

Deconstructing the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* Webpage: What Kind of Pastor Do Churches Say They Want?

Chris Xenakis

What expectations do United Church of Christ (UCC) congregations that are currently engaged in search-and-call processes have of their prospective ministers? What qualifications are they looking for? Who do they say they want their next pastors to be, and what do they want them to do? And are their expectations realistic given all that we are learning from church scholars and consultants, from organizations like the [Center for Progressive Renewal](#) (CPR), and from the UCC's [Center for Analytics, Research and Data](#) (CARD) about congregations, their ministers, and the rising tides of change that are sweeping society and churches alike?

To begin grappling with these questions, I turned to the [UCC Ministry Opportunities](#) website and examined every listing—some 256 of them, representing 5 percent of the United Church of Christ's 5,117 congregations—posted during the week of February 14-20, 2016. Since I wanted to know what churches say about themselves and their expectations of their future ministers *in their most salient statements*, I only examined the listings and narratives posted on the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* website. I intentionally did not look at any church Facebook pages, websites or profiles. Moreover, my examination was disinterested: I was not engaged in a search process; I was not looking for a new church to serve; and I was not “goin’ fishing”—trolling to see “what was out there”—just in case I found a church that I wanted to have my ministerial profile sent to. Rather, I wanted to learn whatever I could about UCC congregations' expectations of their pastors.

What I came away with was a snapshot of the church—or rather, a snapshot of 256 UCC churches and their ministries—at one particular moment in their history. I do not assume that the listings I reviewed are in any way representative of all UCC congregations.

I will admit at the outset that a certain amount of researcher subjectivity and interpretive bias may be unavoidable in a study such as this—and so, it may be helpful if I reveal what I know of my own bias. I am a white male UCC minister in his mid-60s who considers himself theologically and politically Liberal. I love the United Church of Christ—I embrace its polity and diversity, its united and uniting spirit, its deep-seated commitment to social justice, and the radical, unapologetic Open and Affirming welcome that it extends to all people.

If my words suggest the zeal of a convert, it is because I have traveled a long and convoluted spiritual journey to the United Church of Christ—as many of us have. The short version of my journey includes attending two Baptist seminaries, being ordained in a Conservative Baptist Association of America (CBAA) church in 1979, and serving as pastor of a CBAA congregation in Arizona. I left the CBAA in 1990; that same year, I discovered the UCC and found personal freedom, intellectual honesty, and spiritual vitality. In 1993 I was granted UCC ministerial standing in the Potomac Association of the Central Atlantic Conference. Subsequently, I have

served congregations in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and in Central New York. Currently I am the pastor of Groton Community Church (UCC) in Groton, New York.

After examining the 256 listings on the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* website, I came away with several tentative conclusions:

Church Demography

Many listings on the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* website described churches that are small and/or populated with retirement-aged folks. The narrative of the United Church of Newport, in Newport, Vermont, could have been written by many: “We have an aging congregation, but occasionally [we] attract a young family to come and stay.”

Seventy-eight churches—just over 30 percent of the 256 listings—said that they were looking for part-time pastors. This finding dovetails neatly with the research of church scholars, leaders, and consultants who tell us that in coming years, more and more American Mainline and Progressive Protestant churches, including UCC congregations, will be led by part-time clergy. The immediate explanation for this trend probably has to do with dwindling Sunday morning attendances, fewer and smaller offering plate donations, and shrinking church operating budgets. Broader and more systemic causes of the increase in part time pastorates include demographic shifts and cultural dislocations in American society-at-large. Thus, UCC General Minister and President John Dorhauer attributes congregational decline to lowering birthrates, aging church buildings, and the influence of postmodernism, while UCC Pastor and author Anthony Robinson points to cultural transitions in how Americans think about religion and church attendance as important contributing factors. (See Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* [Chicago: Exploration Press, 2015], pp. 7-14, and Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003], pp. 3-11.)

As increasing numbers of churches list their part-time openings on the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* website, other very small and poor churches may avoid doing so—particularly if they do not want to call new ministers from hundreds or thousands of miles away (and/or if they do not want to pay for such ministers’ moving expenses). Instead, small churches may be content to ask their Conference Staff for the names of a few local retired ministers who can “supply their pulpits” every Sunday.

