

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL: INVENTING A PARISH SPECIFIC TRANSITIONAL MINISTRY

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MINISTRY DURING THE TRANSITIONAL TIME

For the purposes of this discussion we will be focusing on the role of the ordained ministry during the transitional time while the search is being conducted.

There are three primary tasks that need to be achieved during the transitional time:

1. *Call*

To call a new rector. While this is the work of the congregation, the transitional minister has a significant role in ensuring that the congregation has the adequate emotional and spiritual resources to engage in a search.

2. *Prepare*

To prepare the congregation for the future with a new leader.

3. *Provide*

To provide contextually-relevant, ongoing pastoral care and ministry to the congregation during the transition.

These three tasks are not mutually discreet, linear, or exclusive. There is also great overlap in many of the search tasks and many transitional ministry tasks. For example; people resolve grief by developing a realistic view of an enjoyable future. Creating a vision for the future is a necessary precursor to deciding on the search criteria for the next rector. Some aspects of resolving grief may need to be done prior to the search, but in other situations the very act of thinking about the future will help resolve grief. In a similar manner, since the pastoral context for the congregation is one of transition, much of the Sunday-to-Sunday preaching needs to relate to their understanding of God's call and presence in times of change.

In our experience artificial and unhelpful barriers have often been erected between the tasks of ministry during the interim time and the search tasks. Some of these barriers were created to prevent interim clergy from inappropriately interfering in the search process. Rather than create artificial barriers to prevent bad things from happening, we need to ensure that both transitional clergy and search consultants are skilled in their respective areas. They must also be able to create collaborative relationships with each other and integrate their ministries for the benefit of the congregation.

In this section we will explore some of the key aspects of the transitional time as it relates to and impacts the search process.

*See the gold in the congregation,
hold it for them
until they are ready to take
it for themselves, and
never take it for yourself.*

— Katherine Tyler Scott

*Be a servant of your
congregation's future,
not an expert on its past.*

*In our experience artificial
and unhelpful barriers
have often been erected
between the tasks of
ministry during the interim
time and the search tasks.*

Are You Ready to Start a Search?

There are three primary resources a congregation needs to embark upon a search:

1. A clear vision of what the congregation wants to become. This is created by the self-study and visioning process used to create the congregation's profile.
2. A clear idea of what the congregation needs from a rector to help them achieve their vision. This is derived from the visioning process and becomes the search criteria.
3. The emotional and spiritual readiness to engage in a discernment process.

As a servant to a people in transition, transitional ministers are automatically servants of the search process. One of the tasks of transitional ministry is assisting the congregation with the development of these resources .

Barbara Frederickson and her colleagues at the University of Michigan found that when the daily ratio of positive to negative emotional events is above 2.9 to 1, the human mind becomes expansive, creative, resilient and reparative. Frederickson also discovered that when the ratio of positive-to-negative emotion drops below 2.9 to 1 the mind becomes linear, inflexible, and unable to think beyond the rut in which it finds itself.

Other research shows that in a positive emotional state our intuition is more accurate. This is of critical significance in the discernment process. The final step in the search process is the discernment of a call from a list of qualified candidates. Unlike the analytic steps of the search process that precede this phase, discernment is essentially an intuitive process. If we want to increase the accuracy of people's intuition we need to ensure that the emotional climate is positive. Theologically speaking it is impossible to be in harmony with or discern the will of a loving God if we are not in a loving place.

Are the people in your congregation, the search committee and your vestry in a positive emotional state? When a congregation is in a state of conflict, grief, or anxiety about the future, the community will be unable to make creative, Godly decisions. One of the initial tasks of the transitional time is to help the congregation achieve, if it doesn't already exist, a loving culture that results in positive emotional states so that the congregation can think creatively about their future.

Crisis is not always bad; it can become a turning point in your life for the better. Yes, it can bring danger and upset, but it also carries with it opportunity for growth and change. As you try to discover a way to cope with crisis, you could discover a new and better way of living.
— H. Norman Wright

A positive attitude may not solve all your problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort."
— Herm Albright

Culture Change and Search Processes

The following scenario is an all too common in current searches processes.

1. The rector announces he or she is leaving.
2. The congregation feels anxious about their future and quickly establishes a search committee to help manage the anxiety. This search committee is formed by the prevailing or “old” culture and will reflect those cultural values and expectations.
3. The profile is established and also reflects what “currently is” with respect to the values and hopes for the future. Many of these cultural norms are unspoken, habituated behaviors and will not be part of the written profile, but will have a major influence on the decisions of the search committee.
4. During the transitional time the congregation engages in activities that begin to raise up new leadership and transform the culture. New values and expectations will come to the fore, but they are developed after the profile is completed and the behaviors haven’t matured sufficiently to become the habits of the congregation. Thus they will have minimal expression in the search process.
5. The rector is called according to the old cultural values and expectations.
6. The new rector arrives, the newly emerging leadership are disenfranchised, and the culture reverts to the old values.

Culture change doesn’t happen overnight. Usually significant culture change requires up to three years to become habituated and self-sustaining. In the above example the new culture needed to be more fully established to be sustained after the new rector is called.

From our experience, the time frame of many current searches is either too short or too long. When a congregation clearly needs to make significant changes to its culture, then a 12-18 month transition time is too short to allow the new culture to have a significant impact on the search process. It would be more effective to delay the search process for 18 months while the congregational dynamics are addressed and then establish a search committee.

Conversely, when a church is highly motivated and effective a 12-18 month interim is likely to result in too greater loss of momentum.

As a servant to a people in transition, transitional ministers are automatically servants of the search process.

