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**INTERVIEWING FOR AN INTERIM-TIME CALL? CONTRACT
OR AGREEMENT: WHAT WORD DO YOU USE?**

Updated August 5, 2015
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INTERVIEWING FOR AN INTERIM-TIME CALL? CONTRACT OR AGREEMENT: WHAT WORD DO YOU USE?

Check me on this: what word do you and Call Committees say most often to refer to the process of preparing, interviewing, negotiating, and accepting (or extending) an interim-time call? You say “contract,” don’t you? And if, by chance, you use another word, are you or the Call Committee thinking “contract?” You are, aren’t you? If so, stop! Step away from the “C” word. It has no place in your conversation and no role in the outcome. Worse, it’s generally understood intent works at cross-purpose with Practitioner and Congregation’s desires because “contracts” are principally about things, not relationships - about finitude and certainty, not curiosity and possibility - and about Law, not Grace. The word we use to describe the call process matters. Merriam-Webster Online says,

Contract:

“a binding agreement between two or more persons or parties”

“a business arrangement for the supply of goods or services at a fixed price”

“a document describing the terms of a contract”

(Merriam-Webster Online, An Encyclopedia Britannica Company)

I’ve another word. It’s a word you know and it’s a word that I use to describe the *call process*. It is the word that titles the document that the Interim-time congregation and I sign: *Agreement*. Step into this word. *Agreement*. It opens, invites and takes all the time it needs.

- *Agreement* describes the work we must do with ourselves in preparation for an interview conversation
- *Agreement* holds and frames the conversation with the Call Committee
- *Agreement* describes Practitioner/Congregation relationship and it signals the way they will enter Interim-time work

Agreement:

“harmony of opinion, action, or character”

“an arrangement as to a course of action”

“a contract duly executed and legally binding”

(Merriam-Webster Online, An Encyclopedia Britannica Company)

The word we use to describe and name our process matters! Agreement invites Interim-time Practitioners and Congregation to make something

together. Agreement-making begins with one crucial and essential question: *"How may I help?"* Here are two reasons why this question matters. *"How may I help?"* first of all creates clarity of purpose regarding one's personal relational life. Next, this questions provides vocational clarity or reaffirmation. Ask the question this way: *"How may I help myself?"*

This self-reflective question gives pause. Interim-time work is near completion. Farewells are done; goodbyes are said. You are (heading) home. Ask, *"How may I help myself?"*

- What spiritual and emotional boundaries do I need to honor before I prepare to speak to a Call Committee?
- Do I need a month or two to rest and rejuvenate? Do I have enough financial savings to bridge from now to then? Do I need to immediately generate income?
- Do my family or friends need me within driving distance or flying distance?
- What signal events are ahead? Do I have medical matters to attend to? Do I have caregiver obligations?

Jesus of Nazareth went, so the Christian scriptures say, to a quiet place, alone, to pray. Steward yourself. Take a breath. Settle your heart and mind about intimate and deeply personal family stuff.

Next, clarify or reaffirm your vocational identity. Take a reality check. Deep in your bones how do you vocationally think of yourself?

- Are you an Intentional Interim minister?
- Are you a Settled pastor doing interim ministry?
- Are you a priest-in-charge or transitional minister (to use two current titles) with expectation of regularizing your Interim-time assignment to a settled call?
- Did you (or will you) use Interim-time ministry to discern vocational clarity?
- Did you (or will you) say "yes" largely because you have been asked to serve...or because you have few other options?

Today's Congregations are often unsure and unclear about the true nature of Interim-time. Agreement-making, asking "how may I help?" is predicated on your vocational clarity. A Congregation's vocational clarity, one of the signal outcomes during Interim-time ministry, needs "harmony of opinion, action, [and] character." The Apostle Paul reminds the church that some are called to teach, others to administrate, others to preach...

Know your vocational self. Know what you are and what you seek. Know what you need and how you approach interim-time ministry.

Having answered "*how may I help myself?*" Agreement-making asks: *How may I help you?* This deceptively simple question frames Practitioner and Congregational mutual inquiry. It says: we are not making a contract, but collaborating on an *Agreement*. How will you know if this is so?

I was two months into an Interim-time call and found myself feeling at turns bored and overwhelmed, exhausted and energized, distracted, focussed, connected and disengaged. Something felt "off." I felt out of step with the Congregation and Leadership concurred: they felt out of step with me. There is always catch-up once work begins, of course. Agreement-making expects adjustment and renegotiation. This time something else was going on. We were not on the same page. I was operating out of *Agreement*. The Congregation was operating out of *contract*. Not good.

Dan Ariely works as the James B Duke Visiting Professor of Behavioral Economics at Duke University. In the Harvard Business Review: The Magazine, he wrote about contracts, where he distinguished between "complete" and "incomplete" or "handshake" contracts. Complete contracts are most useful when addressing things, ...

"When we use complete contracts as a basis for working together, we take away flexibility, reasonableness, and understanding...." (March 2011, HBR, Dan Ariely, *In Praise of the Handshake*)

Congregations and their leaders, with some Practitioners, picture their relationship as one resembling a medical model / expert – solution world-view. In this world, *contract* makes sense. Contracts are precise and prescriptive. They leave no room for wiggle unless written so. Contracts say what they mean and mean what they say: no more, no less. They presume expertise and exactitude; they make promises, establish obligations and name consequences. *Agreement* depends upon what Edgar Schein calls "humble inquiry."

"...we must become better at asking and do less telling in a culture that overvalues telling" writes Edgar Schein in his introduction to *Humble Inquiry*.... "What we choose to ask, when we ask, what our underlying attitude is as we ask-all are key to relationship building, to communication, and to task performance." (pg, 3,4 Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry*, 2013. Kindle Edition)

Agreement-making...

begins with mutuality: everyone has expertise; everyone has wisdom.

- Are Practitioner and Congregation compatible?
- Do your theological and worldview perspectives find common ground?
- Will your emotional and spiritual temperaments feel revered and honored?
- Can you get along? Can you be yourself?

Agreement-making...

makes plain hopes and dreams, honors people and material resources, and makes grace space for prayerful discernment.

- "How may I help?"
- "How will I receive help?"

Agreement-making...

insists all stakeholders are essential.

- Does the Judicatory have a principle role?
- Are the matriarchs and patriarchs in the conversation?
- Does the loyal opposition have a voice?
- Are the financial influencers in the room?
- In what way are members, friends and the public invested and heard?

Agreement-making...

means taking time to form consensus on the issues that seem to matter and taking time to name the issues that really matter.

- Does the process feel rushed?
- Are issues raised and attended to?
- Does Agreement-making feel like Contract-making?
- Are Practitioner and Leadership taking enough time and space to prepare well?
- Does prayerful discernment undergird the process?

Agreement-making...

means Practitioners say plainly whether they can *help*, and when they know they can, to name without equivocation what they need to serve well.

- What compensation and benefits are essential and non-negotiable?
- What congregational support, including such eventualities as outside consultation, are essential and non-negotiable?

Agreement-making...

organically leads to practical, realistic benchmarks and the financial, material and people resources that necessarily see them through.

- is Practitioner and Leadership prepared for *this* interim-time work on *this* interim-time schedule with *this* interim-time budget and *these* people resources?
- Have Leadership and Practitioner named who and what is needed to start and join well?
- When polity includes a congregational vote to call the Interim-time Practitioner, what steps and process will achieve informed consensus ... not only about the choice of Practitioner but for the scope of the Agreement?

Agreement-making, at its best, creates grace space for both Practitioner and Congregation's mutual discernment. As you prepare for your next call, ask: "How may I help?"