

## 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

Calling 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

Preparing the congregation for the future with a new leader.

### 3. Provide

Providing 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 creating 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.

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*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

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

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*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

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

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## 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 servants 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 positive-to-negative ratio 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 during the transitional time is to help the congregation create (if it doesn't already exist) and come to dwell in a loving culture that results in positive emotional states, so that the congregation can think creatively about their future.

## Culture Change and Search Processes

The following scenario is an all-too-common occurrence in search 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. They will have minimal expression in the search process because of this.
5. The rector is called according to the old cultural values and expectations.
6. The new rector arrives, the newly-emerging leadership is 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 in order to be sustainable 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, 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 only 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 great a loss of momentum.

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

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

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

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## 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 conversations with church leaders, one bishop said, "There are some situations I wouldn't use an interim minister in." Such a statement suggests that the bishop had only one idea of the ministry that an interim minister provides. What he meant was that he would only use a trained interim minister in conflicted congregations. But the question that comes to our minds is this: "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 required to have a substantial interim ministry, 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 new 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, or Medium

**Current Congregational State:** Spirited or Dispirited

**Future Potential:** Congruent or Disparate

**Succession Predictability:** Planned or Unplanned

### **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 fellow parishioners but not know 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 quick and realistic measure of

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*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

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

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

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the congregation's size. Attendance at this service typically gives 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, one person can typically relate closely to about 12 other people. That means that one person can relate to about 144 others with one degree of separation or familiarity. Small congregations who describe themselves as a "family" will invariably have fewer 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 a 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 processes using appreciative inquiry summits or town hall meetings.

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

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**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 often 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 timeline for the search process.

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*Change is inevitable –  
except from a  
vending machine.*

— Robert C. Gallagher

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*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

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*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*

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*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*

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### **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 in the community as a whole. This results in some of the following characteristics:

- To some parishioners, 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 timeline.
- 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, their relationship with the rector is the most important aspect, whereas others will be more invested in a program or subgroup within the congregation. Some will grieve the loss of the former rector, while others will show little grief if their specific programs are maintained.

Both growth and decline create tension as they have the potential to compromise the core values of one or both groups. Growth will jeopardize the opportunity for close personal relationships; 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.

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

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

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

— Eric Shinseki

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

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*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.*

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## **Current State**

Is the congregation energized for ministry or dispirited?

We have found the common use of the term “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,” and this is an alienating process when used to describe a human community.

Rather than using such language, we prefer a simple assessment that, without judgment or exploration of cause, asks: “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.

An energized congregation requires a different type of ministry than a dispirited congregation. For example, if the type of ministry engaged in for a declining congregation is used in a growing congregation, that 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?

For congregations stuck in a maintenance mode, neither energized nor dispirited, or in only a gradual decline, visioning and strategic planning 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 the installed rector can be an essential part of redeveloping the ministry of the congregation.

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 either in 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.
- 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 might include an aging congregation in a suburban area that is predominated by younger families, or a declining, once successful African-American congregation that now finds itself in a Latino community due to a demographic shift.

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*The future has a way of arriving unannounced.*

— George Will

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*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

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*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

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*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.*

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

- 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-focused 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? 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 debating whether a congregation should or should not engage in a search while a retiring incumbent is still employed, ask this 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, and 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:

- They are stable and energized.
- They have a clear sense of their future and are acting from a place of love and hope, and not from fear of an unknown future they need to control.
- Their rector has no desire to meddle in the search.
- They do not need major congregational development.
- They have the resources to engage an external search consultant so that search issues do not default to the church staff.

Faced with a planned transition, a well-energized congregation, 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, is unlikely to be able to successfully engage in a search process during the rector’s tenure. In these circumstances it would be appropriate to wait until the rector departs. The congregation can then engage in a substantial period of transitional ministry prior to engaging in their search.

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

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*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.*

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### 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	Potential	Succession
Small	Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energized</li> <li>• Dispirited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congruent</li> <li>• Disparate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned</li> <li>• Unplanned</li> </ul>
Average	Family and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energized</li> <li>• Dispirited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congruent</li> <li>• Disparate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned</li> <li>• Unplanned</li> </ul>
Large	Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energized</li> <li>• Dispirited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congruent</li> <li>• Disparate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned</li> <li>• Unplanned</li> </ul>

*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: the "**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 desired outcome of **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 next few pages we provide examples of 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 provide you with possibilities for designing your own transitional ministry.

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*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*

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*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*

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

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

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### ***Energized, Congruent, Planned Succession***

With the appropriate consultation during the last year of the incumbent's ministry, this congregation 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. 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 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, 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 and 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 titled "Responding to Grief" for ways to assist congregations in this time.

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 whether there are 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***

In this case, 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 explored. In many

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*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.*

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

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*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.

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*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

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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 away 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, with 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 question 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 attracting people from the local community. If this is not accomplished, the next rector's tenure is likely to be short, and the now dispirited congregation will face an unplanned succession, with even greater disparity 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.

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

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*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

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*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

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*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

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## Types of Transitional Ministry

### **Sunday Supply Priest**

- The priest provides preaching and worship leadership.
- The priest has no authority or responsibility for the life of the congregation beyond the Sunday services.
- The priest is definitely part time, and remuneration is based on the number of services provided.
- Using a Sunday supply priest is appropriate in very small congregations, or for very brief transitional times.

### **Priest-In-Residence or 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.
- This type of ministry may be appropriate in energized congregations where the congregation needs to take greater ownership of their vision and purpose.
- This ministry is most appropriate in shorter, 12-18 month transitional periods.
- The transitional pastor is not a candidate for the permanent position.
- The priest may be full or part-time. Remuneration is similar to or prorated from the 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.
- This approach 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.



- While this ministry is appropriate in longer, 3-year transitional periods, and in most cases the priest is full-time, nonetheless the priest is not a candidate for the permanent position.
- 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 where 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.
- This type of ministry is 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 this is a full-time position, and remuneration is similar to the former rector's salary package.

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*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

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*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

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*Beware of grand goals  
and paltry resources.  
You will get what  
you pay for.*

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*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.*

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### ***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 clergy person. 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 grand goals and paltry 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 eventually 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, and the new rector will be faced with 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.

## **Current Compensation Norms for Transitional Ministry**

The following are compensation guidelines for full-time transitional ministry that are commonly used by intentional transitional ministers:

- 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 are 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, use a pro-rated scale for each item. Please consult the section on clergy compensation for other compensation issues and to establish the total compensation cost for the parish.

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 open ended. A firm deadline holds people accountable to the search process and the transitional tasks, but because there are so many unknown variables that influence the process, an open-ended “for however long it takes” approach might make 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.

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*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:

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*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

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

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*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

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### **Creating Transitional Ministry Contracts**

Most dioceses can provide sample contracts from their web sites that can be adapted for 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. Developing these goals is part of the process of designing the transitional ministry. These goals will be the reference points for evaluating the performance of the transitional ministry. In the case of a 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 was discussed in the "Deciding Who Does What" section on pages 16-18. There are four options:

- 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 meet regularly to discuss any pastoral issues and congregational dynamics that are impacting the search process.
- The transitional minister leads 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 also serves as the search consultant.

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

**Example 1: 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.

**Example 2: 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 action 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.

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*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. This is not accountability, it is punishment and retribution. Accountability is simply a statement about how I can count on you and you can count on me.*

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

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**Instructions:** Use the grid to assess the state of your congregation.

Church Size	Primary Value	Current State	Potential	Succession
Small	Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energized</li> <li>• Dispirited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congruent</li> <li>• Disparate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned</li> <li>• Unplanned</li> </ul>
Average	Family and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energized</li> <li>• Dispirited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congruent</li> <li>• Disparate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned</li> <li>• Unplanned</li> </ul>
Large	Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energized</li> <li>• Dispirited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congruent</li> <li>• Disparate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned</li> <li>• Unplanned</li> </ul>

**Note:** The current state is simply a description. You do not need to state why the congregation is in this state.

**Create Goals for the Transitional Period:** Imagine that the transitional ministry time has been incredibly successful. What would the congregation be doing and what would have been accomplished? From the perspective of a successful transitional ministry, design three or four specific goals for the transitional period.

**Invent the Ministry to Achieve the Goals:** What type of ministry resources does this congregation need to achieve these goals?