From our experience, the time frame of many current searches is either too short or too long.

*Let's hold rigidly
to a flexible plan.*

*Do your theories inform
your next step or just
explain yesterday's reality.*

*Most transition rules were
invented to prevent bad
things happening rather
than ensuring that
good things happen.*

Designing A Transitional Ministry: One Size Doesn't Fit All

There is great variability in the church's current practice of ministry during times of transition. In our conversation with church leaders one Bishop said: "There are some situations I wouldn't use an interim minister." Such a statement suggests that the bishop had only one idea of the ministry that an interim provides. What he meant was that he would only use a trained interim in conflicted congregations. But the question that comes to our minds is, "what happens to the successful congregations, are they simply abandoned during the transitional period?"

In other dioceses we have observed that all the congregations are mandated to have to have a substantial interim regardless of the congregation's individual needs. This "one size fits all" type of thinking violates the essence of incarnational ministry. Just as Jesus didn't spit on the ground and apply mud to the eyes of every blind person he encountered, incarnational ministry requires that we are continually inventing and creating a ministry to meet the unique needs of a specific congregation.

What Type of Ministry Does this Congregation Need?

Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach or asking a limiting "yes or no" question about whether the congregation needs an intentional transitional minister, the incarnational approach begins by asking the following question:

"Given this congregation's current state, what type of ministry do they need to take them successfully into their future?"

This is a question that the vestry and Bishop need to consider prior to the calling of a transitional minister. In many ways it is also the question to be asked in the search for the installed rector. However, in this section our focus will be on assessing the needs of the congregation during the transition to ensure that it can engage in a successful search.

To design a transitional ministry we can use the **A⇒B** model for creating change. The first step is to describe **A**, the congregation's current state or starting point. On the following pages we provide an assessment process based on factors such as congregational size, current functioning, and whether they need to engage in significant culture transformation prior to the search.

Assessing Congregational Needs: Four Factors

Congregational Size: Small, Large, Medium

Succession Predictability: Planned or Unplanned

Current Congregational State: Spirited or Dispirited

Future Potential: Congruent or Disparate

Congregational Size

In using appreciative inquiry in congregations we have been surprised by the consistency of the language parishioners use to describe their congregation and its relationship to congregational size. Parishioners from small churches invariably describe their congregation as a family. In contrast parishioners from large congregations will describe their church as a community. Parishioners from medium-sized churches will use a mix of family and community language.

The overall size of a congregation determines the nature of the relationships parishioners have with their rector. This size factor and its impact on relationships is represented in one of the core values of the congregation. In small congregations, individual parishioners will have personal access to the rector, who will often serve as a hub for the congregation's activities. In addition to having a close relationship with their rector they will also have close relationships with many parishioners. Consequently they use familial language to describe their congregation.

In large congregations not all parishioners will have a direct personal relationship with the rector. In these congregations the rector may recognize the faces of their parishioners but not know everyone's names. Likewise parishioners may recognize the faces of many parishioners but not know many of their names. The church functions as a small community, where people share a common membership but without familial recognition.

In addition to impacting the core values of a congregation, size often determines the material resources the congregation has available to engage in a search and their ability to offer an attractive salary package to prospective rectors.

We have found church rolls to be very ineffective in assessing ministry needs. In many cases it is easy to be added to the roll but no one's name is ever removed from the roll, leaving the roll highly inflated and consequently very inaccurate. In most congregations the Easter Sunday attendance will provide a very quick and realistic

When our first parents were driven out of Paradise, Adam is believed to have remarked to Eve: "My dear, we live in an age of transition."

— Dean Inge

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.

— Charles Darwin

*The important thing is this:
To be able at any moment
to sacrifice what we are for
what we could become.*
— Charles Dubois

measure of the congregation's size. This is typically a measure of the number of people in the wider community who call upon the church for ministry at times of pastoral need.

With respect to the search process, average Sunday attendance is a better measure of the number of people who will want some input into the search process. Congregations that experience considerable attendance variation due to seasonal phenomena, such as "snow birds," may have to make adjustments to some of the size differentiations. The critical issue is an awareness of the number of people who will want to be included in aspects of the search process.

Beyond being attuned to the predominant use of descriptive language we can create some rough numerical distinctions between these three sizes of congregations. In social systems people can typically relate closely to about 12 people. That means that people can relate to about 144 with one degree of separation or familiarity. Small congregations who describe themselves as a "family" will invariably have less than 150 people involved in worship. From our experience when congregations have over 350 people involved in worship parishioners will almost exclusively use the word community to describe their congregation.

Small Congregations: Implications for Search and Interim Time

Core Identity and Value: Family

The use of familial language to describe their congregation is indicative of the importance of personal relationships throughout the congregational system. This results in some of the following characteristics:

- Announcements during worship services are an important part of the congregation's networking and self-care.
- Most parishioners will want to have significant input into both minor and major decisions in the life of the congregation.
- The annual meeting in small congregations is attended by most parishioners and may actually be larger than the average Sunday worship attendance.
- Because the entire congregation gathers for annual meetings the small congregation is often logistically resourced to conduct strategic visioning process using appreciative inquiry summits or town hall meetings.

*If you cannot do
great things,
do small things
in a great way.*
— Napoleon Hill

Major Challenge: Economic Survivability

The critical concern in most small congregations is economic survivability. In rural areas this is almost entirely an issue of demographics. Congregations are often stable, but threatened by declining numbers due to declining community populations. Long-standing parishioners have seen clergy come and go, they love them and are loved by them and life goes on. Given their economic challenges, small rural congregations are confronted with the choice between finding someone willing to serve their congregation in a part-time capacity or inventing a totally different way of doing ministry and being the people of God.

