

What does qualitative research into the deployment of Interim Ministers in the Church of England indicate about the current state and significance of the CofE parish church?

Conference participants are asked to respect the provisional nature of this paper, which is a document for discussion rather than a completed argument. I am particularly interested to hear about comparable short-term, transitional appointments in other churches and whether the situation of the Church of England described here matches your own experience, whether Anglican or not.

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Introduction. I have been interested in Interim Ministry (IM) since a short term appointment in 2010/11 as an interim minister in the West Midlands.¹ The role of an Interim Minister, working with a local church in the transition period between longer term appointments, is common practice in the churches of North America, in the Church of Scotland and in the URC. In this paper IM is used in the sense of an intentional, time-limited, appointment to help a parish move collectively through a period of change. The appointment lasts, typically, between 18 months and three years. Interim ministers are not gap-fillers sent to hold together a parish until a new long-term incumbent is in post. IM is process which focuses on particular tasks, at the end of which the parish will be ready to move into its new configuration and the interim minister will be ready to move on.

During 2017/18 I carried out two pieces of qualitative research into Interim Ministry. The first was for Durham University 'Common Awards' Seedcorn Fund into the tools and resources needed by Interim Ministers, the second was for Chelmsford diocese, evaluating the effectiveness of the Interim Ministry posts funded by the Church Commissioners through the Transition Project. This paper also reflects the contributions of the delegates to the national conference on IM sponsored by the diocese of Chelmsford in Feb. 2017.

Research for Common Awards. In October 2017 I sent a questionnaire, enquiring about IM activity and the methods used, to forty-three ministers who had been identified as acting as IMs by their diocese. Of these 18 IMs respondents were acting to effect change, rather than as locums, maintaining the status quo. I had eight individual meetings and two focus groups with practising interim ministers. I joined the Church of Scotland's annual gathering of interim ministers and attended a week long training programme for the Diocese of Europe run by Molly Dale Smith of the N American Interim Ministry Network.

Research for the Diocese of Chelmsford. I interviewed the lay leaders of six churches which had experienced IM and, separately, the interim ministers attached to them. I consulted the interim ministers' reports to their line managers and had access to records of attendance and finance in

¹ Reflections published as Jordan, Elizabeth. 2011. 'Monarch, Shepherd or Parent: Interim Ministry and the Church of England.' *Practical Theology*, 5(1), pp. 67-82.

those churches. In consultation with the senior leadership of the diocese it was decided that that effectiveness of IM in the local church would be evidenced by new mission values instilled, fresh leadership developed and effective handover/overlap to standard/permanent leadership. The suitability, preparation and effectiveness of the IM would be commented on and specific, key actions during the period of interim ministry noted for future learning.

I have made a formal report to each body that requested this research and it to these unpublished papers that reference is made.

Interim Ministry The Interim Ministry Network was established in 1980 in N America to bring together expertise and training resources for congregations in transition and those who work as interim ministers. The experience of the Network is that denominational structures influence appointments and the relationship between the congregation and the denominational authority, but that emotions, dynamics and the process of leadership are deeply congruent in each church during the period between settled pastors.² This validates comparison between the experience of churches overseas and in this country and encourages a comparison between varieties of denominational practice. My question is whether the growing use of IM in the Church of England is an indication of changing relationships, expectations and aspirations across the national church.

Loren Mead, founder of the Alban Institute, identified factors common in Western churches at the end of Christendom: membership losses, financial pressures, the secular society, and the end of a privileged position in civic life.³ This analysis may be compared with that of the Mission Shaped Church report⁴ and of works on the end of Christendom, which are even more apocalyptic in the picture they paint of a paradigm shift in church life in this country.⁵ Despite the differences between churches, a shared sense of being in a missionary situation is held in common. The Interim Ministry Network, indeed, published a collection of articles on the changing religious landscape in N America in 2015. One of these articles advocated looking to the Church of England to examine a church that had already begun to address declining resources, the challenges of technology, shifting demographics and new patterns of governance in the situation posed by a post-Christendom era.⁶ It is within this changing situation, in which the structures of the church and even the expression of the Gospel are being re-formed, that congregations in transition between long term appointments find themselves.

In February 2017 a conference on IM was sponsored by Chelmsford diocese. It was attended by 50 delegates from 19 dioceses. There are now 32 members of a UK IM Facebook group, each working as intentional interim ministers. It is not possible to say how many Interim Ministers are working in the Church of England as, though there are now clear guidelines for such appointments, no central

² Smith, Molly Dale. 2009. *Transitional Ministry: A Time of Opportunity* New York: Church Publishing. p. viii.