Despite persuasive arguments by church leaders, including John Dorhauer, that future parish ministry will be increasingly bi-vocational (see *Beyond Resistance*, p. 51), many pastors are reluctant to accept part-time calls which will require them to seek additional employment outside the church. (This antipathy toward bi-vocational ministry is nearly absolute for ordained seminary-trained clergy with M.Div.’s, doctorates, and other advanced degrees.) And no minister I know of is willing to relocate to a distant location, at her or his expense, to accept a part-time call. So I wonder: Might this trending increase in part-time and bi-vocational ministry suggest that a kind of *search-and-call provincialism* or *hodophobia*—a reciprocal reluctance on the part of churches and pastors to travel, or even to search for each other, outside of their established geographical boundaries—will set in among UCC congregations and ministers in the years ahead? Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is already happening.

Of course, larger and more affluent churches with vacant pulpits will always be swamped with profiles from ministers near and far—particularly for well-paying, full-time positions. And in some instances, smaller congregations with modest budgets may also draw interest from newly-retired ministers in distant locations, who are planning to move near such churches in order to be close to grandchildren, and are interested in accepting a part-time pastoral position.

As a measure of church size and vitality, membership figures can be deceptive. Only two or three churches admitted in their narratives that their Sunday morning attendances are small—possibly in the 30-to-60 range—despite claiming memberships in the 200-to-500 range (or higher); nevertheless, I suspect that a great many Mainline and Progressive (including UCC) churches have similarly-stark membership-attendance disparities. Such dramatic variations may reflect church leaders' failure to check on congregants they haven't seen in several years, and/or their disinclination to update their membership lists. They also may reflect a simple desire on the part of congregants who have moved away or become home-bound to remain on their churches' active membership lists. On the other hand, some Mainline/Progressive and UCC churches are redefining or deemphasizing older, traditional conceptions of membership, which may be seen as inherently exclusive, dividing congregants into "insiders" and "outsiders."

Not surprisingly, most Open and Affirming (ONA) churches mentioned, and some emphasized, their ONA status in their listings. In addition, a few non-ONA churches used ONA-sounding language in their narratives, to indicate, for example, that they are "faithful and welcoming," or "open and accepting," or "welcoming to all." I am not certain if, or how, these "non-ONA but welcoming-to-all" churches are affected reputationally by their use of such substitute wording. Are they seen, by their congregants, by their broader communities, and not insignificantly, by the UCC ministers who read their narratives on the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* website, as less welcoming than, or as equally welcoming as, ONA churches? Here's my strong suspicion: Whether these churches realize it or not, their substitute wording does not make them seem inclusive, but rather, functions as a kind of unintended code language, indicating that they are *not* Open and Affirming, and/or that they *disagree* with the affirmation and full inclusion of LGBT people in the life of their congregations.

Nineteen churches—about 7.5 percent of the 256 congregations, a relatively insignificant number—emphasized the historic nature of their buildings in their narratives.

Seventy (about 26 percent) of the 256 churches indicated that they offer a parsonage as part of their compensation package. It is possible that additional churches have parsonages but did not mention their availability because they are in disrepair or are rented out.

In general, parsonages offer several well-known advantages to churches and their ministers. Many pastors like the convenience of living next door to the churches they serve. Parsonages can also be wonderful for young, first-call ministers with children, and for ministers who are disinclined to purchase a home. And congregations like having 24/7 access to their ministers, and having them live in the immediate neighborhood—indeed, right on church property. Moreover, churches that have parsonages can pay their ministers a reduced cash salary.

Negatives to parsonage living can include a heightened experience of the everyday loss of privacy and "goldfish bowl-living" which often attend traditional parish ministry. Churches may prohibit ministers and their family members from smoking inside the parsonage—a personal habit that many of us find unpleasant, but which, in fact, most congregants can indulge in inside

their own homes and apartments. In addition, I have known single ministers who were not allowed to invite someone they were dating, or a romantic partner, to the parsonage as an overnight guest. Churches also may intrude in their ministers' home life by holding Sunday school classes, studies, and business meetings in the parsonage living room; in turn, ministers and their families may find it awkward to complain about such practices, or for that matter, to negotiate repairs and improvements to the parsonage, such as replacing the carpeting or installing a dishwasher. Then too, it often makes economic sense for ministers to buy a house in whatever community they want to live in, and begin building up equity.