Usually, small urban and suburban parishes face very different issues, since their potential for growth and development surrounds them. The question is not how to survive but how to be a vibrant, relevant witness to the Kingdom of God, and to their local community. Some small urban churches were once flourishing congregations that have not kept pace with the changing demographics in their neighborhood. Although the issues may be different, the choices are similar to those in small rural communities, i.e. finding someone to maintain and grow their current culture or taking a different approach and creating a new ministry that is more responsive to needs of the neighborhood

With respect to the transitional period it is important to focus on the future vision for the congregation. If significant culture change is desired some of the questions that will need to be asked and answered are:

- Has the congregation agreed to the change of direction? Is it being imposed on the congregation by external pressures or is it emerging from within the congregation?
- Who is going to lead that change, the transitional minister or the next rector?

Some smaller parishes that do not have the resources to engage in an extensive search or to attract well-qualified candidates may find themselves in an extended unintentional transitional time. Under-resourced congregations may prefer to do a limited search from a prequalified list supplied by the diocese. Having a frank conversation about these possibilities, prior to calling a transitional minister, is necessary to establish the transitional ministry expectations and the time line for the search process.

*Change is inevitable
—except from a
vending machine.*
— Robert C. Gallagher

*Christianity has been
buried inside the walls of
churches and secured with
the shackles of dogmatism.
Let it be liberated to come
into the midst of us and
teach us freedom, equality
and love.*
— Minna Canth

*Church isn't
where you meet.
Church isn't a building.
Church is what you do.
Church is who you are.
Church is the human
outworking of the person
of Jesus Christ.
Let's not go to Church,
let's be the Church.
— Bridget Willard*

*Someone has said,
"If we could get religion
like a Baptist,
experience it like a
Methodist,
be positive about it like a
Disciple,
be proud of it like an
Episcopalian,
pay for it like a
Presbyterian,
propagate it like an
Adventist,
and enjoy it like an
Afro-American –
that would be
some religion!
— Harry Emerson Fosdick*

Large Congregations: Implications for Search and Interim Time

Core Identity and Value: Community

Within a community, personal relationships and influence are maintained in small sub-groupings rather than the community as a whole. This results in some of the following characteristics:

- Announcements during worship services often feel like a crass intrusion into the worship experience.
- Most parishioners are not dependent on a personal relationship with the rector. Pastoral care is likely to be provided by associate clergy and teams of lay people, all of which will continue during the transitional period.
- Parishioners most consistent contact with their rector will be from the rector's preaching.
- The rector's primary relationships and responsibilities will lie with the ministry staff and key lay people. Most parishioners will be unaware of the inter-staff dynamics.
- Parishioners' intimacy needs within the congregation are met in smaller groupings which will persist during the interim time.
- Most parishioners will be active "consumers" of the church's services, such as study groups, mission trips, worship etc. and they will not want significant input into the planning of events, especially those outside their particular interest.
- The annual meeting in large congregations is attended by a small percentage of the average Sunday worship attendance.
- Their large size creates logistical challenges for conducting appreciative inquiry summits or town hall meetings that may add time to the transitional time line.
- Large churches have a substantial bureaucracy that creates inertia to change. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If the congregation is successful (which many are or they wouldn't be large) the inertia allows the church to stay successful and maintain programs during the interim time.

Major Challenges

The challenges will vary depending on the congregation. Maintaining congregational momentum and developing staff relationships are critical during the transitional time. Many transitional ministers will not have had experience of leading a multi-staffed congregation and may be ill equipped for the task.

Medium Congregations: Implications for Search and Interim Time**Core Identity and Value:** Mixture of “Family” and “Community”

Medium-sized congregations are often more complex than small or large congregations because of the potential conflict between those who identify and value their congregation as a family, or as a community. The previous characteristics of small and large congregations will be mixed within the one congregation and often lead to conflict.

For some, relationships with the rector is important whereas others will be more invested in a program or sub-group within the congregation. Some will grieve the loss of the former rector whereas others will show little grief if their specific programs are maintained.

Both growth and decline create tension as they potentially compromise the core value of the other group. Growth will jeopardize the opportunity for close personal relationships, whereas decline will jeopardize the opportunity for special programming.

Without a unified core value parishioners will be more aware of conflict, or the potential for conflict, and are likely to express more anxiety during the transitional time than smaller or larger congregations. The most anxious parishioners are likely to pressure others to “get the search done” without taking the necessary time to create a unified sense of the congregation that meets the potential needs of both groups.

Major Challenges

Creating a unified vision and a plan of action that encompasses both the family and community values and that allows for growth. A core task of the transitional time will be to uncover the shared values of both groups and to incorporate them into a unified vision for the future.

*True peace is not merely
the absence of tension:
it is the presence of justice.*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

*If you don't like change,
you're going to like
irrelevance even less.*

— Eric Shinseki

The act of diagnosis is a sophisticated form of judgment and blame, that when used to describe a human community, will be alienating.

Theologically speaking it is impossible to be in harmony with or discern the will of a loving God if we are not in a loving place.

Current State

Is the congregation energized for ministry or dispirited?

We have found the common use of the term “congregational health” to describe human systems such as a church to be unhelpful. The language of health also raises in consciousness the idea of sickness and often results in pejorative, judgmental labels being applied to a congregation that doesn’t meet some external standard of congregational health. Similarly the language of health also raises the idea of congregational diagnosis that is an alienating process when used to describe a human community.