³ Mead, Loren B. 1994. *Transforming Congregations for the Future*. Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute Publications.

⁴ Cray, Graham ed., *Mission Shaped Church* 2004 London: Church House Publishing.

⁵ e.g. Murray, Stuart. 2004. *Church after Christendom* Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, Jamieson, Alan. 2002. *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond the Churches* London: SPCK, Brown, Andrew and Woodhead, Linda. 2016. *That was the Church, That Was*. London: Bloomsbury.

⁶ Trimble, Cameron. 'The changing landscape of the American Church,' in Norman B Bendroth. 2014. ed. 'Transitional Ministry Today: successful strategies for churches and pastors.' Lanham, Maryland, US: Rowman and Littlefield pp. 37-51. The Mission-Shaped Church report and establishment of 'Fresh Expressions of church' were particularly admired.

records are kept.⁷ There is also variation in practice: some dioceses use the term for appointments which, while being of shorter length, do not carry the expectation of intentional transition. This paper, though, aims to examine the insights which may be gathered from the increasing use of IM as a tool for change in local churches. Many of the participants at the national conference held in 2017 noted that IM generated lessons and insights for all of the church, seeing IM as indicative of the wider process of change in the C of E.⁸ The Church of England is currently engaged in a programme of 'Renewal and Reform.' Julian Hubbard, former Director of Ministry for the Church of England, noted that 'Renewal and Reform is not dealing with new issues, but chronic issues which are becoming more acute and the local situation ..encountered in Interim Ministry mirrors the national situation.'⁹ Dr Jane Williams suggested that the role of Interim Ministry was 'to restore Anglican ecclesiology - to look at a parish and recognise that this is a parish where the stuff that matters has got lost.'¹⁰ What could focus on a few parishes in transition indicate about the whole of the CofE?¹¹

Two reasons for confidence in this research question suggest themselves. Interim ministers, firstly, are ideally placed to act as *participant observers* in local churches, able to gain a deep understanding of the situation but not becoming fully immersed as they carry out a time limited ministry. They need to engage rapidly with the relationships and habits of the church, common foci of ethnographers' research. Secondly, the adoption and development of a new form of ministry, with the accompanying work that has been required to make it possible, has been uncharacteristically rapid.¹² Necessary changes to the legislation concerning appointments have been made at the request of the House of Bishops who have discerned the need for this ministry. In this paper I will examine what the experience of Interim Ministers, of those who appoint them and of the churches to which they are sent has indicated about ecclesial leadership, the treatment of ministerial vacancy, the increasing significance of congregations in the life of the Church of England and lessons learned about the evaluation of ministry.

LEADERSHIP

The first area to be examined is that of leadership. The Church of England is designed to be 'episcopally led and synodically governed.'¹³ The relationship between the diocese and the local church, always much stronger than that between the parish and the national church, is made apparent in the process of ministerial appointments. The appointment of an Interim Minister indicates the changing relationships between national, diocesan, parish and local lay leaders through the pattern of appointments, the reasons for the appointment and the nature of leadership of a parish church.

⁷ Church Commissioners: Supplementary advice Issued by the Archbishops' Council in December 2017 Interim Posts made under Regulation 29 (7C) of the Ecclesiastical Offices (Terms of Service) Regulations 2009 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/Interim%20posts%20Guidance%20supplementary%20advice.pdf>

⁸ IM Conference report, 2017 distributed to delegates.

⁹ IM conference report, 2017, 2.3.1

¹⁰ IM conference report, 2017, 2.1.5

¹¹ Phyllis Tickle, in *Great Emergence*. 2008. Grand Rapids: Baker Books asserts that Christianity has major shifts every 500 years and we are presently in such a period.

¹² Church Commissioners, 2017.

¹³ Brown and Woodhead, 2016, p. 52.

