

What Is Interim Ministry?

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Three words are associated with the interim period in a congregation:¹ *change, transition and transformation.*

Change can be defined as the inevitable movement of life's forces. Inevitable means it is going to happen, and movement means we will become different. This is true for churches as well as individuals. In fact, for a faith community, the interim period between senior clergy is the time that change becomes most obvious. We can choose to resist it or fight it or be angry about it or even deny it, but change is going to occur; we are going to become different as life progresses. It is very natural, then, for a congregation to find themselves grappling with the concept of change – especially during the interim time.

Transition is the process by which individuals and congregations deal with change. The late William Bridges, a leading professional on the topic of transition states, "When change happens without people going through a transition, it is just a rearrangement of the chairs." So we find ourselves asking, "What are the options?" "What can be done that will create the best opportunity to handle change in a healthy way?"

Perhaps the most difficult part of understanding what is happening is that change is situational, but transition is psychological. It is not changes we resist. We resist the losses and endings. With every change, a piece of somebody's world is being lost.

Transformation is the new shape that grows out of this time of transition. Transformation is the result of individuals and congregations managing change and transition, and dealing with the losses and endings. Transformation is what gives the church new life and new possibilities and new energy as the people claim their place and purpose in God's Kingdom.

The presence of these three elements – change, transition, transformation – is why the interim time in a church often is referred to as a "wilderness journey." Three biblical characters immediately come to mind when thinking about the wilderness journey.

The Exodus story is about what happened during the 40 years the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness. The story is about a transition from the end of one experience (slavery) to the beginning of another experience/setting (freedom). In the process of going from Egypt to the Promise Land, the people are seeking and discovering and clarifying God's will, direction and movement in their lives. During the journey, they often move off course. But, that is where Moses makes his contribution. He continues to redirect them and to challenge them to refocus their energy to God's glory.

The second biblical character that comes to mind when thinking about a wilderness journey is John the Baptist. In the Gospel of Matthew we are told that this individual came to prepare the way for Jesus. John has a purpose. He believes that God has given him the responsibility for pointing people to Jesus. He moves about in the wilderness with a consistent and urgent message. Others try to redirect him and Jesus even confuses him by asking John to baptize him. Nevertheless, throughout the entire journey, John continues to seek and discover and clarify God's will, direction and movement.

The third person who comes to mind is Jesus himself. Also in the Gospel of Matthew we learn that early in his ministry Jesus is led off into the wilderness. He spends 40 days and 40 nights in prayer and fasting. He is earnestly seeking and discovering and clarifying God's will, direction and movement. This is not a simple task and it does not come without challenge and pain. Jesus is confronted by Satan and tempted to go a direction other than that ordained by God. Jesus emerges from the wilderness, but not before he has clarity about what God is calling him to be and to do.

Notice that Moses dealt with change and transition, but not transformation. He led the people through the process of dealing with those inevitable movements of life's forces, but he did not get to see the new shape that takes place. Moses did not enter into the Promise Land. Moses was the interim leader. He helped the people become clear about their purpose. He helped them to rethink their relationship with God and how that would impact their future. He stayed with the people until the permanent leader emerged.

John the Baptist announced the change that was going to take place and introduced the transition that would have to happen for transformation to occur. Before the transformation really took hold, however, John was put to death. Those who objected to his message of change fought against him. They wanted to keep things the way they were. They were afraid of what would happen to their traditions. They were comfortable with who they were and heard John's messages as a threat. John was the interim leader. His purpose was to encourage the transition that was required in order to transform the world. He was not the light, he only pointed to the light.

Jesus, on the other hand, dealt with change, transition, and transformation. Yet, the transformation also cost him his life.

You cannot transition through change and experience transformation without giving up the old and taking on the new. In Matthew 9:17, Jesus is credited with saying, "Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

This time period called the “interim” provides congregations an opportunity to put new wine into the fresh wineskins. It gives a faith community the chance to leave behind the enslaving behaviors and attitudes that keep them focused on the past instead of the present and the future. It is a time when the people can objectively decide what meaningful parts of their history, tradition and practice will continue to be carried with them and what will be left behind.

Interim ministry also is about seeking effective ways to organize for ministry, recruit, train and develop new leadership. It involves assessing the way decisions are made in the church and determining if there are more inclusive ways to handle this task. This is a time to look at how the community of faith relates to one another, the surrounding neighborhood, and the wider church. Finally, this is a time for a congregation to discover their identity apart from the pastor of the church. This is an opportunity to develop a vision that will help meet the spiritual needs of members and enhance their ministry beyond themselves. With this kind of clarity, the congregation can find a new leader who will equip them to follow what they believe to be God’s will, direction and purpose.

¹ I am indebted to Warren Schulz for introducing me to the distinction of these three words. (Nicholson, Roger S. *Temporary Shepherds (A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry)*. Alban, 1998, p. 121.)

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