Rather than using such language we prefer a simple assessment that asks without judgment or exploration of cause: **is the congregation growing, maintaining or declining?** This assessment, for the purposes of establishing a transitional ministry, can simply be conducted by reviewing the past five years’ Sunday attendance and financial reports. Remember our task is simply to define “**A**,” the current state of the congregation and not engage in speculating about the cause of the current state.

Responding to the current state of being energized or dispirited will require a different type of ministry. For example; if the type of ministry engaged in for a declining congregation is used in a growing congregation, the congregation is likely to regress during the interim and lose valuable momentum.

Some of the issues to consider in creating a transitional ministry for an energized congregation include:

- Energized congregations that are growing will be most vulnerable to regression during a prolonged interim.
- A core focus of the transitional time is to ensure that the resources used to create the growth are still available to the congregation during the transition.
- Is the vision and energy that created the growth incarnated in the congregation or does it still need to be embraced and embodied by the parishioners?

Some of the issues to consider when creating a transitional ministry for a dispirited congregation include:

- Dispirited congregations may need a longer than typical transitional time to help build a sense of identity and purpose that will allow them to successfully call a new rector and enter into a collaborative ministry with that person.
- Searching for a rector while dispirited is likely to result in either the congregation's searching for a messiah to rescue them, or the calling of a dispirited pastor who seems "just like us".
- When de-energized, the natural tendency is for people to engage in counterproductive cycles of cause, judgment, blame, and alienation. Creating safety for vigorous conversation, discovering common purpose, and growing collaboration will be essential tasks during the transitional time.
- For congregations stuck in a maintenance mode or a gradual decline, visioning and strategic planing will be essential to re-energize the congregation. The question to consider is whether to do that work during the transition time or to call a new rector with the skills and experience to re-energize the congregation so that installed rector can be an essential part of redeveloping the ministry of the congregation.
- Depending on the severity and length of time the congregation has been in the dispirited state, a three-year interim with the search not initiated until the third year would make more sense than a twelve-month interim.

Future Potential

Since transition implies moving from a current state to a future state we need to consider whether the congregation has a sustainable future in its current form. Some questions to consider when looking at sustainability issues:

Does the congregation look like a cross section of the local community? How congruent is the congregation with its neighborhood? What is its potential for growth and development?

The congruence or disparity of the congregation with its neighborhood and the resources in the community will determine the future potential. Examples of disparity would include an aging congregation in a suburban area that is predominated by younger families. Or a declining, once successful Black congregation, that now finds itself in a Latino community due to a demographic shift.

Searching for a rector while dispirited is likely to result in either the congregation's searching for a messiah to rescue them, or the calling of a dispirited pastor who seems "just like us".

The future has a way of arriving unannounced.

— George Will

I cannot say whether things will get better if we change; what I can say is they must change if they are to get better.

— Georg C. Lichtenberg

Disenchantment, whether it is a minor disappointment or a major shock, is the signal that things are moving into transition in our lives.
— William Bridges

With large numbers of clergy retiring in a predictable time-frame the church needs to seriously grasp and act on the idea of succession planning.

Some things to consider in creating a transitional ministry to resolve future potential issues are:

- Small, stable congregations in small communities do not need an interim period to do development work.
- Small congregations in communities of declining population will need to develop new ways of doing ministry. They will need mentor clergy to identify and train laity to do many of “clergy” tasks rather than chaplains to do the ministry for them.
- Larger congregations in changing demographic areas will need to align ministry with the environmental context. This is easier said than done and needs considerable expertise on the part of the transitional minister, as it requires some parishioners, especially long-standing ones, to make major sacrifices for the future well-being of the congregation.
- For congregations in stable demographic areas, the disparity between who they are and their potential is primarily an issue of stalled growth. One of the biggest barriers to that growth is the transition from family to community values. It is unrealistic to expect a transitional minister to take a congregation through that barrier in 12 months. Perhaps they can prepare the soil, but the change in culture from a primarily relational ministry to a program-focussed ministry will take longer. Parishioners more easily enter into that transition if they know their rector is going to be with them through the process and into the promised land. In energized congregations this is the work of the rector or permanent pastor and not the work of a transitional minister.

Succession Predictability

Was the former rector’s departure planned such as a retirement or was it unplanned such as the rector finding another position? Churches are not good at succession planning. Many of our spoken and unspoken rules about clergy searches inadvertently ensure that the issue of succession planning is studiously avoided.

We find that the current state of succession planning makes no sense from an organizational viewpoint. Many clergy retire with everyone “knowing” that it is going to happen but absolutely nothing is done to prepare the congregation for their future. Even when the rector has announced they are retiring, the “rule” is that the search process in its entirety must wait until after the rector has left.

Rather than debate whether a congregation should or should not engage in a search while a retiring incumbent is still employed ask an alternative question which could lead to some different strategies regarding succession planning.

“Under what circumstances would it be appropriate for a congregation to engage in a search, or what resources are needed for the congregation to be able to engage in a search, while the retiring incumbent is still present?”

From our perspective congregations that have the following characteristics could easily engage in a search while the retiring rector is still present:

- Stable and energized;
- Have a clear sense of their future and are acting from a place of love and hope and not fear of an unknown future they need to control;
- A well differentiated rector who will not meddle in the search;
- Do not need major congregational development;
- Have the resources to engage an external search consultant so that search issues do not default to the church staff.