**Time Frame:** How long will it take to achieve the goals?



## Responding to Grief

When a congregation is in the midst of grieving their former rector's departure, they are not in a creative spiritual or emotional place to be able to conduct a successful search. However, depending on the extent and nature of the grief, many of the strategies to resolve grief will actually help the congregation in their search process. In this section we will explore the nature of grief from an appreciative perspective, and provide strategies to help a congregation resolve grief.

### **Not All Congregations Grieve Their Last Rector**

*The story is told of a well-intentioned transitional minister who believed it was important for the congregation he was serving to resolve their grief. Every Sunday his sermons were about grief and the need to resolve it. After several months, the congregation became very frustrated and sent the church elders to tell the pastor to change his preaching. "You just don't understand," the elders said. "We are not grieving our last pastor!"*

*"There you go," said the transitional minister, "one of the key signs of grief is denial."*

From our own experience of serving as transitional ministers, and training and consulting with other transitional ministers, we have found that sustained grief over the loss of a rector is actually quite rare. Some congregations have actually been quite glad that their rector left! The most common response, though, is a brief period of missing the former rector, mingled with a sense of gratitude for what the rector had given them, and a sense of interested hope or caring that the rector and their family find their next ministry experience fulfilling. In these circumstances parishioners know that clergy come and clergy go, that relationships ebb and flow, and that the feelings of loss will fairly quickly diminish. Both clergy and parishioners move on while maintaining appropriate friendships.

Similarly, in contrast to horror stories of former rectors meddling in congregations after they have left, most rectors know how to leave a congregation, and ongoing relationships between clergy and congregations are generally appropriate examples of genuine caring and interest between friends who have shared significant life experiences. As a transitional minister, respecting these relationships and allowing them to take their natural course is a more appropriate response than creating inhumane walls and barriers that are often disrespectful and pastorally insensitive.

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*Conducting a search while  
grieving is like the  
lost looking for  
what they are missing  
in a place they cannot find  
while all the time being  
miserably afraid  
they will forget  
they ever had it.*

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*Even if happiness forgets  
you a little bit, never  
completely forget about it.  
— Jacques Prévert*

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*In the night of death,  
hope sees a star,  
and listening love can  
hear the rustle of a wing.  
— Robert Ingersoll*

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*To spare oneself from grief  
at all cost can be achieved  
only at the price  
of total detachment,  
which excludes the ability  
to experience happiness.  
— Erich Fromm*

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*Only those who avoid love  
can avoid grief.  
The point is to  
learn from grief  
and remain vulnerable  
to love.  
— John Brantner*

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### **When Congregations Are Grieving**

While sustained grief that impairs congregational functioning is not as common as many expect, there are times when grief does become a significant obstacle that prevents the congregation from being able to engage in a search.

One form of grief that can be very complex occurs when a rector actually dies while they are serving the congregation. This grief can be compounded by family members of the deceased rector remaining in the congregation. This is not to say that they need to leave, for they also are members of the church and in need of support through their loss. It will, however, require considerable pastoral skill from the transitional minister to help the congregation and the rector's family move through their grief before the congregation is able to engage in a search.

In addition to noting that not all congregations grieve, it is also true that within a congregation there will be great variance among parishioners with respect to their grief. Some parishioners may be quite grief-struck, while others are relatively unconcerned about the previous rector's departure.

Differences in parishioner's grief are likely to be magnified when there has been substantial conflict in the congregation and parishioners have become polarized into groups with very different relationships with the former rector. Within the congregation, these variations will also be impacted by the personal situations of individuals. For example, a parishioner who has recently lost a loved one may become devastated at the loss of the rector who cared for them when their loved one died. In this situation, the loss of the rector has triggered and compounded their personal grief.

In the following section we will provide an Appreciative Inquiry-based understanding of grief, and strategies that the transitional minister can use to help the congregation resolve their grief<sup>18</sup>. This approach to understanding and responding to grief will be useful for both mild expressions of grief and the more severe forms of grief that can immobilize individuals or entire congregations. The discerning transitional minister will also need to decide whether to approach the grief work with the congregation as a whole, or with individuals or smaller groups of grieving parishioners.

## Understanding Grief

The experience of grief is manifested in a variety of ways; sadness, anger, and numbness are just some of the many different responses to loss. Rather than using a classical understanding of the stages of grief, we will use the **A** ⇒ **B** change model to create a healing response to the parishioners' experience. The first step is to understand what people are experiencing when they are grieving. What is **State A** when someone is grieving? If we listen to people who are in the midst of the early stages of grieving they will often say things like:

- "I can't imagine going on without him."
- "I don't know how I will cope."
- "We are going to miss her."

When we examine these statements, we note that they are all about the future, not the past. The people have lost hope in their ability to cope with or have an enjoyable future. To have hope, a person has to be able to imagine a future that they would like to live in. When they are not able to imagine that future, they will experience great pain and a sense of loss. This pain may be expressed in sadness, rage, anxiety, or a mixture of these and other emotions. But the pain of loss is not simply a loss of something in the past: what has been lost is the ability to access a preferred future.

Even after the grief has persisted for a period of time people will say things like:

- "I still really miss him."
- "I'm not doing very well without her."

These are statements about the present. Not feeling resourceful in the present is an obstacle to creating their future.

Here is an illustration of this grief experience:

I (Rob) was meeting with a family of 5 adult children and their mother to prepare a funeral for their dad and husband who had just died. We were gathered around the kitchen table, and the children especially were telling stories about some of the things their dad had done. There was much laughter as they remembered their dad climbing into a peach tree to prune a branch when the branch broke and dad came tumbling out of the tree. In the middle of telling the stories one of the siblings began to weep quite deeply. That person had moved

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*You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present.*

— Jan Glidewell

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*It is foolish to tear one's hair in grief, as though sorrow would be made less by baldness.*

— Marcus Tullius Cicero

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*Nobody gets to live life backwards. Look ahead – that's where your future lies.*

— Ann Landers

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*The congregation will need to keep telling you what they valued about their former rector until they know that you know what they valued and currently miss.*

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from looking back to an experience of their dad in the past, which was a pleasurable experience, to looking into the future in which their beloved dad was not. They could see the peach tree, but their dad wasn't part of the picture anymore, and they became distressed. The pain associated with loss comes from the inability to imagine what or who we will love in the future.

From this reflection we would define the experience of grief as follows:

***"Grief is the inability to imagine a tomorrow that you would enjoy or find life-giving."***

Grief is not about being trapped in the past, it is about being unable to imagine a preferred future. A realistic hope allows us to release concerns about the future so that we can live fully in the present moment. Without a future to look forward to, we will stay trapped in our memories of the past and unable to experience present joys.

### ***Appreciative Grieving: Inventing a Response to Grief***

What is **State B**, or the goal, if we are helping someone to resolve grief? What would the person be doing if they weren't grieving? They would be enjoying life and looking forward to doing enjoyable things. Since the grief response occurs because people cannot imagine a preferred future, the "cure" for grief is to help the person imagine a future that they can look forward to. You might ask them:

- What makes your life enjoyable?
- What do you need to be able to look forward to tomorrow?

While the specifics of what makes life enjoyable differs for each one of us, the essence of what makes life enjoyable is that it includes things we value. People grieve when they look into the future and cannot see what they value. Grief is resolved when the person is able to explore what was valuable about a past relationship, and then is able to imagine new ways of experiencing that value in the future, despite the loss of their loved one.

From an appreciative perspective, creating images of a preferred future is not about fantasizing, or naive, positive thinking, or living in denial. The imaging process begins by exploring what was good in the past. The image of the future is based on this foundation of things they have experienced in the past and therefore realistically know to be attainable. It is not based on what they naively fantasize might come true.

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*People will have more confidence journeying to the future when they get to carry what they value from the past with them.*  
— Fifth Assumption of Appreciative Inquiry

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## ***Distinguishing the Value from the Vehicle***

Things we value come to us in a form, or a “vehicle.” But the vehicle is not the value, nor is the value the vehicle. For example, the value may be “love” and the vehicle through which we experience love is the person who loves us. In assisting people to grieve, we need to help them distinguish the value from the vehicle. While the vehicle may be lost and unattainable, the value hasn’t been lost. This may require drilling down or mining into the value in order to find the deeper value that is eternal, and not simply restricted to the temporal vehicle.