The pattern of appointments: managing the transitional period. The time when a bishop could, in partnership with the patron, send a priest to a parish without consultation with local lay leaders is long past. The PCC draws up a profile and job description and the 'parish reps' expect to be part of the selection process: they have a right to veto the candidate even after a post is offered. The Church Commissioners guidelines¹⁴ advocate a similar process for the appointment of interim ministers, but the desire of Senior Staff to respond rapidly to a deteriorating situation resulted in a couple of those that I interviewed being 'imposed.'¹⁵ The resentment that this caused indicated the expectation of local leaders that they will be consulted, asserting that they were not passive recipients of ministry but had a significant role in the church's future. The mixed messages that were received, such as the lack of choice about the appointment of an interim minister combined with the instruction to develop stronger lay leadership, also led to confusion at another group of villages about how and where decisions are made. 'Working out how to achieve what we had identified as a priority turned into following someone else's agenda.'¹⁶ The relationship between parish and diocese is changing, increasing the situation's complexity. Each part of the church's life is interdependent and fixing one issue, the appointment of an effective minister, may create another, long-term resentment and distrust between parish and diocese.¹⁷

The appointment of Interim Ministers has identified how little honest information is often given to longer term appointees. As Interim Ministers, according to the Church Commissioners' guidelines, require transparency in role descriptions, knowledge of the history of the parish and the expectations that church and bishop have of them then good practice may be established for others. Much is being learned about the dynamics of transition. IM, which reduces the period between arrival and departure, has provided greater clarity on what is required in times of transition for the minister, parish and diocese. Common conventions, such as that the newcomer does not consult their predecessor not talk to their successor, are being challenged. Full information on arrival and the necessity of a well managed handover are changing established patterns of appointment. Bridges¹⁸ emphasizes the importance of good endings as the beginning of transition. The Interim Minister would, ideally, be appointed as soon as a vacancy is announced. Mead's research indicates that how the time between announcement of departure and actual leaving are spent will affect the ministry of the next pastor. It is good practice to clarify exact dates, organize events to say goodbye, support the pastor who is not in best position to make decisions and reassure the congregation that most normal services will continue.¹⁹ I have noted that, in the Church of England, much is made of the beginning of ministry, with a licensing service at which the church leaders and signs of office play a part, but that little is provided formally or liturgically to mark the end. The manner of departing is

¹⁴ Church Commissioners, 2017.

¹⁵ Jordan, Elizabeth. 2018a. Final report to Diocese of Chelmsford. p. 16

¹⁶ Jordan, 2018, p. 14

¹⁷ Western. 2008. Leadership, a Critical Text. London, Sage. p.183

¹⁸ Bridges, William. 1995. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. London: Nicholas Brealy Publishing.

¹⁹ Mead, Loren B. (2012) *A Change of Pastors...and How it affects change in the congregation* Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute. p. 24.

left to the individual minister to arrange – at a time when he or she may be least able to discern the best practice.²⁰

Bridges' contribution to the understanding of the processes of change is to highlight the 'neutral zone,' the space between the ending and the new beginning.²¹ This is a time of anxiety, when old disputes re-emerge, and openness to 'strong leadership' may result in the increased dominance of a few. It can also be a time of creative experimentation, as ideas are tested out. In my own experience as an interim minister in a the church which was facing major changes in the future I was able to explore potential partnerships and mission opportunities, envisioning a future for the church that was not restricted by my own gifts and capacity. People will change in their own self perception and skills during this time: they might need the protection and encouragement of the interim minister, backed by the denomination authority, to guide this change in a health-giving direction. My own experience suggests that some might feel it is disloyal to the previous priest to change much, outwardly or inwardly, during this time, and need encouragement to own the changes that will happen regardless of their efforts. Conversely, expectations after a pastoral breakdown may be unrealistically high and the congregation need to recognise the need for space to reflect and pray. At the end of their work interim ministers can ensure there will be a good welcome for the new minister, with all the information that they need provided, and set a healthy example by leaving gracefully and definitely. A good handover, including relevant information for the new appointee, will contribute to the long-term value of the changes made during the interim period.

Thus the pattern of appointment of interim minister has indicated the growing involvement of the congregation in the appointment of its minister, and the openness of congregation, clergy and senior staff to respond to changing situations by altering long established conventions.

The reasons for the appointments. Why has there been such an increase in the number of appointments of interim ministers? The changes within the Church of England and external challenges already mentioned are, no doubt, the primary reason. It is clear is that many churches are in crisis. The usual reasons for the appointment of interim ministers: a failure of leadership or breakdown in relationships, financial difficulties, loss of members or a rapidly changing environment could be found to some degree in almost all of the parish churches in the country. The shortage of stipendiary clergy, the decreasing ability of the congregations to meet the expenses of maintaining buildings and costs of ministry and the increasing indifference of the English population have created a situation in which future of the national church is bleak.²² Those churches which are identified as in need of IM are at an extreme end of a spectrum, not in a class of their own.