For example, a well-energized congregation, with a predictable transition, especially a large one where much of the day-to-day pastoral work is provided by associate staff, could engage in most of their search process during the last year of the rector’s tenure. This would require only a 2-3 month “sabbatical” between clergy. During the last year of the rector’s ministry, the congregation could engage in an appreciative summit to celebrate the retiring rector’s ministry in the congregation and to use the process as a foundation for taking ownership of the ministry and their future. Knowing their future is in their own hands will minimize the potential for excessive grief, or a loss of momentum. Such a process will reduce the likelihood of the all too common congregational decline that accompanies a retiring rector’s last years of ministry.

In contrast, a congregation that is dispirited or in conflict and does not have the above resources, even though the transition is predictable, is unlikely to be able to successfully engage in a search process during the rector’s tenure. In these circumstance it would be appropriate to wait until the rector departs and the congregation can then engage in a substantial period of transitional ministry prior to engaging in their search.

Under what circumstances would it be appropriate for a congregation to engage in a search, or what resources are needed for the congregation to be able to engage in a search, while the retiring incumbent is still present?

It makes absolutely no sense to insist that, successful, energized, congregations spend at least a year or more of enforced transition between clergy. God’s not waiting, why should God’s people wait.

Assessing for Transitional Ministry Needs

Using the above factors we can create a matrix of possibilities that lead to specific plans for the transitional time. This is not offered as a rigorous rule, but as a guide for creative conversation and thinking in order to respond to the unique needs of the congregation during the transitional time.

| Church Size | Primary Value | Current State | Succession | Potential |
|-------------|----------------------|---------------|------------|-----------|
| Small | Family | Energized | Planned | Congruent |
| | | Dispirited | Unplanned | Disparate |
| Medium | Family and Community | Energized | Planned | Congruent |
| | | Dispirited | Unplanned | Disparate |
| Large | Community | Energized | Planned | Congruent |
| | | Dispirited | Unplanned | Disparate |

Be very wary of descriptions of problems masquerading as solutions to problems.

Conducting the Assessment

The purpose of the assessment is to create a current “picture” of the congregational functioning. As noted, it is a picture of “**State A**” in our **A** ⇒ **B** model of creating change. An open discussion between diocesan personnel and the congregational leaders, before the rector leaves, is required so they can collaboratively design an appropriate ministry for the transitional time.

When conducting the assessment it is important to keep the process on track and not veer off into blame for the current state. At this point in time the cause of the current state is not an issue. The congregation will spend the rest of its existence in the future and the task at hand is not to apportion blame for the current state, but to identify the transitional ministry resources they need to take them successfully into their future.

Within the transitional ministry design meeting, this assessment is designed to be a brief step in the process. During our Appreciative Interim Ministry training, once the categories are briefly described, most transitional ministers can complete this assessment in a few minutes. Difficulty in achieving agreement on the current state is simply indicative that the congregation is dispirited and not ready to move directly into their search process.

Your congregation will spend the rest of its existence in the future. The task at hand is not to apportion blame for its current state, but to identify the transitional ministry resources they need to take them successfully into their future.

Designing the Transitional Ministry

Having defined **A** we now need to describe the goal or "**B**" in the **A** ⇒ **B** change process. To determine the goals for the transitional time we need to determine what a successful transitional ministry in this congregation would achieve. To make that decision we would ask the combined diocesan-congregational leadership questions such as:

- What would a successful transitional ministry in this congregation look like?
- At the end of the interim time, after the transitional minister and the congregation have been very successful, what would they have accomplished, and what would the congregation be doing, or experiencing, or look like?

Notice that the focus is on what the congregation and the transitional minister would have co-created together. During the transitional time the congregation needs to achieve their goals not have something done to them.

Once a successful outcome is defined, the next task is to consider how **State A** and **State B** differ. In a stable, energized congregation the final **State B** is likely to be very similar to the current **State A**. In this case the congregation will not need an extensive transitional ministry. The focus will be primarily on sustaining the current life of the congregation. In contrast, a large difference between the desire outcome **State B** and the current **State A** indicates that the congregation needs to engage in significant change. The time required to achieve that transformation will increase as the difference between the outcome and current state increases. As the difference increases, congregations also need to consider whether they need to delay engaging in their search for an installed rector until they have accomplished some of the transitional work and culture transformation.

Possible Transitional Ministry Designs

Once the desired outcome is identified and compared with the current state, the next step is to decide what ministry resources are needed during the transitional time to achieve the desired outcome. On the following pages examples are provided as possible transitional ministry designs for congregations with different current states on the assessment matrix. This is not intended as an exhaustive or absolute set of guidelines but rather to open some possibilities for designing the transitional ministry.

An example of a successful Transitional Ministry:

When you came we thought the church was what the priest did, while you were here we have discovered that we are the church.

— Feedback given to a Transitional Minister

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do.

So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor.

Catch the trade winds in your sails.

Explore. Dream. Discover.

— Mark Twain

*The church is not here
to meet our needs.
We are the church
here to meet the
needs of the world.*
— Erwin McManus

*I still say a church steeple
with a lightning rod on top
shows a lack of confidence.*
— Doug McLeod

Energized, Congruent Congregations, Planned Succession

With the appropriate consultation during the last year of the incumbent's ministry they should be able to plan for succession during that year and have a short, possibly 1-3 month, transitional time that would be similar to a sabbatical for the congregation. The purpose of the brief sabbatical would be to provide a space in the congregation's consciousness to help parishioners recognize that the former rector has actually left and minimize the possibility of direct comparisons between the new and former rectors. No significant congregational development would be undertaken during this transitional time.

Small congregations may function adequately with just supply ministry during this transitional time.