Here is an example of mining a value:

*Parishioner:* I just really miss Pastor Bob.

*Pastor:* I’m curious. Tell me, what do you really miss about him?

*Parishioner:* I really miss his preaching.

*Pastor:* What was it about his preaching that you really value?

*Parishioner:* When he would preach I just had that wonderful sense of God’s presence, and I knew everything was going to be OK.

*Pastor:* That’s really wonderful, that sense of God’s presence. Take a moment and let yourself remember that sense of God’s presence right now ... It’s really amazing, isn’t it, that you can sense that right now...

*(in most cases people will move into that remembering, in the very Biblical understanding of re-membering, or making a past reality become the present)*

What is really cool is that the gift Pastor Bob gave you, that sense of God’s presence — you still have that, it hasn’t been taken from you ... I wonder where you hold that presence within you?

*Parishioner:* It’s in my heart and all around me.

*Pastor:* Holding it in your heart makes sense to me because wherever you go it will be there ... with you ...

Take a moment and think of some places in the future where you would like to experience that presence, and allow your imagination to bring that presence from your heart into those places.

In this process we have separated an eternal value — God’s presence — from its temporal vehicle (Pastor Bob), and made the value available

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*Clergy may shine the light, but they are not the source of The Light. We grieve when we confuse the bulb by which we knew the light with The Light.*

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*The future is uncertain, because love changes everything.*  
— Unknown

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*We do not stop loving  
people when they die and  
our faith says they don't  
stop loving us either.*

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*Death leaves a heartache  
no one can heal,  
love leaves a memory  
no one can steal.  
— From an Irish headstone*

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*For I am convinced that  
neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers, nor  
things present, nor things  
to come, nor powers,  
nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all  
creation, will be able to  
separate us from the love  
of God in Christ  
Jesus our Lord.  
— Romans 8:38-39*

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in the future. There are other ways that this distinction can be made. For example, an alternative strategy is to find other times when the person has had similar experiences of God's presence independent of Pastor Bob, perhaps at a sunset or moments of quiet. Remembering these times challenges the grieving perception that God's presence can only be experienced in Pastor Bob's preaching.

What we are doing in this processes is discovering a past value and grounding the person in their memory of that value, so that they are "re-membered" in that value. Now the value is in the present, a present which doesn't include the vehicle by which they originally knew or received the value. Through this exercise, they learn that they still have what was really valuable. From the perspective of having the value in the present, they can begin realistically imagining having it in the future. Once they are able to imagine that value in the future, they will literally not be able to grieve.

There are some subtleties to this appreciative approach. For example, after we find the deeper value of God's presence, we would not ask the person a yes/no type of question, such as "Have you experienced God's presence since Pastor Bob left?" If we did ask that question they probably would say no, and we would have reinforced their loss and compounded their grief.

Rather than asking a yes/no question, we invite the person to remember by reliving an experience, so that they can experience the value in the present moment. We can then ask a leading question such as: "I am curious, when else have you experienced that same feeling?" At that point the person is likely to explore their memory and begin making connections, where perhaps connections did not previously exist. They may not have recognized that the experience of the sunset was also about God's presence. As they gather these experiences, they begin to feel more resourceful and hopeful about their future.

Here is another example of mining into a value following the death of a loved one.

*Parishioner:* I really miss my dad.

*Pastor:* Tell me, what about your dad do you really miss?

*Parishioner:* He used to give great hugs. Whenever I was having a bad day I could just go in and get a hug. Now I can't do that any more.



*Pastor:* His hugs were really special ... As you remember his hugs I wonder what you experienced when he hugged you.

*Parishioner:* He just really believed in me, and when he hugged me I would somehow get my confidence back.

*Pastor:* Your strength and confidence were restored.

*Parishioner:* Yeah.

*Pastor:* That's pretty neat ... Why don't you take a moment and remember that belief in you that you and your dad would share at those times ... And be aware of the feeling of confidence that it gives you ... Gives you even now ...

Once the person is experiencing in the present this value that they thought was lost, you can help them to move into imagining having it in their future, especially if they carry it in a place like their own heart. This example demonstrates the need to mine into the value to find the eternal value. Obviously the person can no longer go and get a hug, but they can still access this internal and eternal quality that even death cannot destroy.

Death is both a robber and a liar. Death can and does steal a loved one's physical presence from you but it lies when it says it can take their love from you. Everything a deceased loved one has ever given you, you still have, unless you have given it away or someone steals it from you. You can choose what you want to keep and what you let go of. In that choosing, you have more power than death. My (Rob's) dad was a very quiet, reserved, man who rarely expressed praise or affirmation. He died when I was 18 years old, just months after I graduated high school with the highest academic and character awards the school offered. Nothing, not his death nor the intervening 37 years, has taken from me the grin on his face and the quiet, bottomless pride he has in me. We do not stop loving people when they die and our faith says they don't stop loving us either.

This strategy of resolving grief is very different from many psycho-educational approaches where the intervention focuses most of its time teaching the person about grief to normalize feelings of anger or sadness. Such processes may be somewhat helpful in reducing the self-alienation that follows their self-judgments about being angry or sad and not coping well, but they rarely help the person move from their sense of loss to a place of hope.

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*While grief is fresh,  
every attempt to divert  
only irritates.  
You must wait till it be  
digested, and then  
amusement will dissipate  
the remains of it.*

— Samuel Johnson

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*If you want to be really  
helpful to grieving people,  
don't teach them about  
grief, because they are  
already experts at grieving.  
What we need to do is lead  
them through their grief  
to the place where they  
can imagine a future with  
qualities they value.*

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*We must welcome the future, remembering that soon it will be the past; and we must respect the past remembering that once it was all that was humanly possible.*

— George Santayana

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*How shall you remember?  
Do you want to remember your loved one with love and gratitude or with sadness and grief?*

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To truly help someone move from grief to hope we need to lead them through the process, not teach them about the process. We would never teach or tell them that they are miserable because they can't imagine their future and that what they need to do to feel better is imagine a happy future. Rather, we invite them to share stories about what they miss and what they valued, and then help them to discover that these essential values are still available.

### ***Satisfying Objections to Resolving Grief***

Some people may object to making the distinction between a value and the vehicle by which it was known, because they feel it is a betrayal of the person or their memory of their loved one. Others may feel that they need to spend an appropriate amount of time feeling miserable before they will allow themselves to be happy. Part of their thinking may be that if their grief resolved too quickly, then perhaps they never really cared for the person. Others may feel that if they were to be happy in the present or future, they would be betraying the person who had loved them in the past. With respect to a beloved rector, parishioners may become embarrassed if they tell their former rector that they are really enjoying their new rector, because their current enjoyment is somehow a judgment about the former rector. All of these objections need to be satisfied if people are to sustainably resolve their grief and be restored to hope.

### ***How Shall We Remember?***

One of the objections to resolving grief that may need to be satisfied is the fear of forgetting the loved one. Staying in grief is a way to ensure that they never forget them. This type of objection is illustrated by the Israelites exiled to Babylon after the destruction of the Temple. They are terrified that they will forget Jerusalem and cry out: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy" (*Psalms 137:5-6*).

In satisfying this objection it may be helpful to reassure the grieving person that they will never forget, but the real question is "How do you want to remember?" Do they want to remember with sadness and grief, or with love and gratitude for the life they shared? Never forgetting by remembering with love and gratitude opens the person to the future, in contrast to the future-limiting experience of remembering with sadness and grief.

### Strategies to Remember with Love and Gratitude

Invite the person to remember their loved one and the life they shared. In these memorable experiences, be aware of the qualities or characteristics that made the person memorable. Take time to allow the person to be grateful for having the opportunity to share in these qualities. Ask the person where they would like to “store” these memories so that they are always accessible whenever they choose to recall them. Many people will respond with a physical gesture implying “in my heart.” Inquire whether they have any objection to moving these memories into their heart so that they can remember with love and gratitude. If there are objections, inquire of the part that objects what would satisfy the objection. When the objections are satisfied, invite the person in their own way to move the memories into their heart or the place they have chosen to store them so they can be accessible. When the memories are relocated, invite the person to imagine journeying into their future remembering with love and gratitude, and knowing they can always remember because they carry these memories in their heart with love and gratitude.