Of the 256 listings on the *Ministry Opportunities* website, a prodigious 156, or 61 percent, did not contain any compensation (salary and benefits) information. There may be all sorts of reasons for omitting such data, but in my view they are mostly bad reasons; if final compensation figures are unknown, or if a church wants to base its minister's salary on her or his experience, it should say so, and then list a salary range, which is clearly identified as such. Search committees *should not* assume that ministers do not care about salary information, or that "if a pastoral candidate is really interested in our church, she will dig through our 25-page church profile" to find those compensation figures.

As we might expect, churches in high cost-of-living regions (including large cities, New England, and California) offered the highest compensation packages, with some part-time positions in those locations paying more than full-time pastorates in other regions. Churches in rural America, the Midwest, and the South tended to pay lower salaries.

Traditional vs. Innovative Ministry

The narratives of 28 churches (11 percent of the 256 listings) described exceptional ministries in which leaders and congregants communicate clearly, function effectively, are innovative, and/or are driven passionately and purposefully by the demands of social justice. These churches operate shelter houses, food pantries, community gardens, tutoring programs, and refugee-resettlement ministries for their neighborhoods and villages; some offer free weekly community meals to the public, while others maintain emergency funds that they dispense to community residents who encounter unexpected difficulties; still others offer sanctuary to immigrants. These churches include the Church of the Palms in Sun City, Arizona ("We cover the spectrum theologically and politically; we disagree well and value open communication. Mission/outreach is in our spiritual DNA"); Miami Lakes Congregational UCC in Miami Lakes, Florida ("We are comfortable with emerging challenges facing Christianity and are one of the two town churches performing same-gender marriages. Our desire is to be a regional voice for Progressive Christianity"); Sanctuary UCC in Medford, Massachusetts, which sold its aging building and now operates a storefront ministry in an urban neighborhood; the Cherokee Park United Church in St. Paul, Minnesota ("We give all our members the theological elbowroom to find God. We are committed to being anti-racist and multicultural. We partner with the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community for their annual Wacipi [Pow Wow]. We partner with an El Salvadoran congregation and attend immigration demonstrations at Ramsey County jail"); and Beloved Community Church, Birmingham, Alabama (We "serve as sanctuary for people who have not felt at home in traditional churches").

A far greater number of narratives described traditional UCC congregations with unexceptional or customary worship services, programs, and ministries. While these are good UCC churches with Progressive theologies, their narratives did not distinguish them as among the few most

innovative congregations. Some are not even particularly strong churches. Most seem to be doing very little to engage the Millennial Generation, or to reach out to the thousands of people in their communities who have dropped out of church, and/or say that they have no religious affiliation. A great many of these narratives did not acknowledge even an awareness of the demographic and cultural changes that are rocking the American church. Perhaps, such congregations are satisfied with the way things are—at least for the moment—and don't see any need for transformative ministry. Or perhaps, they are so caught up with their own current problems and decline (which they may attribute, variably, to internal church conflicts; or to former-pastors not meeting their expectations; or to congregants who have lost interest in the church, or moved away, or got older and retired, and/or have gone into a nursing home, and/or died) that they fail to see anything and anyone beyond the walls of their sanctuaries. And they fail to realize that many of their problems stem from broad societal and cultural dislocations that are impacting all congregations.

A minority of small churches (just 10 churches, or 4 percent of the 256 listings) suggested in their narratives that they are clearly happy with who and what they are, and that they are not looking for a revitalization minister, or insisting that their next pastor bring new congregants to the church, and instigate a new program of growth or change. Although we may not understand either the serenity or the apparent passivity of such churches and their leaders (many of these are, after all, declining congregations), there is a lot to be said for knowing who you are, and being at peace with that identity.

