

BEST LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN TRANSITIONAL MINISTRY

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I. INTRODUCTION

In my independent study course this past fall I focused attention on best leadership practices in transitional ministry. In this paper I intend to explore some of what I learned through the three main concentrations of the course which included: attending the Transitional Ministry Education Consortium week one training: An Introduction to Transitional Ministry, reading various texts that support the work of transitional ministry, and interview pastors who are serving in transitional ministry positions in congregations. The bulk of this paper will focus on what I have learned through the interview process as informed by the course material from TMEC and my additional reading. What I intend to show is that even though each transitional minister has their own and different personalities and approaches, and each congregational setting also has its own personality and approach to ministry and the mission of Jesus Christ, there are some common best practices for approaching the work of transitional ministry.

The individuals that I interviewed each are known for their successful leadership and work with churches in transition. That is churches who have recently lost one pastor and currently in the process toward searching for a new installed pastor. The transitional pastors who I interviewed were recommended to me by presbytery leaders who have witnessed their work within congregations and how those congregations have been able to thrive in their ministries after they have left. I don't mean to suggest that that is the only marker of success because there have been some successful transitions where the churches have closed their doors or have merged with other congregations. This is hard and holy work as well and should not be discounted.

II. HISTORY OF TERMINOLOGY (INTERIM V. TRANSITIONAL)

So far in this paper, I have used the term transitional ministry which is a newer term that is being used for the more traditional term of interim ministry. I have developed a personal understanding for how to identify the difference between the work of an interim and that of a transitional minister. In my understanding, the interim minister is someone who is contracted with a congregation to preach, provide pastoral care duties, and serve as the moderator of the session while the work to find a new minister is being done by a committee of the church with support from the presbytery and limited guidance from the interim minister. A transitional minister, however, is called to serve the basic pastoral needs of the congregation through preaching, pastoral care, and moderating the session, and they work closely with a transition committee (if created, or the session if not) to go through the steps for transitioning toward a new installed pastor. The difference is that the interim is relatively hands off in the transition process while the transitional minister is assisting the process while not directing it.

This interpretation is not shared and did not get any traction with the folks it was in conversation with. What each of them informed me is that there is no real difference between the two terms. It just depends on what the presbytery or the congregation decides to call it. However, each of the pastors I talked with agreed that it made more sense, especially in today's church climate, to be identified as an interim minister and to make sure their roles for the congregation are well spelled out. When I approached this particular question, the first, quick response was always in the line of, "well, with how the pandemic has force every church to rethink how they worship and do ministry, every church is in transition, so every minister is serving as a

transitional minister, even if they don't want to." So, this perspective was essential for me to realize that my academic theory for the differentiation of the terms doesn't surely make any sense in the real-world application. So, for the remainder of this paper, I will use the term interim minister unless there is an appropriate reason to distinguish the difference.

III. WHO ENTERS INTO INTERIM MINISTRY?

As someone who sees interim ministry as a vocational calling, I was interested to understand how others have entered the work of interim ministry. There seems to be three main ways ministers arrive serving as interims. The most common and traditional way is for ministers who have retired and are no longer seeking a long term installed position (or are realistic to understand that very few churches are looking for ministers in or near their retirement years) will be asked to serve churches as an interim. Some do this because they still feel like they have many good years of ministry yet to offer, while others may be because their identity is found in their ministry, thus they don't want to let it go. A second way ministers enter the field of interim ministry is out of a default position, if you will. There are times that ministers have not been able to secure an installed pastorate, so they agree to a short term contracted interim position to pay the bills while they are still seeking installed positions. Maybe a minister is tethered to a particular area and the number of installed positions is extremely limited, so they agree to interim positions. Even though this is becoming a more common avenue into the work of interim ministry, the individuals I interviewed each recognized their work as a true calling and that it requires specific skills that may not be as necessary for long term installed ministers. About half

of my interviewees are still seeking installed opportunities, while the other half have come to recognize that they are well suited for interim ministry, and they now see it as a vocation.

The third approach to entering an interim ministry is those like me who see it as a vocation and enter seminary for the specific goal of being an interim minister. This track into interim ministry is surely the rarest as I have only met one other person who had that same sense of calling that took them to seminary.

IV. Important Skills for Interim Ministry

When I asked *what specific skills are required for interim work that are not necessarily needed for installed pastors*, the responses seemed to really be in line with skills that all pastors could benefit from having, however they seem to be of critical importance in effective interim ministry. One aspect of interim ministry that is unique is that there is a clear, finite frame of time in which an interim has available to make a difference. It is therefore critical that the interim minister is quickly able to discern how to utilize these skills most effectively.

Although each of the ministers in which I engaged spoke to this question from their unique lived experiences, I will distill their thoughts into this concise list.