### Grieving and Appreciative Inquiry Summits

In the previous section we have explored the nature of grief and provided an appreciative strategy to resolve grief. In essence, to resolve grief we remember the past, discover what is valuable, and imagine a future containing that value. This is the same model that forms the basis of effective funeral homilies and services. Stories are told extolling the virtues or values of the deceased. Then in some manner the mourners are encouraged to use the person as a role model for those values and to continue those values in their lives as they go into the future. In a real sense the preacher is sprinkling the mourner’s future with the things they valued about the deceased.

Most of the previous discussion was related to helping individuals with grief, but the same basic strategies can be used with a large group such as an entire congregation. The process of discovering what was valuable and using it as the foundation for imagining a preferred future is exactly the same process that occurs in appreciative inquiry summits and visioning processes. We develop an image of a preferred future or a vision for the future by discovering and building on what was valuable in the past. In many congregations the appreciative inquiry strategic visioning process will actually help resolve grief, without the grief being a specific ministry focus. When people have a shared, realistic image of the future that contains what they value

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*If you believe that feeling bad or worrying long enough will change a past or future event, then you are residing on another planet with a different reality system.*

— William James

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*When people have a shared, realistic image of the future that contains what they value and find life-giving, and the belief that they can create it, they will not be grieving.*

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*Carve a tunnel of hope  
through the  
dark mountain of  
disappointment.  
— Martin Luther King Jr.*

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*The best way to prevent  
congregational grief is  
to ensure that the search  
process results in the call  
of a pastor who respects  
what the congregation  
values, and can join the  
congregation in growing  
those values. The first step  
in this process is to help  
the congregation discover  
what it is they truly value.*

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and find life-giving, and the belief that they can create it, they will not be grieving.

From a theological perspective, these grief strategies help people realize that even if people come and go, God and God's love has not left. The Source of all blessing and life is still present. When the people of Israel were exiled to Babylon they were confronted with a great theological challenge that is captured in the words of Psalm 137: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" The people believed that God would only hear their prayers when they were offered on Israel's sacred soil. Holding this belief would cause grief, and they did grieve, as the Psalmist reports. That grief persisted until they were able to discover that God's blessing was still available even in a foreign land. The exile story also suggests that many people were not really able to make that transition, and this is something to keep in mind. Not all members of a congregation will be able to resolve their grief in the same time or fashion, and the focus may need to shift between a congregational approach and an individual one.

### ***Inoculating a Congregation Against Grief***

Some congregations don't grieve when their rector leaves because the transitional minister is very similar to the former rector. For example, if a congregation deeply values the past rector's strong social justice sermons, and the transitional minister also preaches strong social justice sermons, then the congregation will not actually have lost what they value and consequently their grief will be minimal. However, if the congregation subsequently calls a person who does not preach strong social justice sermons then they may begin to grieve the former rector after the transitional time is over and the new rector is installed. In other cases congregations may become attached to their transitional minister and then grieve that person's leaving.

The best way to prevent this type of grief reaction is to help the congregation, during the search preparation and the candidate assessment phase, to continually clarify and focus on what they value and their desired future. As long as the congregation calls someone who can help them grow what they value as a congregation, there will not be a deep sense of loss, and consequently only minimal grief as the congregation transitions to new leadership.

The previous understanding of grief can also be used by the transitional minister to inoculate the congregation against potential grief when they leave. In the last weeks of the transitional time people

will begin saying their good-byes and say things like “We are going to miss you.” Rather than just saying “Thank you” or “I will miss you too,” this is an opportunity to explore what it is they are going to miss. In a similar manner, the transitional minister may need to mine into that value to find a deeper value and then help the people realize that when they leave, what they deeply valued will remain with them.

This process can be used with groups during the last few weeks of the transitional time, by encouraging people to reflect on what they have been grateful for during the transitional time. Where have they seen God working, and what did they do as a result? The more the transitional minister invites the congregation to move their focus from the minister to focusing on where they have seen God at work and how they can continue to engage with God in continuing these tasks, the less likely they will be to grieve the minister’s leaving. While the minister may leave, God is not leaving, and the opportunity to experience God’s blessing will remain rather than depart with the minister.

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*There are things that we  
don't want to happen but  
have to accept,  
things we don't want to  
know but have to learn,  
and people we can't live  
without but have to let go.*

— Author Unknown

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*You cannot change  
one iota of your past.  
You can only change what  
you will allow from your  
past to inform your future.*

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*Denial is a common  
strategy that substitutes  
deliberate ignorance for  
thoughtful knowing.*  
— Adapted from  
Charles Tremper

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*I'm not upset that  
you lied to me,  
I'm upset that from now on  
I can't believe you.*  
— Friedrich Nietzsche

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## Responding to Traumatic Events

Congregations whose transitional time has been caused by egregious misconduct, such as sexual abuse, present a complex entanglement of pain and emotion that requires enormous compassion and specialized skill on the part of the transitional minister.

Within the congregation there may be multiple views of the misconduct and its consequences. Many of these views will become polarized and conflicted. Some parishioners may be in denial, unable to believe that their beloved pastor did the things of which they are accused, and they may minimize the pain of others and/or become hostile toward the victims and their advocates. Others will have totally vilified the pastor and only want revenge. For them to move beyond the trauma would be to minimize its reality and to deny justice.

Conversations about forgiveness can make the situation worse as some will use a rush to forgiveness as a way to minimize or “sweep under the rug” what has been done. Rather than minimizing suffering, true forgiveness requires a deep awareness of what needs to be forgiven. This requires the hard work of listening to the stories and bringing ourselves, the perpetrator, and the victims to the foot of the cross, to stare into the abyss of human depravity which we all share and behold the grace of God in which we also all share. While some may rush to forgive, others may never forgive and years later still remain trapped in their pain and resentment.

Many will find the resulting turmoil too overwhelming and just leave the congregation. Their withdrawn pledges may cause financial pressures that limit the congregation's ability to respond redemptively. Compounding these miseries is the legal system and the need for confidentiality which may delay or hinder opportunities for healing conversations.

One of the consequences of abuse is that the fabric of trust, an essential ingredient of community, has been violated and torn. Without trust, a congregation does not have the essential emotional and spiritual resources to engage in a search process. These congregations need an extended transitional time for the healing work to be done before a search process is implemented. One recommendation is to have a priest-in-charge under special circumstances be appointed to provide the continuity of care through the healing process and into a new vision of the future.



## **Whole Truth Telling: The Three Truths**

When an individual or group has survived a trauma there are three important stories or “truths” that need to be told.

### **1. A bad thing happened.**

This is the story of the negative event and the circumstances that gave rise to suffering, fear, and anger. Unfortunately, we often get voyeuristically attached to the trauma and are unable to see beyond the horror to the life-giving realities that still exist. Some congregations get trapped in this partial truth, telling this story endlessly and in ways that “re-members” them into a state of helplessness. The problem is no longer the trauma but that the people have lost their resourcefulness.

### **2. The person or group survived.**

This second story is crucial because many people who have experienced trauma do not realize, from a psychological perspective, that they survived. They are trapped or frozen in the trauma and need to discover how they survived. While the person may have been rescued by others, the person needs to focus on what they did during that time to ensure that they survived. Some of the survival strategies, such as avoidance or, in extreme situations, dissociation may eventually become problematic. However, in listening to these stories we need to behold with wonder and awe the sheer creativity of the human psyche to respond to life-threatening situations. It is from this place of wonder, and not from judgment, that we can help them discover more effective strategies for living their lives.

I (Rob) was at a gathering of psychotherapists who were having a conversation about a man who had been injured in a national disaster. He had been triaged in the field and set aside to be medi-vac’d to a hospital. In the chaos he was overlooked and left abandoned for 8 hours before he was discovered and taken to the hospital. The man was now suffering not only from his injuries but from the terror of having been abandoned in the midst of his suffering. The psychologists were talking about how terrible it was, who was to blame, and who should be sued, especially for the traumatizing neglect that had compounded the man’s suffering. All of these conversations were in collusion with the man’s sense of victimization, and ultimately unhelpful to restoring him to a place of resourcefulness. What I wanted to do was find the man, help

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*Don't become a  
victim of yourself.  
Forget about the thief  
waiting in the alley;  
what about the  
thief in your mind?*

— Jim Rohn

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*Denial ain't just  
a river in Egypt.*

— Mark Twain

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*The turning point in the  
process of growing up is  
when you discover the core  
of strength within you that  
survives all hurt.*

— Max Lerner

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*Show me your face before  
your mother was born.*

— Buddhist Koan  
or put another way:

*Show me your God-given  
face before the world  
tore it apart.*

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*If your god does not have  
an adequate response  
to suffering or cannot  
“handle” human evil  
such as the Holocaust or  
molestation, then it is much  
too small and you need to  
find another god.*

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him find the part of himself that had not abandoned him when all of humanity had, and take that part out for a beer so that we could thank it for keeping him alive.