Large congregations, especially corporate-sized parishes that have associate staff people taking care of essential day-to-day ministries such as pastoral care, may find that the brief transitional period is an appropriate time to have a resident scholar provide a "different" voice in the pulpit. An alternative strategy may be to schedule the transition during the summer season when many ministries are in summer hiatus.

Energized, Congruent Congregations, Unplanned Succession

Because the succession is unplanned the transitional time will be dependent on the time it takes to conduct a search. Smaller congregations with limited resources may find it to their advantage to do a limited search based on a prequalified short list of candidates from the diocese. Current practice suggests that a typical search for a medium sized or larger congregation is likely to take between 12-18 months.

Because the succession is unplanned, grief reactions to the rector's departure may be more pronounced than in a planned succession since parishioners have had little time to process their feelings. See the section on Resolving Grief for ways to assist congregations in grief.

The main focuses of the transitional period are continuing the ministries, ensuring the congregation owns the vision, maintaining momentum and calling a new rector. Significant change in the culture of the parish would not be anticipated or sought during this time.

Dispirited, Planned or Unplanned Succession, Congruent

When the congregation is dispirited because of unresolved conflict, or issues directly related to the incumbent, it is unlikely that they will be able to engage in a search process until after the rector has departed.

Additional assessment may be necessary to identify the nature of the demotivation. If it is primarily because of malaise and reflects a rector who was personally demotivated, which is often the case in many medium-sized parishes, a 12-18 month transitional time with the focus on visioning for the future and revitalizing ministry would be appropriate.

When conflict exists and has led to the termination of the pastoral relationship between the rector and the congregation, the question needs to be asked whether the conflict was simply between the rector and a fairly unified congregation or are there deep, substantial factions within the congregation. In the former situation when the majority of the congregation have objected to some aspect of the rector's ministry or conduct, the conflict will often resolve once the rector has departed. The transitional time may focus on healing and forgiveness within the congregation to prepare them for the future.

Alternatively, if there has been a substantial history of conflict, short tenures, clergy misconduct, and deep factions within the congregation, the transitional time will need to be extended. We would recommend a three-year transitional period, with the first two years focusing on resolving the conflict by growing collaboration around shared values and purpose prior to initiating the search in the third year.

Dispirited, Unplanned Succession, Disparate

Here the extent of the demotivation and the disparity between the congregation and community environment will determine the nature of the transitional ministry.

In small congregations the real issues will be centered on survivability and preparing for a new way of doing ministry that is congruent with their environment. Small congregations in rural settings may need to explore team ministry or other shared ministry designs to create sustainable ministry.

In urban settings the nature of the disparity between the congregation and the neighborhood needs to be respectfully

If your congregation has considerable conflict or is in need of a significant culture change, consider at least a three-year transition with the search being done in the last year when the issues are resolved.

Absolutely nothing will revitalize a discouraged church faster than rediscovering it's purpose.
— Rick Warren

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.
— Martin Luther King, Jr.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.
— Ephesians 2:19

explored. In many cases the disparity is due to changing demographics. Older parishioners may commute from the suburbs to attend services in the church that once was a place of deep neighborhood connection. Some small congregations may need to consider closing and merging with another congregation. Concurrent with the ending of the “old” congregation a new ministry reflective of the neighborhood and that ministers to the people of the neighborhood may be started.

These are complex issues that are not resolved by people outside of the “cultural system” imposing a plan on them. At the same time parishioners will need to move from the expectation that all they need to do is find the “right” rector who will return them to their glory days. The transitional time will not simply be a transition between rectors but a transition between cultures and very different ways of being a parishioner.

It is not uncommon in these situations for the congregation and the diocese to want very different outcomes and the transitional minister getting caught in the conflict between these two viewpoints. Coming to a place of shared expectations of the transitional time through frank and open conversation will be essential prior to the beginning of the transitional period.

In larger congregations where immediate survivability is not an issue an extended transitional time of 2-3 years will be necessary to build collaborative patterns in place of conflict and transform the congregational culture. Once again the key questions to ask in designing the transitional time is whether the congregational rebuilding can be done during the transitional time between rectors or whether it would be better done by the next rector. Because dispirited congregations are not in a resourceful state to make wise, loving decisions it may be appropriate for the bishop to appoint a Priest-in-Charge under special circumstances. This option will be described in detail in the next section

Energized, Planned Succession, Disparate

This situation is likely to occur following a long, generally successful tenure with the congregation aging along with the rector and reflecting their shared interests and values. The disparity with the neighborhood may be one of age or of culture if there have been demographic shifts in the community. When the tenure has been long and successful, but the congregation has failed to reflect the local community in its membership, the congregation is likely to

have been oriented around the rector, with allegiance to the familial-based relationships. Parishioners who have left the area will often commute back to the parish because of their commitment to their friends and clergy.

Grief and anxiety over the future are likely to be significant factors for the congregation to deal with during the transitional time. The grief over the loss of pastoral relationships will be compounded by grief over the loss of the wider community.

During this the transitional time, members need to identify a new reason for being a congregation and attract people from the local community. If this is not accomplished the next tenure is likely to be short, and “Dispirited, Unplanned,” and with greater “Discrepancy” between the reality of the parish and the surrounding community.

An extended transitional ministry that responds to grief and engages the congregation with the local community will be required. In some situations the transitional minister may need to be able to respond to significant multicultural issues.

Concluding the Transitional Ministry Design

Once the assessment is completed and the goals and expectations have been established the next step is to consider what clergy resources are required to help the congregation achieve their goals for the transitional time. Of particular concern will be:

- The nature of the authority given to the transitional minister.
- The expected duration of the transitional period.
- Whether the transitional ministry will be provided on a full-time or part-time basis.

