

Rethinking Transitional Ministry

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“The irony is that some specialists in transitional ministry are having a hard time making a transition,” says Dr. Jim McFayden, Professor of Ministry and Leadership Development at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. He is not alone in saying that it is time to rethink how denominations, churches and intentional interim ministers do transitional ministry within twenty-first century realities.

The standard practice of interim ministry is now three decades old and much has changed in our churches and culture during that time. Therefore it’s worth reviewing what the practice has been, where we are seeing push back, and where fresh thinking and new models of interim or transitional ministry are being tried.

Current Practices

In 1976 Loren Mead of the Alban Institute presented a paper at the Association of Religion and Applied Behavioral Sciences entitled, “The Interim Pastor: A Neglected Role in Parish Development.” In his research among churches in transition, Mead found that the “in between time” was one of the most fertile times for congregational development. The next two years brought a flurry of publications following up Mead’s insights and Alban began to assemble a team to study the question further. The result was a paradigm of change revolving around a series of “developmental tasks,” which remain the backbone of much interim ministry training.

The Interim Ministry Network (IMN) hung out its shingle in June of 1981. What began as a group of denominational executives and ministers has today grown to be a professional organization with a membership of over 1,300 Christian and Jewish clergy

from a twenty-five to thirty denominations across the nation. The Network provides training, referrals, standards and credentialing, publications, and consulting.

Much has changed since IMN was launched thirty-five years ago. American society is far more religiously diverse and driven by rapid shifts in technology, dividing us into little interest groups and “market shares.” Sharp divisions in our politics and public discourse have heightened incivility in our public life and this has spilled into churches. Denominational loyalty is now a non-factor in choosing a church. A new category of religious practice, “None,” is in ascendancy and increasingly people are “spiritual but not religious.” Events, programs, banners, mailings, posters—the old “attractional” model of church growth-- no longer bring in new members as they once did. Long past are the days when all churches had to do was open their doors and people would wander in. These changes impact not only transitional ministry, but all ministry—making all clergy, in a sense, transitional ministers.

In the midst of this new reality, it is worth asking how interim ministry needs to re-shape itself? These past four months I have spoken to several dozen interim pastors, teachers of interim pastors, judicatory executives, and consultants in seven denominations to sound them out about their perceptions of what is going on and needs to happen. There’s a lot of creative talk abuzz. The existing model has served the mainline church well for three decades, but it is clear that new models and methods need to be explored. One size does not fit all.

The current training focuses on two parallel tracks: five process tasks that the interim minister should address and five developmental tasks that are the work of the congregation. First, the interim must enter the emotional and organizational life of the

church connecting with lay leaders and pew sitters. The second is analyzing the system by figuring out the folk-ways, how things are done, where the *de facto* leadership lies. Once this is done, the interim connects with the community and denomination accessing resources and looking for ministry opportunities. Fourth, the interim discerns his or her priorities for the work ahead during a narrow time-frame. Lastly, as the pastor learns more about the context of ministry and the congregation she evaluates and adjusts the ministry tasks.

The congregation has its own work as well, which is often done with a Transition Team. They must *Come to terms with their history*, including times of termination, conflict, and grief as well as flourishing. They should *Discover a new identity*, asking, “Who are we? What are our core values? What’s our purpose?” The interim time allows for *Changes in leadership*, helping people develop skills or reworking old personnel policies. Many churches also use the interim time to *Rethink and renew linkages* with the local church’s denominational heritage. The last step is *Committing to new directions in ministry* by preparing for a new pastor putting together a contract and settling finances, building support systems, setting out clear expectations and having plans for the future.

Critiques and Push Back

Several of the people I talked to have questioned some of these current practices citing examples of untrained interim ministers or a rigid application of the Five Developmental Tasks without taking into account the context of the congregation. Anthony B. Robinson, a seasoned United Church of Christ pastor, author and consultant has recommended that “Tall Steeple” churches, in particular, might consider

a “succession” model where the newly called pastor overlaps the outgoing pastor so the church does not lose momentum. Michael Piazza of the Center for Progressive Renewal suggests that we need two kinds of interim ministers: a healer for congregations recovering from the trauma of a natural disaster, clergy betrayal or serious conflict, and an entrepreneur who can lead a congregation to renewal stressing that not only a change of pastors needs to take place but a change in church culture. Others wonder if interim pastors should be more than being a “non-anxious” presence to coax churches out of their lethargy. Still others wonder if interim ministry is a place for mediocre pastors who can’t make it in settled ministry.