It is in their stories of survival that people and congregations can see and regain their resourcefulness. In the telling of these stories of survival they are “re-membered” into a state of resourcefulness. They can discover strengths where previously they only saw weakness and put these strengths to work, not in re-living their past, but creating their future.

Both the story of the bad thing that happened and the story of survival need to be told in relationship to each other. If we only tell the stories of the negative thing that happened, then we will foster victim consciousness and keep the person trapped in their past. If we only tell the positive stories of how they survived, we would minimize the suffering and foster denial. We need to tell both stories, because each only has meaning in relationship to the other. Only when both stories are told can we create the possibility of transformed living in the Life that is beyond the notion of positive and negative. This leads us to the third truth that needs to be told.

**3. God, the Source of Life and Love, is greater than humanity’s capacity for evil. Despite the trauma, there is a life-giving future to be lived.**

Where is God in the midst of suffering? Where is God in the horrors of the Holocaust, or genocide, or when a pastor molests a child? Why did we survive when others didn’t? These are common and profound existential questions which most religions seek to address in some form. Despite all the evil humanity has inflicted upon itself throughout history, life goes on and is continually offered to each one of us, despite our deeds and the deeds done to us. If your god does not have an adequate response to suffering or cannot “handle” human evil, such as the Holocaust or molestation, then it is much too small and you need to find another god.

The transitional time is also a time to reflect theologically on this great mystery — not in an abstract or academic way, but in a way that relates to the congregation’s experience. This is an opportunity to help the congregation realize that despite the traumatic events, God has not abandoned them. They are

still being given life and have life to share with those in their community. As in telling only the story of survival, only sharing the story of God's presence may be a form of denial. We cannot have a helpful conversation about grace if it doesn't include a conversation about sin.

### **The Three Stories**

These three truths represent three different stories that can be told about any traumatic event: a victim's story, a survivor's story, or a thriver's story — the redemption story of new life.

For the congregation to truly recover from the impact of a trauma, the congregation's narrative needs to be transformed. If the congregation stays with the victim story, they will repeat experiences of victimization. They will call clergy to rescue them, but the act of seeking a rescuer perpetuates the victim story. If the incoming clergy does not act as a rescuer, conflict is likely to ensue and the people will once again feel victimized. The survivor story is a necessary way point on the road to thriving. When told it helps the people regain a sense of resourceful and rebuilds a resourceful foundation to imagine a desired future. However, staying with this story may lead to denial of the event itself. Both experiences — as victim and as survivor — must be acknowledge, accepted, and replaced with the next story: the thriver's story.

The thriver's story of new life in God is not likely to be told until well into the interim or the next rector's tenure. It requires a series of successes to establish this new narrative. Once created, a robust thriver story creates its own momentum and self-correcting homeostasis. While the thriver narrative may take time to establish in the congregation's consciousness, having a clear survivor/thriver story and an awareness of God's presence will be necessary to engage in a search. When a congregation tangibly discovers that God is still present, despite the trauma, they are "re-membered" as the children of God and have a future to live and are able to engage in the search for a new rector.

### **Responding to Historic Abuse**

Many transitional ministers find themselves in congregations where there has been an incident (or multiple incidents) of abuse in the past, and the question arises as to how the transitional minister should respond to that history. Some would ignore it, saying "it doesn't matter now," while others would see their primary task as helping the congregation explore and deal with it. We find both of these approaches unhelpful, as they deny a fundamental aspect of incarnational ministry, namely,

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*Those who do not have power over the stories that dominate their lives, power to retell them, rethink them, deconstruct them, joke about them, and change them as times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts.*

— Salmun Rushdie

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*We don't want to explain yesterday's world, what we want to do is articulate tomorrow's possibilities*

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*Thou shalt not be a victim.  
Thou shalt not be a perpetrator.  
Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.*

— Holocaust Museum,  
Washington, DC

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An elder Native American  
was teaching his  
grandchildren about life.  
He said to them,  
"A fight is going on inside  
me. It is a terrible fight, and  
it is between  
two wolves.

One wolf represents fear,  
anger, envy, sorrow,  
regret, greed, arrogance,  
self-pity, guilt, resentment,  
inferiority, jealousy and lies.

The other wolf stands for  
joy, peace, love, hope,  
sharing, serenity, humility,  
kindness, benevolence,  
friendship, empathy,  
generosity, truth and  
compassion. This same  
fight is going on  
inside of you and  
every other person too."

The children thought about  
it for a minute and then  
one child asked  
his grandfather,  
"Which wolf will win?"  
The wise one  
simply replied:  
"The one I feed."  
— Cherokee Parable

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entering into and dealing with the present to create a preferred future. When the disciples encountered the man born blind, they wanted to know what in the past had caused the man's blindness — was it his sin or the sin of his parents? Jesus dismissed such ideas, pointing instead to the present situation as an opportunity for the glory of God to be revealed (*John 9:1-3*).

The critical concern is what is occurring in the present moment and what resources people need to create their tomorrow. There may be a history of abuse, but how does it impact the congregation today? Some congregations may find it easier to talk of the historic trauma rather than talking about their current situation and how they will minister to the needs of the people in their neighborhood. Other congregations, without a sense of purpose that inspires the present moment, may look back at the past and fixate on when it all began to fail. In this situation, no amount of talking about the trauma will help because the missing resource is a sense of purpose for this present moment. Discovering how they survived, the resources they still have, and their current purpose will reorient them from the past and its failings to the present moment and their possibilities of a preferred future.

### **The Loss of Trust**

Probably the most lasting impact of abuse in a congregation is that trust is destroyed. The lack of trust may be found in a variety of relationships. Parishioners may no longer trust clergy, and act in ways that cause clergy not to trust them. Anger may be displaced onto the victims, or onto the bishop, for causing their beloved rector to be removed. Parishioners may no longer trust one another, as some may have known of the abuse and done little to confront the rector. Others may feel the situation was dealt with inappropriately. Some may have "moved on" while others remain fixated on the abuse.

While the cause of the broken trust may be in the past, the concern is for how the lack of trust is being manifested in the present. In the following list of signs of a lack of trust, notice how they are all occurring in the present. While these signs may be associated with a history of abuse, their presence does not imply abuse has occurred. A subtle erosion of trust can occur in any congregation and may be reinforced to become the prevailing culture.

Regardless of the causes in the past, the following signs of a lack of trust are always in the present:

- Some congregations may find it difficult to have open conversations about any significant concern.
- Meetings may be brief and tense with significant conversations being had in the parking lot between smaller groups.
- Power may be localized in a small group that makes decisions in secret.
- There may be little transparency with respect to finances.
- Parishioners may be uninspired and unwilling to engage with others in ministry to the community.
- An atmosphere of fear may pervade the congregation rather than an atmosphere of love and joy.
- Parishioners may intentionally avoid one another.
- Church meetings may be tense arguments over minor issues while larger issues are ignored.
- The diocese or other external agencies may be held in contempt, with the congregation acting as though they are under siege.

When we look over a list of signs of a lack of trust we can see that there is a common underlying element: it is no longer safe for people to come and be themselves. There is only alienation where there needs to be acceptance.

### ***Rebuilding Trust: Truth and Reconciliation***

To rebuild trust we need to first rebuild safety. Without building safety, forcing people to talk when there is no trust will only make things worse. When people are unwilling to engage in conversation with one another we need to first ask: "What do you need to make it safe enough to have this conversation?"

The first step in creating safety is to focus on what people need today to feel safe, rather than on the origins of their lack of safety. To achieve this current safety, people can remember times when they have felt safe in the past and explore what made them feel safe. Using this remembered experience and knowledge, they can then reflect on how they can offer these qualities, attitudes, or behaviors of safety to others.