In the following section we will provide descriptions of possible options for congregations to consider when calling a transitional minister. It should be noted that within the Episcopal church there is no standardized language or practice across dioceses regarding transitional ministry and some of the terms may be defined differently from diocese to diocese.

Go into the streets and preach the good news. If you have to, use words.

— St Francis

Those who seek absolute power, even though they seek it to do what they regard as good, are simply demanding the right to enforce their own version of heaven on earth.

And let me remind you, they are the very ones who always create the most hellish tyrannies.

Absolute power does corrupt, and those who seek it must be suspect and must be opposed.

— Barry Goldwater

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake - for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him.
— Matthew 4:18-20

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.
— Australian Aborigine Woman

Types of Transitional Ministry

Sunday Supply

- Provides preaching and worship leadership.
- Supply priest has no authority or responsibility for the life of the congregation beyond the Sunday services.
- Is definitely part time and remuneration is based of the number of services provided.
- Appropriate in very small congregations or for very brief transitional times.

Priest-in-Residence, also called Transitional Pastor,

- The priest provides the full range of pastoral care and worship leadership, but is not responsible for the administrative leadership of the congregation.
- The formal authority and responsibility for the life of the congregation is fully vested in the senior warden and the vestry.
- The senior warden chairs and leads the vestry meetings.
- May be appropriate in energized congregations where the congregation needs to take greater ownership of their vision and purpose.
- Appropriate in shorter, 12-18 month transitional periods.
- The transitional pastor is not a candidate for the permanent position.
- May be full or part-time. Remuneration is similar to or prorated from former incumbent's salary.

Priest-In-Charge

- The priest has the authority and responsibility of a permanent or installed rector but in a time-limited capacity.
- The priest-in-charge chairs and leads the vestry meeting.
- May be appropriate in dispirited or conflicted congregations where the transitional minister may need to exercise considerable authority such as removing parishioners from leadership roles.
- Appropriate in longer, 3-year transitional periods.
- The Priest is not a candidate for the permanent position.
- In most cases it will be full-time.
- Remuneration is similar to the former rector's salary package.

Priest-In-Charge Under Special Circumstances

This is a relatively recent designation that has proven successful in congregations with “special circumstances” such as highly conflicted congregations, or congregations in which egregious misconduct has occurred, or the congregation may have had a search process that has failed to find a suitable candidate. In these special circumstances congregations don’t have the emotional and spiritual resources to make wise and loving decisions and the priest-in-charge under special circumstances provides a way forward for the congregation.

- The Bishop appoints a Priest-in-Charge.
- The priest has all the authority and responsibility of a permanent or installed rector but in a time-limited capacity (often three years).
- During the limited time period the priest and the congregation discern whether the person is called as the permanent replacement.
- The congregation does not engage in a search process or consider other candidates during this time.
- If the decision is made for the priest to stay, the work “morphs” into that of an installed rector.
- If either the priest or congregation decide not to proceed with the pastoral relationship, the priest would leave and a transitional minister would be called while the congregation engages in a search process for a new rector.
- Appropriate in circumstances where congregations need to do considerable culture transformation that would take longer than 2 or 3 years and where it would be appropriate to have one priest journey with the congregation through the entire transformation.
- In most cases it will be full-time.
- Remuneration is similar to the former rector’s salary package.

Reverence for Life affords me my fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting, and enhancing life and that to destroy, harm, or to hinder life is evil. Affirmation of the world – that is affirmation of the will to live, which appears in phenomenal forms all around me – is only possible for me in that I give myself out for other life.

— Albert Schweitzer

*If you are planning for a year, sow rice;
if you are planning for a decade,
plant trees;
if you are planning for a lifetime,
educate people.*

— Chinese Proverb

*Beware of great goals
and cheap resources.
You will get what
you pay for.*

Time Resource Considerations: Full-Time or Part-Time

Many congregations facing budget pressures think that the transitional period is a time to save money by hiring only a part-time clergyperson. In many of these cases because so little clergy resources are being put into the congregation the budget will continue to shrink rather than recover. Rather than start from the idea of saving money, the critical issue is to reflect on the goals for the transitional time and ask what time resource will we need from the transitional minister to accomplish those goals?

Beware of great goals and cheap resources. You will get what you pay for. If you want to make significant changes in your congregational culture you will need to call and remunerate competent clergy to do a full-time job. In our experience, except in small or highly stable congregations with associate clergy, transitional ministry is a full-time endeavor.

Note: If the congregation does decide to call a part-time transitional minister and hopes to call a full-time rector they need to create a budget line item offset for the rector's full salary. Without the offset the congregation may be lulled into a false sense of security while paying a part-time clergy person. This also sets up the new rector for a huge financial hurdle in their first year of ministry which may jeopardize their future ministry with the congregation.

Salary Considerations

Personal Note: I (Rob) have spent most of my parish ministry working as an intentional transitional minister and have been treated very fairly and equitably by all the congregations that I have served. However, I am continually amazed and appalled by the shabby way many congregations treat highly-trained intentional transitional ministers with respect to compensation.

My basic understanding of transitional ministry compensation and the general expectations amongst transitional ministers is for the transitional minister to receive at least what the former incumbent received provided it is at least the diocesan minimum. In some circumstances, where the transitional minister has additional expertise to resolve issues that the former incumbent was unable to accomplish, the transitional minister could reasonably expect to receive more than the former incumbent received.