◆ **Communication** — the interim must be able to have clear communication skills.

This goes beyond preaching a good sermon and is focused on making sure the folks in the congregation and the leadership know what is going on at every step of the process. All communication with the congregation is as timely and transparent as possible. Recognizing people receive information differently, the interim must be able

to and willing to use multiple modes of communication. The adage holds true that people don't really hear your message unless you say it seven different ways.

- ◆ **Intuition** — The interim must be able to quickly assess where problems and conflicts are situated. However, beyond this analysis, the interim must be able to discern and prioritize what situations need to be addressed in what order...or not at all. After all there is only so much time, not every issue can be addressed. One of the interim pastors I talked with reminded me of a saying he shared with me at the training event this past fall, "be sure not to let out any more snakes than you can handle."
- ◆ **Trustworthy**— building trust quickly is essential work for an interim because there is limited time, and it is important to be able to start making adjustments in areas of the congregation's ministry that may be difficult. Trust building is basically an interpersonal-relational task which includes pastoral care visits, being available to listen to members. Setting up times to meet with the church's leadership to share expectations. This is especially important with staff members who might be anxious about their job security. Meeting with them early on and making it clear what the plans are in the interim period will go a long way to building trust.
- ◆ **A Well Differentiated Self** — recognizing that one's ability to be self-differentiated is always on a spectrum depending on one's intimacy with the other, the ability to recognize the boundary between yourself and the other (person, issue, organization) is important. A self-differentiated interim comes to a congregation with a non-anxious presence and is able to help others see that all will be well, and all manner of things

will be well. Some of the interims in my interviews used terms like, being brave, or thick skinned and less concerned about people-pleasing.

- ◆ **Administration** — For many pastors, administration skills do not necessarily come to the top of their list of attributes, however, in the work of an interim minister, it is critical. From the first day in the office being able to quickly get a grasp on the everyday operation of the church will help ease anxiety and build trust for much of the congregation. Having clear expectations and sharing them with staff and leadership provides opportunities for success and helps build a sense of respect within the culture.

Although each of the skills would be ones that I think most pastors may find useful, an interim minister will find that having a mastery in each of these will provide them the ability to maintain healthy relationships, and work through conflicts and problems with as little resistance as possible. Of course, a certain level of resistance is inevitable within an anxious system but in sharpening these skills the interim minister will find more success in their work and the newly installed pastor that follows the interim will be grateful for their dedicated and difficult work.

V. Common Challenges found in Churches in Transition

Yes, it is undeniable that every congregation is unique and there are no two congregations that have the exact issues or conflicts to work through. That being said, there are certain common challenges found in most every church in transition and it would be good for an interim minister to be prepared to assist the congregation in addressing them toward healing and

wholeness. Let's consider the most common challenges among the churches represented in my interviews.

- ◆ **Anxiety** — This has been mentioned in various sections within this paper. Having anxiety is only natural when a congregation loses their leader, especially within a system that puts a lot of responsibility and identity on their leaders. Anxiety relates to other areas of concern as we will see, but having a strong pastoral presence seems to be a huge factor in a congregation's level of anxiety. Even though an interim can reduce this anxiety, folks believe it would be ideal to rush to the next installed pastor so the congregation will be recognized by its members and by others as being stable.
- ◆ **Grief** — Every congregation in transition deals with a level of grief and loss that comes with the last pastor leaving. Even if they were unanimous in their desire for that person to move on, there is still grief in what was lost or never came to be. Some of the grief could be in the loss of programs or realizing there are programs that will need to be put on hold until another installed pastor comes. Although this is not always true, there is a perception that there is little a church can do during an interim period. Dispelling this worry early on in an interim position would be very helpful. There is also the grief around who will be there to tend to the grand life events within the people of the congregation such as weddings, funerals, and baptisms. By quickly creating relationships and building trust within the congregation, an interim minister will be able to reduce this area of concern as well. Another common area of grief is that there are not as many young families participating in the life of the church as there used to be. The church just isn't thriving like in the past.

- ◆ **Unresolved conflict** — Times of transition tend to bring out conflicts that have been unresolved, ignored, locked in a closet, or even allowed to fester in the open.