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*Hanging onto resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head.*  
— Ann Landers

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*With Christ's prayer of forgiveness from the cross the universal religion of revenge is overcome and the universal law of retaliation is annulled.*  
— Jurgen Moltman

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*Forgiveness is the economy of the heart... Forgiveness saves expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of spirits.*  
— Hannah More

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*Forgiving someone won't  
make them nice,  
it will however  
make you nicer.*  
— Unknown

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The South African Truth and Reconciliation process was designed to make it safe enough for people to make confessions about the injustices that had been perpetrated by the authorities. In a very real way, the Church's teaching about God's love makes it safe for people to confess their sins, and then to find the power to live new lives.

In dealing with a past injustice, it is important to stay focused on the goal of reconciliation, which is about how we will live and work together in the future. In creating a healing process, we need to ensure that the outcome of the process is leading to greater acceptance rather than increased alienation. The process is not truth and punishment, nor is it denial and reconciliation.

Just talking about the past will not help, unless it leads to changes in the present. Forgiveness is an essential part of the process. From our experience, many in the church do not know how to forgive and consequently the transitional ministry time may require significant teaching — not on the need to forgive, but on how to forgive.



## The Ministries of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

It is not uncommon for people in transition to need to forgive what has happened in the past so they can be reconciled to their future. Without forgiveness, people remain trapped in their past, obsessing over what has been done to them. While they are looking back to the past, it is impossible to look forward. If they are resentful of the past, when they do glimpse the future they are likely to see continual experiences of what happened in the past, and find most of their effort going into self-protective measures.

Some people find it very easy to forgive, while others, often despite their best efforts, find it difficult to release their resentment and live joyfully in the present moment. Our experience of helping people learn how to forgive indicates that there are two primary areas to focus on: the first is the skill or ability to forgive, and the second is the person's motivation to forgive. When people can't forgive, it is because they don't know how, or because some part of them objects to forgiving and that objection needs to be satisfied before the person will be free to forgive.

### *The Skill of Forgiving*

Despite forgiveness being one of the core elements of the Gospel, our experience of most churchgoers is that we are very unskilled at forgiving others, and we rarely make forgiveness an essential part of our daily practice. When we don't know how to forgive, we have four options: we can stay resentful as a self-protective blanket to prevent further pain; we can numb out our pain and become passionless and disengaged; we can avoid the context, such as the church where the injury occurred; or we can learn to forgive. Forgiveness is a skill that we can practice and develop. To develop the skill of forgiving, people need to understand the nature of resentment and what forgiveness is — and what it is not.

Take a moment and think of someone you resent. Without getting into the content of what they did to you, focus on the thoughts underlying the resentment.

When we examine the thought patterns in resentment we often find a thought like: "They shouldn't have done..."

What this suggests is that resentment is a current demand that someone or something in the past should have been different. While the event that created our resentment may be in the past, the

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*The key is to get to know people and trust them to be who they are. Instead, we trust people to be who we want them to be — and when they're not, we cry.*

— Unknown

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*Sincere forgiveness isn't colored with expectations that the other person apologize or change. Don't worry whether or not they finally understand you. Love them and release them. Life feeds back truth to people in its own way and time — just like it does for you and me.*

— Sara Paddison

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*When you forgive,  
you in no way change the  
past — but you sure  
do change the future.*  
— Bernard Meltzer

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*We need to  
forgive and remember  
not forgive and forget.*  
— Robert McDonald

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*If a fox gets in the  
chicken coop we need  
to get the fox out and  
protect the chickens by  
remembering that  
foxes are foxes and aren't  
safe around chickens.*

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resentment is in the present and is manifested as a demand about the past. What we cannot do is change the past. It doesn't matter how bad or egregious the offending behavior was, nor how hard we demand in this present moment that they had not done what they did, it is in the past and we cannot change the past. What we can do is change how we view the past, and how we reorient from what happened to what we want to happen in the future. Forgiveness is something that we do in the present to let go of the demand that the past would have been different.

***When we forgive we release our current demand that the past or the people in the past would have been different.***

This understanding of forgiveness forms the basis of a forgiveness process that we will present at the end of this section<sup>19</sup>.

Forgiveness isn't denial that something bad happened. One of the steps in the forgiveness process is transforming the demand into a preference. We move from demanding that a person had behaved differently in the past to preferring that they had behaved differently in the past. By transforming the demand to a preference, we are not denying that something bad happened; rather we are changing the way we relate to what happened.

One of the common, truly unhelpful understandings about forgiveness is that we need to forgive and forget. First off, it is actually impossible to completely forget things, especially when you try hard to forget, as the very act of trying to forget will hold the issue in consciousness and refresh your memory. It is also potentially dangerous to forget what has been done to you. Imagine if you had tried to pet a lion and had your arm mauled. As part of your healing from the trauma you would need to forgive the lion. If you forgot that lions maul arms, you might end up losing the other arm when you tried to pet one again. What we need to do is forgive — and remember that lions have the potential to maul arms. Likewise, we need to forgive a breach of trust while remembering that some people are not trustworthy. As we have noted, reconciliation is only possible when the person is able to demonstrate trustworthiness.

Forgiving and remembering is very different from forgiving and reliving. In reliving an experience, we will be awash with all the same painful feelings we had when the experience first occurred. In forgiving, we need to be able to remember without the feelings so we can learn from the experience.

Forgiveness requires that we change our personal narrative. When we forgive, we are letting go of the injury as means of defining who we are. Resentment is a victim narrative. It is a narrative that says we were deprived of life at some point, and that we are presently being deprived of life by that past action. In the process of forgiving someone, we are letting go of the victim narrative and its impact on our life. In its place, we may put a survivor narrative that focuses not on the injury, but on how we survived the injury, and how we are experiencing life in this present moment.

Forgiveness also means that we are letting go of any hope of reward or benefit from the injury. When we forgive, we are giving up the right to compensation. Whatever debt that was incurred is forgiven. Such benefit is not limited simply to any financial consideration, but also to any status or power, such as being a victim or martyr, that we may have obtained through the injury. When we forgive, we can no longer use the injury as a means to gain sympathy from, or to influence or apply leverage to, either the perpetrator or others who may know of the injury. To be able to let go of any secondary benefit of the injury, we need to be able to be fully aware that life is being offered to us by God in this present moment, and that this life that is offered in this present moment is independent of the past injury.

Forgiveness is not reconciliation. Forgiveness is essentially something we do independently of the person who offended us. If we waited for people to ask for our forgiveness, we may have a very long wait before we release the anger and resentment that we carry around. The person who injured us may be long gone, dead, or totally unconcerned about whether we forgive. The primary beneficiary of forgiveness is the person doing the forgiving.

Forgiveness is independent of the person who offended or injured you. In our experience trying to talk about forgiveness with the person who has hurt you rarely leads to healing, and more often than not simply leads to further injury as the conversations evoke blame, judgment, denial, and defensiveness. Often the hidden motivation in these conversations is that we want the person to confess how miserable they had been. Such motivation is a clear indication that the demand nature of the resentment is alive and well.

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*Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.*

— Nelson Mandela

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*Forgiveness is giving yourself back what you had before.*

— Unknown

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*The gate to the Kingdom of God is narrow, not because it requires a narrow mindset or viewpoint to enter; rather it is narrow because so few are able to trust that God's love is so wide. It is the wideness of God's love that embraces us all that unites us beyond our human divisions.*

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*Without forgiveness there  
can be no healing.*  
— Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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*To forgive is to set a  
prisoner free  
and discover that the  
prisoner was you.*  
— Lewis B. Smedes

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*When will our consciences  
grow so tender that we  
will act to prevent human  
misery rather than try to  
avenge it?*  
— Eleanor Roosevelt

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## **Reconciliation**

Reconciliation, on the other hand, requires the mutual engagement of both parties and that the two parties share a common set of values that they agree to live by as they build a better future for both. Reconciliation cannot be coerced by one party from the other. It is not uncommon for perpetrators to beg or manipulate others for forgiveness and reconciliation when they have shown no indication that they have amended their ways. Forgiveness is mandated by Jesus in the scriptures, and while reconciliation is a desired goal the scriptures also acknowledge that sometimes reconciliation may not be achievable (*Matthew 18:15-20*). For example, for the sake of my well-being I need to forgive Hitler for what he did, but I can never be reconciled with him, as he cannot participate in the reconciliation process. However, I also need to forgive the other “Hitlers” in my life for what they did, yet I will not be reconciled to them either until they show recognition of the way they have injured me or others and show clear signs that they have amended their ways and agree to live by a set of values that respects my dignity and the dignity of all people.