My research also revealed a cause that reflects on the relationship between diocesan and parish leaders. Several of the senior staff that I spoke to commented on their need to know what is happening in a parish.²³ The bishops' desire to have someone who will report to them may indicate that a fractured relationship with many parish priests exists. Bishops work hard to establish good

²⁰ The Diocese of New York has lengthy guidance about what needs to be done at departure, <http://www.diocesen.org/pages/260-leavetaking-brochure> though not an associated liturgy. Such could be found in the Franciscan Prayer book *Celebrating Common Prayer*. 2002. London: Bloomsbury.

²¹ Bridges, 1995, p.35.

²² Brown and Woodhead, 2016, esp. pp 205-222

²³ Jordan, Elizabeth, 2018b. Final report to Common Awards, Seedcorn Fund. p. 6.

relationships with their parish priests and the regular pattern of synod, visitation and encounters through Ministerial Development Review and social occasions should enable this. The parish priest has the capacity, though, to conceal much of what happens. Many priests distrust the episcopacy, the source of pastoral care but also operators of discipline and the gate-keepers for new appointments.²⁴ Complete honesty is rarely to their advantage.

The desire to have someone 'on the ground' is also advocated by practical theologians. Percy²⁵ quotes Freire's work on the need for a 'deep literacy' that identifies the variety and diversity of expressions of power. He argued that such deep literacy comes through dialogue - understanding the cultural inheritance and powers that shape us. Anglicanism, in particular, may be a sacralised system of manners - dress, conversation and so on, not a doctrine or creed so 'immersion in a local church is essential to understanding its complex range of implicit dynamics.'²⁶ IM has indicated how little the senior staff can know about what is happening in local churches. A re-configuration of the relationship between the local church, represented by clergy and the lay leaders of congregations and the Church's hierarchy is happening as the local church is the prime source of income. The reluctance, perceived or otherwise, to establish relationships of honesty, trust and mutuality may lead to more widespread acts of rebellion, such as is already happening in areas of sexuality or paying for one's own clergy.²⁷

The nature of ministerial leadership. The selection of and training given to interim ministers has high-lighted the kind of leadership that is needed in local churches. The nature of the church, both at regional and local level means that a hierarchical or bureaucratic model of leadership will no longer be sufficient. The *character* of the leader appears more important than particular skills or strategies. Leadership, writes Western, is more of a knack than a skill, requiring deep wisdom more than models, rules and theories. Formation needs to take precedence over the leadership development.²⁸ The Church of Scotland, which has employed interim ministers for over 30 years, gives higher priority to the personal characteristics and skills of prospective candidates than to qualifications or position.²⁹ A suitable candidate would be a team-player who is able to demonstrate the ability to work with volunteers and be an efficient negotiator and mediator. These personal characteristics are essential because the effectiveness of the interim minister depends on the relationships which are established with the church members and surrounding community.³⁰ There is a growing recognition that change is effected by networks of communication, not by the power of status or position, since organisations are complex responsive processes of relating.³¹ This means all clergy need to learn to listen to what is said and not said and to the influences, past and present, on the community. They need to be able to discern the existing lines of communication and discern the relationships between church members which create the interconnected emotional system of the congregation. Leadership of local churches is, therefore, relational: it will be necessary to prioritise conversation over analysis and planning. Percy be moans

²⁴ Brown and Woodhead, 2016, pp. 84,85.

²⁵ Percy, M. *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism: Currents, Contours, Charts*. 2017. Oxford, Routledge. p. 101.

²⁶ Percy, 2017, p. 106

²⁷ Percy, 2017, p.79

²⁸ Western, 2008, p. 119

²⁹ Jordan, 2018b, p. 4.

³⁰ Jordan, 2018b, pp.18,19.

³¹ Stacey, Ralph D., Griffin, D. and Shaw, P. (2000) *Complexity and Management: fad or radical challenge to systems thinking*. Routledge, London.