Because, as one of the folks I interviewed stated, “anxiety sometimes causes people to misbehave,” conflict becomes more evident. But many times, folks do not realize that a new situation is many times residual or a rebirth of a long-held problem the church has not adequately worked towards transforming and growing from the conflict. An interim minister must be able to assist the congregation in working through their unresolved conflicts using all their skills as listed above. An interim minister should also remember that these conflicts that the church is living with are not about the interim but are realities within the system in which they are living.
- ◆ **Financial Concerns** — Even within congregations that have a surplus of funds, there are always those who are concerned that the church isn’t going to make it. The membership numbers are decreasing, large givers are dying, or the per family pledges are down. All these factors weigh into common financial concerns. There are also other concerns that an interim will recognize a congregation needs to address that they may not be aware of. Some congregations have a large debt that is becoming harder to handle. There are also situations of members controlling funds that they should not have control of. For example, many congregations have designated funds that are separate from the regular operating budgeted funds. Typically, the operating budget comes from member giving through pledges and other gifts, rentals, and sometimes fundraisers. Those monies are used in the regular everyday ministry and mission of the church. The designated or temporary restricted funds are monies that

are given to the church for a specific purpose and can only be used for that purpose. A gift for new hymnals would be an example of a designated fund that is restricted to be used only for the purchase of new hymnals. What can happen is that many times the people who give to a church but want control over how their money is spent will give to a specific fund and sometimes will even be able to tell the church how to spend it. This system gives individuals unhealthy control over the overall operations of the church. In one congregation I studied, the interim sought permission to look at the designated funds and was given the okay to create a task force for this purpose. At the end of their work, the task force recommended the consolidation of many funds into a few larger accounts that were of similar purpose. Then they recommended which committee would have the ability to distribute or spend those funds. This was approved and those people who once had control over the specific funds no longer had that power thus breaking one of the systems of conflict the church had evaded for years.

As I suggested, even though anxiety can and is often a major concern in and of itself, anxiety is also present within the other concerns addressed here. Other areas of concern I heard about included overall burnout (and maybe building resentment) of the few who tend to do most of the work, issues with communication and trust, and some sort of conflict between the church and the weekday preschool program. It is important for the interim minister to quickly discern what challenges they are willing and able to take on and how to prioritize them.

VI. The Interim Minister's First Six Tasks

It should be understood that these six tasks are not necessarily to be taken steps that follow each other, but as tasks that flow in and out of each other like a beautiful tapestry.

- ◆ **Establish Pastoral Relationship** — That being said, one of the most, if not the most important task of the interim minister is to first establish their place as the congregation's pastor. There is a saying around times of pastoral transition: "we only have one pastor at a time." This is to say that whoever the pastor is, be it an installed person, contract pastor, or an assigned stated supply pastor, they are the ones who serve as the pastor of that congregation. They will perform the services of celebration such as weddings and funerals, baptisms, and the Lord's Supper. It is the prerogative of the pastor to invite others to lead as they see fit. There was recently an interim who came onto the job the Monday after one of the former pastors (who had been retired for years but still involved in the congregation) had died. This new interim had no relationship with anyone much less the family of the deceased and it was his task to either lead the memorial service or invite someone else. Wisely, the interim invited the pastor who had just left weeks before to come back as an officiate at the memorial service and the interim pastor assisted. The previous pastor was grateful to be invited to do so, because they had a twenty-year friendship with his mentor, and otherwise he would not have come to the service because he was no longer the pastor there. This was an important first step for this new interim to make, one that will give him a lot of credibility right from the beginning with this congregation. Beyond establishing

one's pastoral position there are six other identified tasks that are common first steps for an interim minister.

- ◆ **Listen** — Sometimes one of the hardest things to do when coming into a new position where you need to establish yourself as the leader is to listen. But that is exactly what needs to happen. Seek out leaders such as church staff and officers to hear from them about the church and their roles. It is important to also listen to what causes them to be anxious and try to ease their anxiety. But mostly listen. (See the appendix to this paper for a list of questions or prompts I was provided by one of the interim ministers I interviewed.) Not only listen to the church leaders but also tune in and listen to the rhythms and tones that church embodies. During fellowship events, meetings, worship and other times, there is a rhythm to pay attention to.
- ◆ **Review & Research** — Take time to look over session meeting minutes, church policies and bylaws, financial reports, and other documents such as histories of the church. Look over as many as ten years to get a good understanding of what has been important to the church and how they govern themselves today. This is actually another form of listening.
- ◆ **Analyze What Needs Attention** - through these listening exercises and research, there is also a sense of analysis going on. The interim is discerning through intuition and processing what are the most important areas of the church or systems that need attention. Sometimes this may be extremely evident as was the case with one of the ministers I talked with who said it was the first day of his second week at the church that he had to fire the preschool director.

- ◆ **Prioritize** — As in the example above, sometimes the task of prioritizing is done for the interim. Most of the time however, it is necessary to take into consideration the rhythms and tones of the congregation as well as what has been shared from conversations and the records reviews to know what tasks need top priority and what may be ones that might need to wait for the next installed pastor.
- ◆ **Set Boundaries** — Before getting too involved in the life of the church, it is important to set personal and professional boundaries for a work schedule, how to engage with members outside of church business and who will be accountable for specific tasks that may have previously been something the last pastor would do. Setting these boundaries will provide a way to engage in self-care as well as modeling for the congregation healthy pastoral relationships.