Some of the criticism has focused on the five tasks themselves. But as Terry Foland, a Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) interim minister who was part of the movement’s birth thirty-five years ago notes, “They have never been static.” He reported that the Interim Ministry Network has reviewed the tasks three times in the past three decades. In the 1980s they added a strong “family systems” component after the work of Edwin Friedman and Peter Steinke and in recent years have been paying attention to the “adaptive” vs. “technical” approach to problems as taught by Ronald Heifetz , Marty Linsky and Alexander Grashow. He says, “The tasks are still relevant but how we do them needs to be different. IMN needs to keep evolving as well as the church.”

Others find the five tasks conceptually sound, but have tailored them to 21st century changes. Les Robinson, the director of the interim ministry arm of the Center for Congregational Health, in Winston-Salem, NC, which trains about 100 interim ministers a year, suggests that, “Instead of saying ‘Coming to Terms with Your History,’ which can denote a negative past that a congregation needs to own, the Center uses ‘Heritage.’

This affirms the distinctives of a church's theological and denominational tradition. It helps them to recognize and own their shadow side, but to also affirm the best of the past and to bring that into the future."

The Center also speaks of "Connections" instead of "Reconnecting with the Denomination." The reality is that we are in a post-denominational era and while it is important to remember one's roots and become reacquainted with available resources, it is equally valuable to re-connect to neighborhoods, cities or towns and the ecumenical and inter-faith community. More and more, interim ministers are helping churches find and use demographics, interview key leaders in their community, and discern needs of which they may not be aware. Robinson also focuses on helping congregations get a clear fix on their identity. "If people do not know who they are and what they value they will never discover what they are to do," he says.

A number of folks feel the five tasks have outlived their usefulness and propose a different track altogether. David Sawyer, director of the D.Min. program at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, which offers a specialization in interim ministry, proposes that the interim minister pay attention three areas of concentration: structures, symptoms and narrative. First, structures include healthy processes built (or needing to be built) into the "immune system" of a congregation to deal with conflict and change when it inevitably comes. These further comprise sound policies, effective governance, and firm boundaries. Second, symptoms include watching where conflict or anxiety bubbles up indicating not only points of friction but of passion. Sawyer prefers to talk about "conflict utilization" instead of management to emphasize the ways in which change is impacting a congregation. And third, narrative includes the church's story around issues of

identity, core values, and mission. “It’s no longer the case that the church changes during ministerial change, but that the church is always changing,” says Sawyer. “A congregation will always be true to its soul, but it must release things that are not essential to its identity or mission.”

Some say the whole “search and call” process of most churches is flawed. In their book, *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions*, Carolyn Weese and Russell Crabtree argue that churches lose a lot of ground because the pastor searches for a new call in secret. When she receives a call, the pastor usually gives the church sixty to ninety days notice. At that time everything is put on hold so that she can wind down her ministry, find an interim pastor, and begin putting a search committee together. They contend that every church should have a contingency plan in place to make a smooth pastoral transition in the event of an emergency or unexpected departure of the current pastor including costs, consultant resources, and strategies to keep momentum going. As much as possible, pastors need to keep leadership apprised of their vocational intentions.

Changing practical realities also dictate different models of transitional ministry. Margaret Bain, a United Church of Canada pastor and current President of the Board of IMN notes that many congregations are looking more toward reinventing themselves. Others are exploring closing their doors and need a skilled interim to help them through that process, while others are going through a process of amalgamation, pooling resources and sharing a common vision with another local church. Other interim specialists can help lead a congregation through healing after clergy sexual or financial misconduct.

Interim ministry also faces the financial reality that smaller congregations cannot afford a full-time trained interim minister. The Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota, for instance, now places a transitional priest and a transitional consultant to work together in a single church. “The priest is to love the people, preach, celebrate the sacraments, and provide pastoral care,” says Karen Olson, Missioner of Ministry for the diocese. “The consultant does the works of discovery and mission and helps the congregation to discern what they need to carry that out. The consultant also coaches chairs of boards and committees. This approach allows for a quicker transition—a year instead of the usual transition 18-24 months—and is therefore more feasible in cash-strapped parishes. “In today’s world there is not patience for longer interims,” Olsen wryly observes.