God Talk and Spiritualized Language

The narratives of about 30 UCC churches (12 percent of the 256 listings) contained vague language, God-talk, and spiritualized terminology that did little to enhance understanding. For example, an Illinois church noted in its narrative: “We are looking for a ‘leader of leaders’ and a ‘servant of servants.’” Similarly, a Pennsylvania congregation wrote that it wants “a pastor with the leadership qualities of a true Shepherd. Someone who will feed us spiritually....” Another church in Pennsylvania sought “a full-time pastor to lead a congregation through a unifying role in the life of the church.” Meanwhile, a church in Ohio described itself as “a small but mighty church that welcomes everyone. We are eager to grow and to reach to [our] community.” A church in New York City had a simple, one-sentence narrative: “Our congregation is seeking a part-time pastor with a love for neighborhood, ministry, people, and prayer.” A congregation in Wisconsin concluded its narrative with the following words: “The past has made us strong, the present has given us purpose and the future has infinite possibilities.” Another church in Wisconsin noted that it “is seeking a full time pastor ‘to climb the hill with us,’ ... a pastor who can go where she/he is needed and cultivate spiritual growth for our congregation.” And a church in New England said this: “A fresh perspective for this discerning congregation in suburban western Massachusetts is a wonderful opportunity.”

Thirty-three narratives (13 percent of the listings) seemed theologically Conservative and/or Evangelical in tone; some of these churches described themselves, in the words of one Vermont congregation, as “Bible-based” and “Christ-centered,” or said that they were, as a church in Oregon called itself, “spirit-filled”—and insisted that their next pastor must have the same qualities. Many of these churches stated their theological assumptions and expectations openly and bluntly; in the words of one such church in North Carolina: “The church believes that there is no other way to salvation but through belief in Jesus Christ, and that the Bible answers all the basic questions of life.” As might be expected, churches’ theological affirmations influenced their expectations of their next minister. Thus, an Illinois church stated that it was looking for a

woman or man who “will have a strong belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and will not be afraid to proclaim that message” and to “reach others for Christ.” Another church in Virginia expressed “hope that the new pastor will walk spiritually.” She or he should be “a person of God, a person of integrity and of good character.” A Pennsylvania church wanted a minister who “conveys a contagious sense of enthusiasm for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” And a church in New Hampshire sought “a pastor who motivates us to live a Christ-filled life.”

In general, these are all fine expressions and sentiments—but they desperately need to be unpacked. What exactly do they mean? In practical terms, what are “Bible-based,” “Christ-centered,” and “Spirit-filled” churches and congregants like? How are they unique—and what distinguishes them from other churches and Christians? How do they relate to other UCC congregations and to the wider church? What kind of ministries and outreach programs do such churches engage in? Exactly who—and what—are they looking for in their new ministers? What do they want their new pastors to do—and be?

The United Church of Christ is diverse, and we cherish and celebrate our many theological and congregational traditions and expressions. And precisely for that reason, we need to communicate clearly and precisely. My friend, Joanne Lanfier, who is a UCC pastor and a counselor with the Susquehanna Association’s (New York Conference’s) Family Counseling Ministry, says that misunderstandings and miscommunication are rampant between churches and pastors, and often derive from unclear, unstated, and/or poorly-defined expectations. I concur. Church narrative writers should follow the advice of those great philosophers of life, love, and semiotics, the Brothers Gibb, who imparted the following sage advice some forty-five years ago: “It’s only words, and words are all I have to tell you what kind of pastor our church is looking for.” At least, that’s what I think they meant to say.

Churches’ Expectations of their Pastors

Thirty of the 256 churches with listings on the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* website were not looking for pastors or senior pastors; rather, they were seeking interims and associate pastors and had very specific and narrowly-defined expectations and lists of duties for these candidates.

Forty-four listings described church ministries and programs that seemed stale, unimaginative, and/or conventional. Perhaps not surprisingly, the expectations that many of these churches had of their next pastor were equally traditional and tedious, focusing almost exclusively on preaching, conducting Bible studies, being a Godly role model, working with children and youth, and visiting the sick, the elderly, and lapsed congregants, as well as active and potential members.

Seven churches—about 2.5 percent of the 256 congregations—admitted that they had experienced conflict with their previous pastor.