Only after you have forgiven someone, and only if you have an ongoing relationship with the person, would we suggest a reconciliation conversation. In this case, the focus of the conversation needs to be on your apology for your resentment, rather than getting the other person to confess to their wrongdoing. The more important part of the conversation needs to be on what shared values you have, and how you will work together in the future. We would also want to pay attention to how safe it is for the two of you to have the conversation. In some situations it may be helpful to have a facilitator to provide the necessary safety to have the conversation.

## **Satisfying Your Objection to Forgiving**

In our experience, the primary reason why people don’t forgive is that some part of them objects to forgiving. This objection needs to be satisfied rather than overcome. If we simply overcome the objection we will do violence to our own psyche and add further injury to ourselves.

Take a moment and go back to your resentment. Before you forgive the person, check to see if any part of you objects to forgiving them.

If you find a part of you that objects to forgiving, ask it what would satisfy the objection.

Most of the time the objections to forgiving have to do with issues of safety and/or justice.

### Safety Objections

Safety objections are typically in the form “If I forgive them they will hurt me again.”

The person is using their resentment to provide for their physical and emotional safety. Unfortunately, resentment is not a very effective strategy for providing safety. It also has some costly side effects such as creating tension or possibly stomach distress or even ulcers. However, it would be unethical to take away the person’s resentment without providing an alternative strategy for keeping them safe. From a place of respect, we need to acknowledge that the person is doing the best they currently know to stay safe, and then help them to a place of safety that does not require resentment. Only when we have satisfied their objection will they be free to release the resentment.

Within a congregation where there has been significant clergy misconduct, such as child abuse, parishioners may object to forgiving the pastor because they are using their resentment to protect future children from abuse. While the goal of protecting children is laudable and needs to be respected, using resentment is emotionally costly and rather ineffective. An alternative method of protecting the children would be to have clear procedures and policies about safeguarding God’s children, and knowing that forgiveness does not mean that the pastor can go back to working with children. This is a time for forgiving and remembering, not forgiving and forgetting.

One of the satisfactions that we have found helpful in responding to the abuse situations is to contemplate Jesus’ admonition to “turn the other cheek.” Unfortunately, in many abusive situations people keep presenting the same cheek and repeating the abuser-victim pattern. Turning the other cheek may mean leaving, literally turning away, and not presenting the same old face of victimhood.

### Justice Objections

Justice objections come in many forms:

“They need to be punished for what they did.”

“If I forgive them, how will the world know they did a bad thing?”

“If I forgive them it will be saying that what they did didn’t matter.”

“If I forgive them they will do it again to someone else.”

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*While the goal of protecting children is laudable and needs to be respected, using resentment to protect them is emotionally costly and rather ineffective.*

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*Resenting someone is a way of never leaving that person.*

— Kare Anderson

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*You can only protect your liberties in this world by protecting the other man’s freedom.*

*You can only be free if I am free.*

— Clarence Darrow

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*To err is human;  
to forgive, divine.*  
— Alexander Pope

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*Father, forgive them; for  
they do not know what  
they are doing.*  
— Luke 23:34

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One of the strategies we have found helpful in responding to justice objections is to explore how effective resentment is in achieving the goal of punishing the person, or informing the world how bad they are. In most cases people will quickly realize how ineffective resentment is in achieving these goals, and that the objection has minimal validity. Further exploration would also reveal that this ineffective strategy also comes with a huge personal cost, as the psychological and physical effects of internalizing those negative feelings takes its toll.

Once the objections to forgiving have been satisfied the person can begin the process of releasing the current demands about the past and reorient to their preferred future.

### ***To Resent is Human, To Forgive is Divine***

The final step in forgiving is to see things the way God sees them. Trying to forgive some people seems a huge agonizing mountain to climb. The good news is that we don't need to forgive them on our own; rather, we can stop trying to forgive them ourselves, and become part of God's forgiveness for them. Forgiveness is not something we do, it is something we become part of. We know that at the heart of the universe is a Heart of Love that embraces us with infinite loving acceptance. It is from within that heart that we are one with all the love in the universe and can join in God's love for those who have injured us. It is also in that love that we can turn from the past injury to the future, and wonder how that love will be manifested in our lives.



**Forgiveness Goal:** *To Forgive and Remember and not Resent and Relive.*

*Remember, this process is entirely independent of the person you are forgiving. We do not suggest nor recommend that you contact the person that you are forgiving. In our experience entering into such conversations typically leads to more injury than healing. Often it is helpful to have someone lead you through the steps. The person helping does not need to know the story of what happened, they can simply check that you have completed a step and then tell you the next step so you don't interrupt your process. The process may not be linear, nor sequential, but iterative.*

1. **Establish a foundation for forgiving.** Take a moment and remember yourself in the midst of God's love. Remember that there is nothing you have done or will do, nor anything anyone has done or will do to you that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Rest for a moment in that love and from that foundation of love proceed with the following steps.
2. **Identify the current demand in your resentment.** Recollect what happened that led to your resentment. Play the story over in your mind without dwelling on any aspect in particular. As you play the story back, identify the demand you have today about what the person should or should not have done in the past.
3. **Transform the demand into a preference.** What would you have preferred to have had happen? What can you learn from the event that you would prefer to do in the future if confronted with a similar situation?
4. **Seek and satisfy objections to forgiving.** Check to see if there is any part of you that objects to forgiving. Ask that part what would satisfy your objection. Keep working with yourself until all your objections are satisfied.
5. **In your imagination, release the person from your demand.**  

*"(Person's Name)... I would have preferred that you would have... and now I release you from my demand that in the past you would have, or should have, or shouldn't have..."*

Imagine yourself doing what you would prefer if a similar situation were to arise in the future.
6. **Return to your awareness of God's infinite love.** Put yourself in that love and be aware that love extends to the person you have forgiven. Move the person in your imagination to a place that feels comfortable or neutral emotionally and is surrounded by God's infinite love.
7. **Return your awareness to being loved by God.** Take a moment to wonder how you will experience that love in the future.
8. **Check to see if you still resent the person.** If you do resent the person go back over the steps: Ask yourself if there are additional objections to satisfy, demands to release, or things to learn. Remember that it is entirely appropriate to forgive someone and not trust them. We can wisely and calmly not trust someone rather than resentfully not trust someone. Repeat the process until you can remember the person without the resentment.

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*You cannot be lonely  
if you like the person  
you're alone with.*  
— Wayne W. Dyer

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*Guilt is nothing more than  
arrogance – because you  
are saying you and your  
actions are big enough to  
stop God loving you.*  
— Thomas Hora

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*Some pray over  
things they have done,  
and make them seem  
like double,  
Some straight away  
forgive themselves  
and save the Lord  
the trouble.*  
— John Gaynor Banks

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### **Forgiving Yourself**

The person most often in need of your forgiveness is you. Many people find it easy to forgive others, but stay trapped in guilt and shame or endless “shoulds” and “oughts” about their thoughts or actions in the past. This is both debilitating and demeaning. Rather than struggling with perfectionistic demands to assuage guilt, people would find it more helpful to forgive themselves.

The seven steps in the forgiveness process can also be used to help you forgive yourself. Pay particular attention to your objections for self-forgiveness. One of the objections that you may have is a fear that if you “went easy” on yourself you would become a slacker and never amount to anything. If so, ask yourself how effective your self-resentment or guilt is in mobilizing you to be a creative, loving person. If it does make you a loving, creative person, then don't stop hating yourself! If on the other hand, as we suspect, self-hate just makes you miserable and unloving, then we suggest you begin the process of forgiving yourself. Leave no stone unturned. Know that there is nothing in your life that can dim the light of God's love for you. In that light learn to forgive yourself. What have you got to lose? After all, you can always go back to hating yourself if forgiving yourself doesn't work!

### **Forgiving God**

It may sound strange, but some people carry a huge resentment toward God, because in their minds God caused something bad to happen, or at least allowed something bad to happen. While the steps may be slightly different, releasing our demands that God should have done things differently and satisfying our objections to forgiving, remain the essential ingredients of forgiving God. It may also be time to clarify your understanding of God, and how you experience God's presence in your life.