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Current Compensation Norms for Transitional Ministry

The following are compensation guidelines for transitional ministry that are commonly used by intentional transitional ministers. Please consult the section on clergy compensation for other compensation issues and to establish the total compensation cost for the parish.

- The transitional minister receives what the former incumbent received provided it is at least the diocesan minimum.
- Full health benefits, vacation, and continuing education allowances are provided.
- 1 month full salary and benefits is provided for every 12 months served in lieu of sabbatical time. Many transitional ministers use this time to “decompress” prior to taking another position.
- Health and pension benefits provided for 3 months (or less if the priest moves directly to another congregation) following the transition time to ensure continuity of care in the down-time between positions.
- For part-time ministry prorate the above.

Within the spirit of the guidelines many variations exist. Some transitional ministers carry their own health insurance as they may not be eligible for diocesan plans or they may be covered under a spouse’s policy. Some retired clergy may work for significantly less because they have restrictions on what they may earn. In any situation where there is a significant difference between the former incumbent’s total compensation package and the transitional minister’s compensation we urge that the difference be included in a budget line item to reflect what the next rector will be paid.

Transitional Duration Considerations

Within the field of transitional ministry debate exists over whether the transitional ministry contract should have firm deadlines or whether the contract should be for a specific time period. The reasoning of the first position is that it holds people accountable to the search process and the transitional tasks. Others argue that because there are so many unknown variables that influence the process, an open-ended “for however long it takes” approach makes more sense. Our recommendation would be to combine the two approaches with the contract providing a general understanding of the duration, for example 12-18 months, and acknowledging the possibility of some variation as the ministry unfolds.

We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.

— Marian Wright Edelman:

Never forget that the purpose for which a man lives is the improvement of the man himself, so that he may go out of this world having, in his great sphere or his small one, done some little good for his fellow creatures and labored a little to diminish the sin and sorrow that are in the world.

— William Gladstone

*A verbal contract isn't
worth the paper it's
printed on.*
— Samuel Goldwyn

*It is a very sobering feeling
to be up in space and
realize that one's safety
factor was determined by
the lowest bidder on a
government contract.*
— Alan Shepherd

Creating Transitional Ministry Contracts

Most dioceses can provide sample contracts from their web sites that can be adapted for the specific congregational needs.

Many transitional ministry contracts include a generic statement about the transitional ministry tasks. We recommend replacing these generic statements with congregation-specific goals that have been developed when the transitional ministry is designed. These goals will be the reference points for evaluating the performance of the transitional ministry. In the case of priest-in-charge under special circumstances they will provide reference points to determine if the ministry is successful and whether the congregation and priest have formed a creative partnership to take the congregation successfully into their future.

The contract also needs to describe the transitional minister's relationship to the search committee. This is discussed in detail in the search consultant section. The various options are:

- The transitional minister has nothing to do with the search or the search process.
- The transitional minister provides spiritual care to the search committee and vestry during the search but has no involvement in the process. The Search Consultant and Transitional Minister shall meet regularly to discuss any pastoral issues and congregational dynamics that are impacting the search process.
- The transitional minister will lead the self study and visioning process as a combined focus of the transitional time and the search process. A search consultant will be retained to facilitate the interview process during the candidate assessment phase of the search.
- The transitional minister will also serve as the search consultant.

On the following page are some examples of goal statements that could be included in a contract between a congregation and a transitional minister. Following the Assessment Exercise we have provided resources for responding to grief, trauma, resentment, and conflict from an Appreciative Way perspective.

For a declining small congregation:

A two-year transitional period is anticipated. During the first 12 months the transitional minister shall lead the congregation in a discernment process to determine the congregation's future potential. Possible outcomes may include a:

- Decision to close the congregation,
- Decision to merge with another congregation, or
- Decision to radically change the shape and structure of the way the church does its ministry with the expectation that it may not need full-time clergy leadership.

During the second 12 months the transitional minister shall assist the congregation in following through on the decision they reached during the first year's discernment process.

For a moderately dispirited medium size congregation:

An 18-month transitional period is anticipated. During that time the transitional minister shall serve as a Transitional Pastor with the following responsibilities:

- In consultation with the head of music, create and lead all worship services.
- Provide and/or oversee all pastoral care.
- Support the senior warden who will chair vestry meetings.

Specific Goals and Actions Steps for the transitional period include:

- Helping the congregation resolve grief over the loss of the former rector.
- Leading a strategic visioning process to re-energize the congregation and prepare the congregation to call a new rector.
- The transitional minister shall lead the self-study and visioning process and the development of the congregational profile. Once the profile is complete a Search Consultant shall be retained to lead the search committee and vestry through the candidate interviews.
- The transitional minister will not be a candidate for the installed rector's position.

*When things go wrong
people say we need
more accountability.
What they really mean is
we want to know who can
punish who for messing up.
Accountability is simply a
statement about how I can
count on you and
you can count on me.*

*Unless someone like you
cares a whole awful lot,
nothing is going to get
better. It's not.*

— Dr. Seuss

Assessment Exercise

Using the grid assess the state of your current congregation.

| Church Size | Primary Value | Current State | Succession | Potential |
|-------------|----------------------|---------------|------------|-----------|
| Small | Family | Energized | Planned | Congruent |
| | | Dispirited | Unplanned | Disparate |
| Average | Family and Community | Energized | Planned | Congruent |
| | | Dispirited | Unplanned | Disparate |
| Large | Community | Energized | Planned | Congruent |
| | | Dispirited | Unplanned | Disparate |

Current State

Goal Exercise

Create three or four goals for the transitional time.

Invent Ministry

What type of ministry resources does this congregation need to achieve these goals?

Time Frame