The vast majority of the 256 narratives contained at least some discussion of pastoral expectations, and most of these suggested that congregations want their next pastor to preach relevant and “thought-provoking” sermons that draw people to church. Some churches added that the new minister’s sermons need to be “Bible-based.” Using an athletic metaphor, St. Stephens UCC of Perkasio, Pennsylvania said that it wants “an enthusiastic pastor who is much like a coach with a team of gifted players.” Other churches said that they want their new minister

to attract new congregants and new dollars—in effect, to function as a kind of Pied Piper who will go out into the community and lead people (along with their wallets!) back into the church.

In addition, churches said that they want their next pastor to be an openly friendly, caring, and happy person who: is accepting of the ideas of others; conducts meaningful worship services; has great integrity and reliability; values family and a strong work ethic; demonstrates compassion, spirituality, acceptance, and equality; recognizes the traditions and history of the church; is emotionally secure; is a helpful and confidential counselor; is passionate about her or his calling to serve; inspires others through scriptural teachings and personal example; and is “technologically savvy.”

After reading such statements, the potential pastor may be left wondering how to prioritize a church’s expectations of her or him. Which qualifications, traits, and responsibilities are non-negotiable—the violation of which is sure to damage the pastor’s relationship to her or his congregation? Which expectations are important but negotiable? Which are of secondary or tertiary importance? How can the pastor know that she or he is meeting the church’s expectations, and doing a good job?

Indeed, many of the 256 church narratives had such lengthy and demanding lists of pastoral expectations that I despaired of ever reading one that said, “We expect our next pastor to be human. We do not expect her or him to be Joan of Arc or St. Paul. We want next pastor to do her or his best, and not work more than 50 hours per week. Our next pastor will make mistakes. We don’t expect her or him to be a master entertainer, story-teller, or stand-up comedian. Nor are we looking for a spellbinding teacher or preacher. And we don’t expect our next pastor to bring new congregants and new dollars into the church—that’s everybody’s job—the whole congregation’s.” Perhaps not surprisingly, I never did read such a narrative.

Fifty-six churches (22 percent of the 256 listings) stated or implied that or one of their highest priorities is to begin a formal program of renewal or revitalization. A similar number—58 churches—suggested that they were looking for pastors with the requisite skills, personalities, and traits to kick-start and drive such a process of revitalization. Such pastors would be possessed of strong leadership and entrepreneurial gifts and graces, and would know how to frame, articulate, and inspire visions that will excite congregations and stimulate numerical church growth.

Strikingly, a number of churches said that they want a pastor who can facilitate change and innovation while simultaneously respecting their most cherished traditions. Typical was a church in Wisconsin which asked in its narrative: “Are you willing to work with people who are traditional but look forward to new ideas? ... Our members value tradition yet are open to new possibilities.” A church in Indiana noted, “We are seeking someone whose mission is to grow our church while maintaining traditions.” And another church in Connecticut said, “This spiritual leader should be energetic, creative, and full of ideas while supporting the traditions of the church.” Now this sounds like a nice, best-of-both-worlds compromise, but it may be a circle that is impossible to square. I don’t know if any minister can be both a change agent *and* the guardian of church tradition! Churches with such expectations may be playing semantical games, and setting both themselves and their new ministers up for failure.

The Narratives

Many of the narratives on the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* website were serviceable, but could have been improved by a good editor or writer with a sharp red pencil. Obviously, churches and Search Committees can, but do not always, avail themselves of the talent of such creative and gifted writers.

Many narratives tried to do too many things at once. They offered extensive descriptions of the church's geographical setting, and they extolled its natural attractions. They praised the communities and neighborhoods surrounding the church's building, and they told of amazing schools, hospitals, and shopping centers less than a mile away. They elaborated on the church's historic building, its wonderful choirs and music ministry, and its excellent dish-to-pass luncheons. They celebrated the church's educational programs, outreach ministries, fundraising events, and many other successes (while often, omitting any mention of the church's problems). And they explained, often at great length, just what kind of pastor the church was looking for, and what her or his duties would be.

