's successful middle aged male characteristics to compare to an early twenties female did not work.

I'd like to think that today's profiles would not only include some women, but that men in the profession in 2022 are more empathetic as well. In fact, I spent two half days at work this week in seminars led mostly by men, talking about building close and caring relationships with clients as being the true measure of running a successful practice. *Another valuable lesson for hiring. Times change, and people change with them.*

The last two applications were when I was being considered for upper management roles. One time the concern was since I would be the first woman hired ever for the

position, how would I deal with traveling to strange cities and staying in hotels alone, a gender issue employers should not really be evaluating once the basic skill set of the position is known. And the last time was questioning if Wisconsin was a big enough state to warrant a CEO of its own. *Perhaps another hiring tip: leave out things that should not be any of our business or really should have already been decided.*

I should note that I got all these jobs.... all part of what I have been doing for 50 years, so as they say, the rest is history. But it reminded me how biased hiring is when I was preparing these remarks.

In the UCC when we get ready to hire a pastor, we form a Search Committee...hopefully a small body somewhat representative of who we are in totality. We also prepare a profile of our church. The numbers parts are easy, but when we get down to our statements of faith, our practices in the church and what we are seeking in a pastor, do we really list who we **are**, or who we **hope to be**? I've heard people who were on the last Search Committee state that Pastor Sonja was all we said we wanted in our profile, and yet in the six years she spent with us, half of which I was in leadership, we heard several complaints and concerns.

Corkey and I have been members going on 41 years. We've both chaired Search Committees and served on others. We've experienced all the pastors COH has ever had, including the interims. I think I am not exaggerating when I say there has not been one of those people with whom there have not been some complaints. Some were minor.....how they dressed, how they sounded, how short or long they preached.... but some were quite serious.....a breach of confidentiality, a lack of pastoral care, and in several instances, conflicts with shared ministry with our sister congregation.

So here we are again, at a threshold. Many of us in leadership feel that we need to do some serious soul searching before we even begin to consider a settled pastor. Included in that should be, are we willing and able to do what we need to do to become a church that can financially sustain a new fulltime pastor? That requires growth. Some of our long-standing members who have built to healthy levels of financial support have died or are aging and retiring. Are we willing to do the work to seek and support a growing membership?

Some of it has to do with our unique relationship as an ecumenical faith community. Will we pick up where the Road Ahead left us and assure that we are doing what we can to keep two churches of different denominations, sizes and needs not just occupying a building but truly having a joint ministry? Covid has made that harder, but as our Stewardship Campaign of last year..... Community Wherever We Are.....and the follow-up, Ministry Wherever We Are, showed, Covid has not killed it. But has it come close to

killing our pastors with over work? Are we willing to do what it takes to make certain that two pastors in the MCC can be treated well regardless of the size of their congregations, and can we create better guidelines for how that shared ministry works? This is the third time COH has lost a minister because, in part, of the imbalance.

Then there are our values and faith statements. We were justifiably proud to be among the first UCC churches to declare ourselves to be Open and Affirming. I think many of us were equally proud of the fact that we helped lead our sister congregation to becoming Reconciling in Christ, the ELCA version of that declaration. I remember being on leadership when we called our first lesbian interim pastor. Jann was not outspoken about who she was as far as gender and relationship issues. This was clear when one of our former older church members was always wondering why such an attractive woman had no boyfriends. Tisha came to us more out and had her commitment service to her then partner here at the MCC. But the nature of being a lesbian woman in a committed relationship was rarely mentioned in her sermons. Sonja instead often used her Queerness to relate to us what it feels like to be marginalized. Her sermons were filled with very vulnerable, personal stories about that topic. She would talk of racial marginalization as well as that of poverty, but she would show it to us through the lens of an openly Queer woman who knew firsthand that marginalization was not what people of faith should do, and that we as a community had to speak up to it in defiance.

Many of us have spoken up about racial equity. Some of us would like us to be seen as Anti-racists. The ELCA is requiring its churches to move towards a statement about that in a few years. But wanting to be there, and being there are two different things, and Sonja reminded us that we had work to do. Whether it has been concerns about rainbow pride flags or Black Lives Matter letters, or the banner proclaiming the values of Being the church, we have had conflicts, huge conflicts, over what has been on our walls. We can have differences of opinion as to having a more meditative space versus one displaying words that some see as political, while some of us see them as faith statements. But we need to be clear to anyone considering serving us how we feel those signs, and images are carried out in our daily faith and not just things we display in this sanctuary.

How do we do this as a church body? We are not one people. We do not speak with one voice. But we do all pray to the same God and worship God and Jesus in this space that holds us as a faith community. Corkey and I joined this church because of the faithful people we met here, the pastoral leadership of a strong and passionate person in Dan and because we saw this as a place where faith was nourished and shared in every walk of our lives. We **felt that**, when we as the MCC agreed, unanimously, to

break the law and take fellow human beings risking harm into sanctuary. We **felt that** when our garden ministry provided food for those who are food insecure and a place for young people, predominantly of color, to have experiences of honoring the earth. We **felt that** when confirmation was not a requirement of any young person of a certain age, but a study of many months that led to discernment as to where that young person might see themselves. We **felt that** when we helped struggling farmers glean their fields amid an early winter. We **felt that** when we welcomed all gender diverse individuals and couples into our midst and performed weddings and celebrated all unions. And while our diversity of color is under-represented, we **feel that** we truly celebrate all of God's people as the equal, strong, and caring people they are and seek to stand up for justice wherever darkness still holds it at bay.

When we were baptized as babies our parents and godparents spoke for us and said that they would raise us with these values. When we were confirmed, if we were, we spoke for ourselves albeit not as clearly in our own words as our young people here do. Adults who have been baptized here speak for themselves. People who join our church speak of what this faith journey means for them.

I think that is our job description. We proclaim, not who we are, but who we seek and pray to be. When a pastor is ordained, and later installed, they proclaim who they pray and hope to be. But we are all human. We will fail. We have failed. Our pastors have failed. What we must not do, in my opinion, is to pretend we are a church that we are not. Whoever is called to serve us, in that servant leadership role, will bring all their baggage with them, and they will know that we have carried ours into this space as well.

This week's lectionary included Psalm 138, which I liked when I first read it, and loved after Vicki Warren sent me a version from Nan Merrill's "Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness." I felt it read a lot like what I think Sonja thought was her job description. You've heard it, but hear again some parts:

"On that day that I called, You answered me; the strength of my soul you increased. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You preserve my Life; You are a very Presence as I face my fears and doubts. You guide me as I pray to fulfill my purpose on earth."

I assume that this Psalm or some other scripture will in some similar way be the job description of a new possible pastor. And I hope that our job description will read like some passages I found from baptism and confirmation liturgies:

"I promise to participate in the life and mission of this family of God's people, sharing regularly in worship of God and enlisting in the work of this church as it serves the

community and the world. I remember that I belong to God, and I am beloved. I celebrate the Spirit in us, refreshing, renewing, and making us one.” Amen.