

Case Study for Religious Professionals and UUMA Guests at Good Offices Training and Continuing Education Day

As you work through the case, pay attention to the impact identity (your own and that of the parties to the conflict) has upon your assessment of the case and the guidance you offer.

Adam, a UUMA member, calls his local Good Officer. He explains his concern:

Adam is a parish minister, in his 4th year serving solo in a medium-sized congregation.

- He is a cis-gendered male, white, in his 30's, married to a woman.
- He supervises four senior staff: DRE, Administrative Director, Music Director, Membership Coordinator

Bethany is a DRE in her 2nd year serving the congregation Adam serves.

- She is a cis-gendered female, African American, single, in her late 20's.
- She is a church member; she was raised in the church by the parents who adopted her, Chris and Deb.

Chris and Deb are long-time church members and both are former Board members.

Adam has just received an email from Bethany, cc to Ellen.

Ellen is a LREDA Good Officer and DRE in a nearby UU congregation.

Bethany asks to meet with Adam, with Ellen present. She wishes to discuss Adam's relationship with her and his behavior toward her, which she feels constitutes sexual harassment.

Adam acknowledges to his Good Officer that:

- Bethany's performance as DRE has been of concern to him
- Bethany is sexually attractive to him

Adam asks advice from his Good Officer:

- What should be his direct response to Bethany's email?
- Are there other responses (involving other persons), he should consider?

How do you, as a Good Officer, handle this first call?

What questions do you ask?

What counsel do you offer?

How do you think about what accountability means in this case?

After you have worked the case, think about the case again assuming different identities for the minister and DRE. Imagine that the minister is a Latina lesbian in her 30's and the DRE is a white young adult in her mid 20's. What difference, if any, does the differing identities make in how you understand the dynamics and how you approach your work?

Case Study for New Good Officers

As you work through the case, pay attention to the impact identity (your own and that of the parties to the conflict) has upon your assessment of the case and the guidance you offer.

Joe (who is white, cis-gender, straight and in his late 60's) retired after 25 years of ministry in the congregation and was the much beloved senior minister for most of those years. Joe is staying in the home that has been his family home for decades, and he and his wife Lois are both very involved in the larger civic community. Lois founded a longstanding small group in the church with which she intends to remain very active in Joe's retirement.

Michael (who is black, cis-gender, gay and in his 30's) arrives as the Interim Minister. Michael is newly fellowshiped and his call is to interim ministry; he hopes to become an Accredited Interim Minister in time. Michael knows Joe's reputation among colleagues in the area and in the UUMA, so he immediately pursues a conversation about a covenant with Joe. Joe expresses willingness to talk, yet when they do, Joe makes clear that he has no intention of minimizing his involvement with congregants, many of whom are friends with whom he and Lois have raised their families, and with whom they still socialize regularly. Joe states no intention to pursue mischief within the congregation, just a desire to remain friends with those who are dear. Joe also explains that he thinks it would be an affront to ask Lois to remove herself from her small group, because it was not she who left (or intended to leave) the church. Michael wants to trust Joe's boundaries, but also knows a covenant is needed. Michael calls you for help in figuring out how to get to a covenant between himself and Joe.

How do you, as a Good Officer, handle this first call?
What questions do you ask?
What counsel do you offer?
How do you think about what accountability means in this case?

Thanks, in part, to your work, Michael and Joe have a covenant to which you believe they have both agreed. However, the very next week after which the covenant was supposedly finalized, you get a call from Michael, who has received distressed emails from prominent church members. They want to know why Michael is "banning Joe from the church" and they are concerned that this is "especially unfair and cruel given Lois' health concerns." Michael is very upset. He tells you the only people he has spoken with so far regarding the covenant are the members of the Board of Trustees, and that this is the first he is hearing of Lois' health concerns.

How do you approach this call?
What questions do you ask?
What counsel do you offer?

Have your thoughts about accountability in this case shifted at all?

After you have worked the case, think about the case again assuming different identities for the retired and interim minister. Imagine that the retired minister is a white, straight, married woman who is experiencing early symptoms of dementia and that the interim minister is white, non-binary, and queer. What difference, if any, does the differing identities make in how you understand the dynamics and how you approach your work?

Case Study for Experienced Good Officers

As you work through the case, pay attention to the impact identity (your own and that of the parties to the conflict) has upon your assessment of the case and the guidance you offer.

Alex (who is white, cis-gender, straight and in his late 40's) is a minister of long standing who is known for great preaching, presence, and for growing a congregation immensely over a short time. Colleagues and congregants alike admire the great stories and illustrations in sermons and forward them regularly to friends and family members. Alex calls you because he has been asked to attend a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees due to "serious concerns" they need to share with him. Alex asked the board chair to describe the concerns ahead of time so he could be prepared, but all the board chair would say was that the concerns are of an ethical nature and that the details would be shared with him at the meeting. Alex is clearly stressed and already defensive.

How do you approach this call?

What questions do you ask?

What counsel do you offer?

How do you think about what accountability means in this case?

Alex calls you after the meeting to give you an update. One of the members of the congregation accused him of plagiarism. The board chair brought a printed copy of one of Alex's recent sermons to the meeting, along with a printed copy of a colleague's sermon that had been published on line a few years prior. The sermon Alex preached had the same personal story as that of his colleague, word for word. Alex acknowledged that he had used his colleagues' story and told you what he told the Board Executive Committee – this wasn't intentional plagiarism but rather sloppy work. He meant to cite the story, which he had found while he was researching, but he just forgot. Alex acknowledges that he has been under a lot of pressure in his ministry and in his personal life and he has made some mistakes, as a consequence. Alex is hoping you can help him figure out how to make things right with the Board Executive Committee.

How do you approach this call?

What questions do you ask?

What counsel do you offer?

Have your thoughts about accountability in this case shifted at all?

Several weeks later you get another call from Alex who is more distraught than ever. Alex tells you that someone from the board must have talked to someone at the UUA because a complaint has been filed against him. He has been asked to respond in writing to the complaint, and he doesn't know what to do. After reassuring Alex that you will help and coaching him to help him find his center, you ask if he will share a copy of the complaint with you. You also ask if you can consult with Congregational Life staff. Alex agrees to both requests. When you read the complaint, you learn that Alex is being accused of plagiarizing many colleagues' stories and, sometimes, entire sermons. Before talking with Alex again, you reach out to Congregational Life staff. In that call, you learn that the Board Chair of the congregation has already been in touch with Congregational Life Staff about how they should go about a negotiated resignation with Alex. When you call Alex back, he tells you that the board wants him to go, but he thinks he should be allowed to stay at least until the complaint with the UUA is fully resolved.

How do you approach this call?

What questions do you ask?

What counsel do you offer?

What are you thinking about accountability now?

How do you think you would work with Alex in the negotiated resignation process?

After you have worked the case, think about the case again assuming different identities for the minister. Imagine that the minister is Asian American and that the other identities described remain the same. What difference, if any, does the differing identity make in how you understand the dynamics and how you approach your work?