Happily, some church leaders skipped much of this hoopla, and wrote crisp, positive, and inviting narratives that focused on their churches' distinctives. Protracted touristy descriptions of "all the things to see and do, that are not far from the church" were left to realtors and Chamber of Commerce websites; similarly, discussions of pastoral duties and expectations, which can make narratives overbearing and unintentionally negative in tone, were carefully-worded and condensed—or omitted entirely. Narrative writers should keep in mind that their purpose is to provide the most important information about their churches, using active, vivid, and succinct language, in such a way that ministers will want to come back later and re-read the narrative, and then will be motivated to read the lengthier and more detailed church profile.

Some narratives suffered from a different problem: They were skimpy three- or four-line postcard blurbs that said virtually nothing about the church, its ministries, or what kind of pastor the congregation is looking for. Such narratives left me wondering, "Gosh, is there nothing interesting that you can tell me about your church?"

There may be really good news and really bad news in all of this. The good news is that, because a number of narratives did not receive the careful editing they deserved, many of the 256 churches are probably more amazing and wonderful centers of ministry, inspiration, and spirituality than their narratives indicate. The bad news is that ministers who are not already familiar with these congregations may skim their narratives, get discouraged by what they read, cross those churches off their list—and never discover how truly wonderful they really are.

Church leaders and Search Committee members may think of narrative-writing as mind-numbing scut work that should be done quickly and gotten over with. But they should take their time, and write carefully and thoughtfully.

The reason these thumbnail narratives are so important is that they are the first statements, and the most salient statements, that ministers will read about the churches they are considering. Indeed, the *UCC Ministry Opportunities* website is the "gateway" to ministry in the United

Church of Christ. Sure, ministers can glean a lot more information from church profiles, but the first inkling they get that a position has come open will likely be on this site.

Two More Things That I Liked Very Much

I liked the [Center for Progressive Renewal](#) “listing” which encourages ministers to consider becoming new church planters and developers, and to take new church planter training. As the listing notes, “there may be no money in [such ministry], no building, [and] no glamour. But what there is can be blessed and [can] multiply. Christ invites us to shape new relationships of faith in community.”

I also liked the short statement that the Iowa Conference attaches at the end of every one of its churches’ narratives, indicating that ministers who accept calls to Iowa churches “will find support in Iowa Conference Covenant Communities for Pastoral Excellence, and in a robust program of intentional mentoring and peer support for young first-call pastors.” Hopefully, all 39 UCC Conferences will find ways to provide such connections and assistance to their ministers; all ministers—not just young first-call pastors—need peer support and collegial collaboration.

Conclusions

I was favorably impressed by the sheer quantity and quality of faithful ministry, service to neighborhoods and communities, and advocacy on behalf of important causes, that I read about in nearly all of the 256 listings, representing large, medium, small, and tiny UCC churches throughout the United States. Several listings were downright exciting to read! Virtually all churches tried to emphasize their distinctiveness or the most favorable aspects of their ministries, buildings, congregations, communities, and local geography.

Indeed, although I was not looking for a new church in which to serve (and I did not ask to have my ministerial profile sent to any of these 256 congregations), I found 25 to 30 churches remarkably compelling. My reaction, upon reading these listings, was, “Gosh! I’d like to serve there!” I was genuinely attracted to the creativity and innovation of these churches’ ministries, the depth of their social justice outreach, and the concreteness and passion with which their narratives were written.

I came away from this study with a fresh appreciation for the diversity within the United Church of Christ. Some of our congregations are very Progressive or Liberal; others are traditional, Conservative, and even quasi-Evangelical. Some are Open and Affirming; others are still discerning whom they will welcome and how enthusiastically. I came away with a renewed understanding of UCC churches as small and large; rural, suburban, and urban; multicultural and monocultural; multi-staffed, staffed by a single full-time pastor, and led by part-time or “pulpit supply” clergy. And I came away believing that all localized expressions of the United Church of Christ are equally valid—what’s important in the search-and-call process is that a good fit takes place between congregations and pastors.