Peter Alexander, a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod interim pastor and trainer for the National Association of Lutheran Interim Pastors, responds that money should not get in the way of a good process. Often longer interim experiences are needed, he says, because many churches are in need of revitalization, renewal or transformation. “More than ever our churches are in trauma or conflict or need a jump-start after a long-term pastorate,” he notes. Most practitioners concur with Alexander that conflict overall is more frequent in churches these days due to the anxiety that comes from changing cultures within and without the church.

Jim McFayden fears the five developmental tasks have become too reified and somewhat immune to change. He emphasizes adaptive leadership training is an important component along with skills at reading the congregation and community context using ethnography, generational and immigration theory. “Instead of simply

working through processes and tasks, the interim needs to take stock of what exactly a congregation needs.” McFayden adds that the skills interim ministers learn could benefit 90% of settled pastors but if interim ministry becomes too specialized they may feel edged out.

Nor are all practitioners enamored with the “family systems” approach of interim ministry training. Rev. Dr. Rob Voyle, director of the Transitional Ministry Network and an Episcopal priest and psychotherapist, argues that the Bowen/Friedman model is a medical model that diagnoses disease instead of discovering pockets of health and nurturing those. “The largest extended family anyone can imagine is 50,” Voyle explains, “The family systems model breaks down because most of our congregations are larger than that. The benefit of Bowen is enabling pastors to understand their own family history and how those dynamics impact their ministry. It’s best to see congregations as communities of faith rather than as families.”

Voyle uses and advocates Appreciate Inquiry as the driving model for interim ministry (AI). AI invites participants to tell a story of a time when life within the church was at its best or was most vital and meaningful for them. The purpose of the exercise is not just to recover a pleasant memory but to be curious about why it happened and how to replicate it. This focuses not upon deficits and problems, but upon assets and solutions. “Instead of coming to terms with their history,” he says, “congregations need to come to terms with their future.”

Rev. John Keydel, most recent past-President of the Interim Ministry Network agrees that a facile use of systems theory can pathologize congregations. He prefers to see the presenting issue as a temporary virus that needs attention. “When your only tool

is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail,” he said. He thinks the principles behind the five developmental tasks are “dead on,” but also feels training should include the insights of social, emotional, and situational intelligence so that pastors have the skills to read people and build relationships even while helping churches identify mission, experiment with worship and different models of governance, and develop leaders.

Interim Sages

In a paper delivered to a meeting of the Interim Ministry Consortium of the PCUSA, David Sawyer averred that interim ministers do not fit the traditional “munus-triplex” model of ministry based on the threefold offices of Christ: prophetic, priestly, and royal. Rather, he says, we must see the interim minister primarily as that of a Sage—those who are gifted with wise discernment to guide family and community in dreaming and interpreting dreams. Walter Brueggemann calls Sages in the Hebrew Scriptures “the practical theologians of the Bible.” They were not installed in an institutional or maintenance role. They were more of coaches and advisers to the community and, as the wisdom literature shows, drew images from the warp and woof of God’s creation; they recognized the contradictions and contingencies of life; and they experienced God through deep mystical experiences, often beyond the bounds of the Law and the Temple.

“If interim ministers are to be sages,” Sawyer argues, “they must avoid the pitfalls of the wisdom literature—as in the critique of Proverbs in which godly wisdom had been co-opted by the status quo of conventional wisdom...Rather interim sages should take their cues from Ecclesiastes and Job by being open to new interpretations of God’s will in the ‘wildly inclusive’ spirit of the church in the 21st century.” He concludes that this

biblical model corresponds well with the organizational process model in systems thinking that is currently used in interim ministry.

Almost to a person, leaders and trainers of intentional interim ministers agree that transitional ministry training needs to include opportunities to develop adaptive leaders—wise, mature, skilled counselors of the church. Further, most interim pastors are discovering that congregations hunger for training in Christian practices, spiritual gift discovery, and Bible study. In order to discern God’s call and vision, congregations also need to recover the practices of prayer, meditation and discovering their mission from pages of scripture.