## Growing Collaboration in Times of Conflict

When people are in conflict about anything, they are not in a place to discern a call. Resolving conflict is an essential foundational step a congregation will need to achieve before they can embark on a search. In some situations where the conflict is mild, many of the appreciative strategies used in the self-study will resolve the conflict by helping to reorient the congregation to their shared values and preferred future. In other situations, the conflict may need to be addressed directly before the self-study can be started.

### **Defining the Problem and Solution**

Some conflict is an essential part of our struggle for human dignity. It is appropriate to be in conflict when human rights are denied and injustice is being perpetrated against ourselves or others. These are conflicts of the foundational core values of the right to exist and to live in freedom. However, many of the conflicts that occur in the church have little to do with issues of justice or these deeper core values. This is especially true for churches with little sense of a deep unifying purpose. In these situations it can become easy for members to become conflicted over trivial issues that are irrelevant to engaging in ministry and sharing the good news of God.

As we have noted previously, how we define the situation will determine how we can discover solutions. How we define conflict, and whether it is a problem, will be critical in how we resolve it. From an appreciative perspective, the problem is not that there is too much conflict, the problem is that there is not enough cooperation or collaboration. Rather than working on conflict management, consultants need to be working on collaboration management.

Conflict occurs when people perceive that a value is threatened or compromised. If we want to truly understand the nature of a conflict, we need to know what the underlying values are that have been compromised. But understanding the conflict is only part of the solution; this understanding in and of itself will not resolve the conflict. By discovering the shared values that underlie the compromised values, we can create a foundation for the work of collaboration. Once this foundation is in place, the people can begin to develop shared goals that are consistent with the values and which they can collaborate on achieving.

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*We have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation not a ministry of conflict management.*

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*The problem in the world is not that there is too much conflict. The problem is that there is not enough cooperation*

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*Anyone who proposes to do good must not expect people to roll stones out of their way, but must accept their lot calmly, even if they roll a few more upon it.*  
— Albert Schweitzer.

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*Blessed are the flexible  
for they shall not be  
bent out of shape.*  
— Robert Ludlum

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*The major block to  
compassion is the  
judgment in our minds.  
Judgment is the mind's  
primary tool of separation.*  
— Diane Berke

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*A good heart is better than  
all the heads in the world.*  
— Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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### ***Eight Rules for Times When Collaborating is Tough***

1. **Show Up:** When things get difficult real collaborators show up. They don't send someone else in their place.
2. **Be Present:** Real collaborators not only show up, they bring their inner being with them and are present in the moment.
3. **Make it Safe:** When it is safe, people can begin to engage in conversation.
4. **Be Compassionate:** Remember that the people are doing the best they know how to do. Move from judgment to curiosity, from anger over hurts to a fierce pursuit of a just future for all.
5. **Tell the Truth:** Not just a half truth but the whole truth. Truth-telling builds trust and doesn't create future liabilities.
6. **Practice Equanimity:** Pay attention to the process and not the outcome. Are people being treated with dignity and respect? Are they being treated in accordance with the community's values? The path to the future must be consistent with the desired future. We cannot fight our way to peace.
7. **Pay Attention to What is Life-Giving:** In the midst of conflict it is easy to get distracted from what is truly life-giving and begin arguing over distortions of the trivial.
8. **Stay Open to Possibilities:** Albert Einstein once said we cannot solve a problem from the mindset that created it. Collaboration occurs when we go from "either or" to "both and" — and then beyond to some transcendent position. Always be open to the possibility of something beyond any current imagination.

### ***Strategies to Achieve Collaboration***

The Spiral of Life can be used to develop strategies to find places of cooperation and collaboration rather than being mired in conflict. The first step is to identify where on the spiral the conflict is occurring. For example, an argument over church architecture would be occurring in the Environment domain. However, it is impossible to resolve a conflict in the domain in which it is occurring. To find agreement and common ground, we will need to move to one of the domains closer to the Source of Life. Typically, this will require going at least to the domain of Values, but may also require going to the Identity and Purpose domains as well. In the next section, we give some descriptions and strategies for developing collaboration for each of the domains.

## Environmental Context

Conflict Type: Disagreement over the distribution of resources.

Conversations, while often vigorous, are rational discussions of possible alternatives. For the most part, people can easily discuss both sides of the argument and brainstorm alternatives.

## Skills Context

Conflict Type: Disagreement over the way to do things.

In general, conversations remain rational discussions of alternatives with clear and specific language. People are free to look for more information that expand possibilities. People usually remain open with one another and believe that a solution does exist and can be found.

## Strategies for Collaboration in the Environment and Skills Contexts

- Set norms for relating.
- Understand the other's map or perspective.
- Find shared values and purpose.
- Brainstorm and imagine alternatives.
- Identify positive shared goals.
- Discover and access resources.
- Seek and satisfy objections rather than overcoming objections.
- Go beyond compromise to solutions that neither side had previously contemplated.
- Pay attention to actual outcomes rather than intentions.

## Values Context

Conflict Type: Disagreement over what is truly important. In some cases basic needs such as freedom and belonging may be in conflict.

Conversations often have considerable emotional content with increasing levels of fear and anger. People may distort their position by generalizing, exaggerating, and omitting information from both their self-presentation and their understanding of the positions of others. The situation may escalate to where people begin withholding information from the other side, or holding meetings in secret.

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*When I give food  
to the poor,  
they call me a saint.  
When I ask why  
the poor have no food,  
they call me a communist.*  
— Dom Helder Camara

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*One of the great mistakes  
is to judge  
policies and programs  
by their intentions rather  
than their results.*  
— Milton Friedman

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*No one can  
whistle a symphony.  
It takes a whole orchestra  
to play it.*  
— H.E. Luccock

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*Defining identity by comparison is found at the heart of all human conflicts, and the path to resolving those conflicts is always to start focusing attention on the similarities that unite the two sides, noticing all the ways they are the same, instead of the ways in which they are different.*

— Steve Andreas

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*You don't have to attend every conflict you are invited to.*

— Tim Scudder

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*If an elephant steps on the tail of a mouse and you say that you want to remain neutral in the situation, the mouse will not appreciate your objectivity.*

— Desmond Tutu

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### **Identity Context**

Conflict Type: Disagreements become personal attacks on the integrity of the people on the other side of the conflict.

Conversations are heated, and may be used to denigrate others. People are either idealized or vilified. Self-protection and defensiveness arise, with each side viewing the other with contempt.

### **Strategies for Collaboration in the Values and Identity Contexts**

- Engage an outside consultant.
- Create shared norms for how people will behave toward one another.
- Hold people accountable to the norms of behavior.
- Maintain a compassionate presence.
- Model the behaviors you want to see.
- Manage the process, not the outcome.
- Clarify the purpose.
- Tell stories that elicit commonality and empathy.
- Maintain a spirit of equanimity and openness: “join” each side.
- Learn and practice the skill of forgiveness.
- Where possible, seek reconciliation.
- Employ righteous mischievousness, such as the use of paradox.

### **Purpose Context**

Conflict Type: Disagreement over their purpose for being and other core existential issues. Often the positions and even the presence of the other party will evoke considerable anxiety and defensive anger.

If agreement cannot be achieved at the Purpose level and the purposes are in conflict, the parties will need to separate and go their separate ways, or they will annihilate each other.

### **Strategies for Collaboration in the Purpose Context**

- Engage an outside consultant.
- Stop talking to each other. Stop listening to each other. Instead, start listening to God, the Source of Life.



- Engage in an ordinary, everyday goal that is completely unrelated to the conflict. For example, build a Habitat for Humanity house together for the benefit of someone outside the community in conflict.

### Source Context

Conflict Type: Disagreement over core existential issues. People will feel entitled and empowered in the name of their god to annihilate those who disagree with their position.

Direct conversation is impossible. People will only be able to speak through third parties.

### Strategies for Collaboration in the Source Context

- Collaboration is impossible. A third party is needed to keep apart the parties who perceive of each other as mortal enemies.
- A Divine transformational encounter, such as Paul's experience on the Damascus road, is required to transform the peoples' hearts and minds. Unfortunately, when individuals in the group have such an awakening, they will be perceived as traitors and deserving of an even worse end than those on the other side of the conflict. Only a transformation of the group as a whole will create the potential for communication and change.

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*We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*

— Viktor Frankl

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