But I also came away with questions. How will the traditional ministries and expectations that several congregations wrote about in their narratives square with the reality of demographic, cultural, and social change? Admittedly, churches in America’s “heartland”—in Iowa and

Nebraska and Kansas, in rural Missouri and Pennsylvania—may not be facing the severe cultural dislocations that urban and suburban churches on the West and East Coasts are experiencing—at least, not yet. “Traditional” ministry may still work in such places, more or less. Even so, the American “heartland” is not hermetically isolated from the broader American culture. Even rural folks in Montana and New Mexico watch CNN and HBO. Even rural congregants in Oklahoma, West Virginia, and South Carolina go to the movies, shop at the mall, have Internet service, and take vacations in Hawaii and Europe. Rural churchgoers are fairly sophisticated (even if they describe themselves as “simple country folks”), and I suspect that the American “heartland” is not as isolated from the floodwaters of social and cultural change as we might think.

Similarly, how will UCC churches that lean Conservative or even Evangelical respond to cultural and social change? Let me explain what I am asking.

Like classical political conservatism, theological conservatism is concerned with preserving the traditions, social and religious institutions, and moral ethos of the past. Conservative and Evangelical churches seem to have an inherent interest in retaining biblical tradition, and in holding on to what they consider to be the best hymns, worship practices, and teachings of the past. Many such churches care about stability and continuity, and seem to define themselves in terms of their opposition, and unwillingness to accommodate themselves, to change. Yet one of the surest hallmarks of the cultural dislocations that churches are experiencing today is that the old tried-and-true church growth techniques and methods that used to work—Bring-A-Friend-to-Church campaigns, Firefighters’ and Police Officers’ Sundays, and “How to Grow Your Sunday School” programs—no longer do. This tells me that Conservative and Evangelical churches have big a problem when it comes to dealing with change.

What is needed in many churches is more than just a new pastor. What is needed are new ways of interacting with congregants, with the Millennial Generation, with the community-at-large, and with the broader culture.

My friend, Joanne Lanfier, who is wise, says that pastor-congregation relationships are a lot like marriages. I would extend her analogy and suggest that the search-and-call process has a lot in common with the elaborate courtship and mating rituals of both humans and animal species. Ministers and churches try, and often go to great lengths, to present their best and most appealing selves to each other, in an effort to win each other’s approval and love, and form a mutually nurturing partnership. And unfortunately, as in marriage, a significant number of pastors and congregations find themselves in unhappy unions and “break up” after a few years together. Surveys conducted by the [Barna Group](#) show that the average tenure of ministers in Mainline churches today is about four years.

Joanne’s marriage analogy and the Barna research raise intriguing questions for further study: When churches and pastors introduce themselves to each other, what aspects of themselves do they reveal and emphasize? What do they conceal? How can we encourage greater transparency and open communication in ministers’ and congregations’ earliest interactions with each other? How can we help churches and pastors listen more carefully to, and think harder about, what they are hearing from each other? Might there be a better way to do search-and-call—perhaps a way that invites ministers and churches to “live together” for a while and get to know each other in a more relaxed manner, before they “tie the knot”?

Finally, my examination of these 256 listings confirmed the findings of *CARD*'s June 2015 [UCC Congregational Vitality and Ministerial Excellence Report](#), which suggested that a great many churches are looking for strong entrepreneurial-type leaders and innovators, and for revitalization pastors (whether or not they actually use the word, "revitalization" in their listings). But the *CARD* survey of UCC congregations, on which the June 2015 Report is based, also revealed a widespread sense among congregations that their ministers (and perhaps, by extension, that the vast majority of UCC ministers) *lack* such leadership and entrepreneurial skills and traits! How will this mismatch work itself out? Will pastors be able to "learn" leadership and entrepreneurial skills "on the job," or through continuing education, or by reading books, or by attending a pastors' retreat here and there? Are pastors and churches "marrying" each other with their fingers crossed, hoping that their new partners in ministry are, or will become, what they need and hope for?

In this connection, it would be fascinating to conduct a survey of UCC ministers to learn what kind of churches and ministry environments they are searching for. What expectations do ministers have of their churches? What do they want, and hope, that their current and future congregants and church leaders will be—and do? How do churches' and ministers' expectations of each other match up? And in what ways do they not match up?



Rev. Chris Xenakis is a UCC pastor currently serving Groton Community Church (UCC) in Central New York. In addition, he is an adjunct lecturer at SUNY-Cortland, teaching courses on world politics, democracy, U.S. foreign policy, and multiculturalism. Chris has written numerous books and articles, which can be found on his [blog](#).