Varying Practices

Transitional ministry practices vary greatly from denomination to denomination as well often due to polity differences. In Free Church traditions, such as the United Church of Christ or the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), requirements for training can fluctuate from Association to Association and Conference to Conference, whereas the Unitarian Universalist Association has strict guidelines for its interim ministers.

United Methodists have a training center in North Carolina and have graduated over 500 intentional interim ministers in the past nine years, who are then credentialed by the Board of Higher Education and Ministry. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has ten centers around the nation that offer two weeks of basic training and the opportunity for advanced continuing education. The National Association of Lutheran Interim Pastors requires a 12 hour discernment event plus three additional phases of training, including two weeks of residential instruction and a 6-month field education project. Episcopalians

often have a Canon for Transitional Ministry on the diocesan staff. Six mainline denominations have their own professional associations of interim ministers.

Many, if not most, interim ministers have received their training from the Interim Ministry Network, which continues to be the gold standard. The training is rigorous, requiring a three-day seminar in the *Fundamentals of Transitional Ministry* and a 5-day intensive event called *The Intentional Interim Minister*. Those trained then work in “learning communities” of 6 to 8 people coached by an IMN faculty member. Each member is to design a project based upon their training and the needs of the congregation they are serving. Before one can receive a certificate he or she must participate in five conference calls, field test the project, and reflect upon and receive feedback from their colleagues.

But Does It Work?

This all, of course, begs the question: How effective is transitional ministry? There is a crying need for longitudinal studies to be done across denominational lines that will provide quantitative results. To date that has not been done, but some smaller studies affirm the effectiveness and need for interim ministry. Susan Nienaber Senior Consultant and Lead Researcher for the Alban Institute recently completed a study of resiliency and recovery among congregations experiencing a high level of conflict or trauma. Of the forty churches she studied, across four denominations, twenty-four said they were 80 to 100% recovered and twenty-two attributed that to “excellent and effective interim leadership.” The Center for Congregational Health uses Survey Monkey to evaluate the 30 to 40 congregations a year that have used one of their trained interim pastors and have had a new pastor for at least two years. When asked if

their church was healthier at the end of the process than it was at the beginning and would they use the same process again, 87% said yes. To date 200 congregations have participated.

In 2007 the Research Services of the PCUSA published a study of the effectiveness of interim pastors in Presbyterian churches. Three hundred and eighteen congregations who had interim ministers between 2004 and 2006 were surveyed. When clerks of session and pastors in congregations with an interim pastor were queried about the experience, 69% of both groups responded, “yes, it was a very good idea,” and another two in ten responded, “yes, it was a good idea.” Responses from Presbyterian Executives and chairs of Committees on Ministry were more mixed but still relatively high. The conclusion of the study was there was still strong support for the use of interim pastors, but some open questions remained about the usefulness of interim pastors in all situations.

But a question remains: was the ministry that was done the best we could do? Is there another way to do training and ministry? Cynthia Hueey, the executive director of the IMN for the past ten years, says that we need updated research work. “What does success look like? Longevity of the next pastor? Spiritual deepening? Increased attendance and giving?” she asks.

New Questions

In addition, I think we need to grapple with the following questions:

- Are there congregations of different sizes that benefit more from interim ministry than others? Or are there situations in which an interim minister is unnecessary?
- What issues of transition respond best to interim leadership?
- Should there be interim ministers who just serve as “place holders,” if churches do not want to do the work?

- Can or should judicatory officials hold congregations accountable for mistreating clergy, having a reputation for conflict, or not doing the necessary work before they call a new pastor by withholding the names of candidates until they do?
- What level of training is needed for most interim positions and what skills and activities do interims find themselves most engaged with?
- How do different polities impact the kind of transitional ministry that is offered?
- What is the role of revitalization, renewal and transformation for interim ministers? Are they separate tasks or do they overlap? Should there be a two-stage process?
- Why don't ethnic churches use interim ministers? Many use a succession model. Are there things those in Anglo churches could learn from them and vice versa?

Transitional ministry is a vital, important ministry that has served our congregations well for the past three decades, but it is not immune to change. Creative and cutting edge ministry is often done during the “in between time” and the training and skills interim ministers receive are useful to all pastors of local congregations. Tennessee Williams put it, “There is a time for departure, even when there’s no certain place to go.” Transitional ministry needs to transition even if the outcomes aren’t yet fully certain.