'the inexorable rise in power of ecclesiastical executive-managers'³² as the Church Commissioners use their funds to incentivise innovation through concentration on church income, resources and church growth, seeing little hope for the church in this approach. Those interim ministers who, asked to identify the tools which they used in congregational healing and development, simply said they met each members and spent long hours in conversation, may have correctly identified this aspect of congregational life.³³

The Church Commissioners Guidelines notes that, at the end of a period of interim ministry 'there is a natural tendency for a congregation to focus on the personality of the interim minister rather than on goals for the future and the particular skills, strengths and abilities needed to achieve these.' Interim ministers frequently become the longer term appointee, despite the advice given is that this should not happen.³⁴ The common acceptance ('*natural tendency*') of interim ministers as full time appointees indicates the value to church members of knowing the person who will be their priest and thus the personal, relational, nature of ministry.

IM has, then, indicated the value of such a relational model and also the value of clarification about what kind of relationship will exist, through the greater details required in job descriptions and honest conversations about expectations.³⁵ Clarity in relationships is a major factor in moving from parent-child relationships, with unwritten expectations and ill-defined emotional contracts, to adult-adult relationships. The interim minister might fill a role that is intentionally short-term, more akin to a consultant to the church than its pastor, or even the role of scapegoat, bearing away the pain which has been acknowledged and worked through. Interim ministers have to be able to distance themselves from the church, able to say goodbye. This represents a new and little understood position in the Church of England, which needs repeated re-affirmation by senior staff and the minister themselves so that it becomes a relationship which is mutually beneficial. I have observed how often clergy in settled appointments reach an understanding of their role, such as 'shepherd' or 'father,' which is not shared with or by their congregations.³⁶ The work done by interim ministers has indicated the value of honest conversations about mutual expectations even in apparently straightforward and problem free situations.

It is a common expectation that restoring a church to health requires a style of leadership that is *distributive*, facilitating development and developing confidence and skills. The great majority of interim ministers are asked to develop lay leadership as part of the changes that need to take place. The long term effectiveness of the changes encouraged by the interim ministry depends on the congregation owning and being able to carry on the new ways of operating. The IM network of N. America recognises this change in emphasis by concentrating on the work that the congregation needs to do, rather than the 'developmental tasks' the interim minister must accomplish.³⁷ An example of the change this perspective makes is the Church of Scotland's preference for teaching mediation skills for the entire congregation rather than conflict management strategies for the leaders.

³² Percy, 2017, p. 36

³³ Jordan, 2018b, p.9

³⁴ Church Commissioners, 2017, part 11.9 p.19

³⁵ Jordan, Elizabeth, 2017, *Honest Conversations in Churches*. Cambridge: Grove Books.

³⁶ Jordan, 2011.

³⁷ John Keydel 'Focus points and the work of the congregation' in Bendroth, 2014, pp 53 -61

Examination of the effectiveness of interim ministry has thus resulted in lessons for all ministerial leadership. Some priests may wish to work as the sole source of theological, spiritual and organisational acumen, but this is shown to have a negative effect. The skills of listening, facilitation and team leadership are needed by all those who exercise leadership in a local church. The ability to be flexible in the face of such changes is identified by Bendroth as a mark of health and leadership of such an open system requires an assured reader of culture.³⁸

The diocese of Chelmsford has concluded from the experience of interim ministry that all parish clergy (and licensed lay ministers in charge of local churches) are engaged in assisting churches through times of transition, as internal or external factors change at a rapid rate. The Chelmsford Leadership Programme³⁹ lists the following characteristics necessary in all such leaders in times of transition:

- Relational skills,
 - Facilitation skills, enabling meetings to be places where all voices are heard and ownership of necessary changes is made easier.
 - An understanding of culture change.
 - Skills of reflective practice, both to learn themselves and to help congregations learn.
 - Vision building, whether capturing and articulating the aspirations of a church or giving hope those who have lost the capacity to look ahead with confidence.
- Implics. For clergy training
- Estab. of community of practitioners - ministry is not a solo venture. All clergy need mentors and peer group. Able to cope with liminality - times in the wilderness are necessary part of change, not stalling of change.
 - For ministerial action Early intervention prevents later dysfunction - need Area Deans on the ground to alert Archdeacons to potential problems - and heed lay leaders who are anxious about their clergy and often protective of them
 - Effectiveness of pastoral contacts - listening to individuals! Need for emotionally mature clergy who are not gaining self-worth from their role. Awareness of virtuous/vicious circle.

IM is a role effectively fulfilled by lay people in several parishes in Chelmsford, supported by neighbouring churches and priests. It appears that interim ministry is not essentially priestly, yet the role can be seen as epitomising the work of a church leader. There are further questions to be raised about why is so much of a church leaders' time is not necessarily priestly!

