



Member Services cultivates relationships and a feedback-rich environment with Unity ministries and leaders. Through leading-edge services and resources, we collectively prosper and evolve in spiritual community.

## Minister Succession Process

Many Unity ministries utilize trained consultants to work with their congregation during a transitional period. Usually this consultant begins work after a minister leaves, conducts transitional processes with the congregation, assists the search team in getting started with finding a new minister, and leaves before the new minister arrives.

In some situations, a minister succession process is more appropriate. In such a process, there is no intentional transitional period between ministers. Rather, the minister is followed directly by a successor.

Successions may occur:

- With an associate minister being groomed for the role over a period of time.
- With a new minister being selected by the search team, while the minister is still in place and the new minister coming in and being mentored by the outgoing minister for a short period of time (as little as two weeks, or as much as 6 months).
- With a new minister arriving just after the previous minister departs.

In *Transitional Ministry Today*, Anthony B Robinson identifies ten critical factors to make such a succession effective. We advise you to consider these factors honestly and make a thoughtful assessment of where you stand. If any of them is missing, a succession plan is probably not right for your ministry. Please also understand that this does not mean that there is something “wrong” with your ministry or your leadership. It is simply an indication that some conscious transitional work would be a better option for you.

These 10 critical factors are:

1. **The ministry is healthy:** There is vitality in the ministry and an absence of serious or chronic conflict. It is important here not to confuse stability or being on a plateau with communal health. Some questions to ask yourselves are:
  - a. Is there an aliveness to our Sunday morning experience? Is there a sense of joyful expectation as we come together?

- b. Do we have at least one program that we are recognized for in the larger community? A program that is touching people and transforming their lives?
  - c. Do we, as a spiritual community, manage conflict well? Do we embrace it as an opportunity to grow, and work through it intentionally and constructively?
  - d. Do we have growth in membership, attendance, giving? Are newer people becoming engaged and stepping into leadership?
  - e. Do we have strong lay leaders who are emotionally and spiritually mature and who can relate to challenges in a conscious, non-anxious manner?
  - f. Do people love this ministry? Are they enthusiastic about it? Do they share this ministry with others?
2. **The ministry has experienced constant evolutionary change.** Robinson describes evolutionary change in this way: “Many of the strongest churches are strong because they are continuously evaluating their ministry and mission and making changes as they go. They are familiar with change. They are accustomed to significant change. They expect it. They like it. Moreover, such congregations experience change as evolutionary, not revolutionary. That is, changes feel like next steps. They may be challenging and demanding. But they are continuous, not discontinuous, with the nature and mission of the church.”
3. **The outgoing minister is able to be open to and allow planning/lead time for the impending change.** Ministry succession requires an open conversation between the outgoing minister and the board, lay leadership and the congregation. It also requires time (at least a year) of successional planning. This is especially important in larger ministries with more complexity.
4. **The outgoing minister is mature, manages his/her ego well, and is desirous of making the succession work.** For a succession plan to work, the outgoing minister needs to transition out cleanly and consciously. It is advisable for the minister to process this transition with a counselor, colleague or UWM representative. Here are some things for him/her to honestly consider:
- a. How good are my boundaries? Am I willing and able to let go and surrender my responsibility to this ministry and the people in my congregation?
  - b. Do I have some clarity about what I am going to and some excitement about the next steps of my journey?
  - c. Do I believe that my work here is complete?
  - d. Am I willing and able to publicly support and bless my successor?
5. **The incoming minister is mature, manages his/her ego well, and is desirous of making the succession work.** This most likely means that the incoming minister has some experience in the field, rather than being newly ordained. He/she needs to see his/her work as building on the work of others, standing on their shoulders. Again, it is advisable for the incoming minister to discuss this with a counselor, colleague or UWM representative. The incoming minister must be able to:

- a. Comfortably speak about the predecessor in positive ways.
  - b. Allow congregational members to speak about the predecessor with appreciation without feeling threatened or uncomfortable.
  - c. Be willing and able to publicly affirm work of previous minister, bless his/her work, and invite him/her to be present and engaged for appropriate events.
6. **There is a good match between the outgoing and incoming minister theologically and in approach to ministry.** Obviously there will be differences between the two individuals, but such differences should seem like a progression or evolutionary step forward. It is also important that the two individuals have a genuine respect and affection for each other.
7. **The congregation understands the succession plan and buys into it.** This entails that the congregational leadership have looked at different options for this time of transition, have selected a succession process and communicated with the congregation about the secession plan including the reasons they chose this plan and the advantages and risks involved.
8. **There is discussion and clarity about what outgoing minister's role and expectations will be before he/she departs.** A succession plan is a wonderful way for an outgoing minister and an incoming minister to be intentional about how the outgoing minister will interact with congregational members after he/she leaves—and to communicate this clearly before he/she leaves. This is especially important if he/she will be remaining in the area.
9. **The outgoing minister prepares for the incoming minister.** This is an opportunity for the outgoing minister to support the ongoing health, vitality and success of the ministry after his/her departure. Some key steps they can take include:
- a. Assigning someone to train, orient and answer questions for the incoming minister. If there is an overlap period in which both ministers are present, the outgoing minister can assume this role. If not, it might be an administrator or lay leader.
  - b. If there is a staff member who is difficult or whose work is under par, this is a good time to assist them in leaving.
  - c. If there are associate ministers or licensed teachers in the ministry, the outgoing minister can help them shift their allegiance to the new minister and understand that they are not the lead minister.
  - d. Introducing the new minister to leaders and associates in the larger community.
10. **The incoming minister is an effective speaker.**

Please contact UWM's Member Services Department for assistance in creating a succession plan that works for you. Email Cynthia Vermillion-Foster, Member Services Director, at [Cynthia@unity.org](mailto:Cynthia@unity.org).