Even though there are probably other first tasks that interim ministers engage in, it was these six that each of the folks I interviewed shared to be most important. They establish early on that the interim pastor is there to not only care for the congregation but also help them move forward to the next place God is calling them.

VII. Interim Ministers' Valued Resources

When I asked this question, I was expecting to hear a list of books, training events, or the media. I was immediately taken aback and truly pleased to be told that the most important resource for an interim minister are long term professional relationships. There are two types of these relationships that I was told to cultivate. The first was with presbytery leadership. Take time to connect with the presbytery executive and the members of the committee on ministry. By

connecting with these folks early on, the interim will be provided opportunities for potential positions that will be opening. They also know many of the issues within their congregations and will be able to share details with the interim that will not be available anywhere else.

The interim should also become involved in a cohort of other interim ministers for support and connection. The work of the interim is much more difficult than many installed pastoral positions because the interim is dealing with many different systems while also serving as the pastor for the congregation. Having a group of folks who understand the work and can offer guidance and wisdom from their lived experiences will be a valuable gift.

There are many books on the work of interim ministry and how to work with congregations in transition or crisis, and they are helpful for what they provide. Having strong relationships with folks who support and care for each other is unbeatable.

VIII. Some Practical Advice from Seasoned Interim Ministers

One of the first mistakes many interim ministers make is to not understand the importance of a contract that meets their specific needs. An interim minister needs to come into the contract negotiations with a clear understanding of their specific needs and bottom line. For instance, many interims take large risks when agreeing to serve for a specific timeframe and not knowing if there will be a position available when the time is up. Therefore, unless the interim is serving while receiving their retirement pay, they should insist on a salary continuance clause providing income and health benefits for two months after leaving a position. There are very few presbyteries that require this in the interim contracts but one that does is in Eastern South

Carolina (I have placed their contract in the appendix).¹ It is also important for an interim minister to be okay with turning down a position if they will not meet the needs of a minister. It is important to know your self-worth and not settle for anything less.

Another piece of practical advice I was offered in the conversations with various interim ministers is to quickly establish the office space as yours. Rearrange the furniture in the pastor's office or study so that those who visit will automatically notice there is a difference. As a way of safe boundary establishment, if there are sofas or couches in the pastor's space, take them out. Reducing any reason for improper conversation, much less behavior will go a long way in establishing trust and boundaries. Do not move into the office until the first day on the job. But it is important to establish the space quickly. As you establish the office space it is also important to establish office hours for visitations and meetings. Will there be times set aside for folks to drop in unscheduled? Will there be study hours away from the office? Informing the staff and members of a work schedule early on will provide space for the interim to make best use of their time.

If the interim must move into a temporary home while taking a position, it is advised to quickly set up the home before even starting the job if possible. This is because after the work begins it is extremely difficult to find the time or energy to do the nesting and this can create an unsettled feeling during the entire interim period. Also find a local spot where it is comfortable like in the TV show Cheers (it was a dated reference that worked for me).

¹ New Harmony Presbytery has two covenants for interim ministers listed under the Committee on Ministry section of this web page <http://www.newharmoniypres.org/nhpresources>

One last important bit of practical advice is that it is important for the interim minister to completely disengage with the congregation and all the members directly when the position ends. This is to allow the new minister to establish their pastoral relationships without interference. There may be a couple of members who have become friends and it is okay to continue those connections as long as they are separate from any pastoral roles.

IX. Conclusion

Many, if not all the specific skills, challenges, and tasks that are identified here as being important for interim pastors are surely also important for regularly installed pastors in congregations throughout the church. What makes it a little more unique for the role of an interim is that there is a limited time in which a minister is present to identify the challenges and work through the tasks in order that they do the best possible job they can to help the congregation be ready to receive their next pastor. Just as each congregation is varied, so is each person who serves as an interim minister. But there are similarities that can be recognized even within the differences. With both the differences and similarities, best practices for Leadership in interim ministry can be recognized and utilized to help congregations prepare themselves for their future ministry and mission. If done well, not only will the congregation become closer to the beloved community God is calling them to be, but they will also be able to call a new minister with guidance of the Holy Spirit, to help lead them into their fullness.

Seven Prompts/Questions to Ask the Church Staff and Session Members
(Shared by Rev. Gavin Meeks)

1. Tell me about you.
2. What's your role and how can I best support you?
3. How has it been for you at this church these past few months?
4. What are your hopes for this interim period?
5. What are your expectations of me as your pastor? (Spend a moment to clarify any discrepancies as needed)
6. What bible story or passage reminds you of this congregation?
7. Why do you stay here?