IM has, thus, raised questions about the nature of ministerial leadership. Interim ministers are different from longer term appointees: invited to a place when a crisis has occurred and the congregation is unable to help itself or cope with the vacancy, they must be particularly adept at reading the situation, relating to the parish without needing to be liked, absorbing pain and walking away when the job is done. Yet, the relational and distributive role is the same.

³⁸ Bendroth, 2014, p 177

³⁹ Chelmsford Leadership Programme. 2019. Available at: <https://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/clergy-leadership-programme> [Accessed: 27.8.19].

VACANCIES AS TIMES OF CHANGE. There has been a convention in the Church of England that changes shouldn't be made during a ministerial vacancy. Still in some places called an 'interregnum' the church is considered to be incapable of making decisions about its future in the absence of the sole ruler. Rather, though, than fearing that all will collapse during the vacancy and that the post should be filled as soon as possible, Mead encourages church leaders to seize the moment when a congregation is open to change.⁴⁰ Changes will happen during the vacancy regardless, so the opportunity for *healthy* development should be embraced.

Bridge describes the liminal time as one of creativity and opportunity.⁴¹ A church that has become settled in unhealthy patterns may be productively disturbed. Analogous to Holy Saturday, in this time nothing, apparently, is happening, but in fact everything is changing. It could be argued that the Church as a whole has failed to realise that, in time between Christ's ascension and second coming, while the High Priest is away, vacancy is the normal state of church. Such a perspective facilitates adaptation to the current situation of rapid changes in the churches' surrounding environment and the need for continual reappraisal of boundaries, finance and deployment. The use of IM in the pastoral re-organisation in N, the creation of a larger statutory team in the TV Group and the need to work with secular partners in P illustrates the way that parishes can require assistance when external factors overwhelm them as much as internal. In PI, for example, the interim minister was appointed to 'establish order and stability in a time of change.' In BI the lay leaders had thought they should attempt to maintain the previous pattern of services with a reduced staff and were deeply grateful to the interim minister who gave them permission to change.⁴²

So in times of change it is apparent that all vacancies may be seen as opportunities for a review of vision and direction. The paper for Archdeacons in Chelmsford,⁴³ indicates the kind of work needed in the increasingly likely situation of a ministerial vacancy. There should be an early discernment of the churches' needs, whether for the appointment of someone with particular skills to meet the challenges of a changing situation or an IM to tackle elements of crisis. The place of the church within the deanery or Unit plan should be a significant factor in this review. It is apparent the Area Deans are already carrying out considerable amount of transition work during vacancies and should be assisted in this task. A handover document should be prepared for the interim minister's successor and contact made if possible.

WHOSE CHURCH? THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF THE CONGREGATION

This study of IM highlights the changing face of ordained ministry in the Church of England. An informal assessment would suggest that clergy are staying for ever shorter times in parishes.⁴⁴ A decreasing proportion of stipendiary, full-time clergy will mean that ministerial vacancies will continue to increase in frequency and length. In addition, many paid posts are increasing in complexity as clergy are being licensed to large groups of parishes. Turnbull argues that changes to the parochial structure, the bedrock of the Church of England, are needed urgently to maintain

⁴⁰ Mead, *A Change of Pastors...and How it affects change in the congregation*. 2nd edition. 2005. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute), p. 82

⁴¹ Bridges, 1995.

⁴² Jordan, 2018a, pp. 16&14

⁴³ See Appendix A

⁴⁴ I have just noted that none of the ministers I interviewed for doctoral research in 2012 about lay clergy relationships at the outset of ministry are still in post.

presence in each community while preventing the burnout of clergy.⁴⁵ As professional, paid ministry changes the organisation and affiliation of the church at a local level is altered. The third area in which IM is an indicator of the state of Church of England is in the growing importance of the congregation, understood in this sense as the community of worshippers.

The encouragement to many interim ministers to develop lay ministry recognises that the enduring factor amidst these changes is the members of the congregation. A shift in perception is taking place: the local church is not seen as belonging to the priest but to those who are part of the continuing life of church, before, during and after a ministerial vacancy. Church members themselves find necessary support and affirmation in the relationships created and sustained in the worshipping community. The regular attenders of church find that their religious faith is mocked and resisted by a secular community, but that their support, especially financial, of their church is essential for its future. Church of England congregations are much more likely to have an awareness of who is part of the 'Church family' in the 21st century than in previous generations.⁴⁶

One conclusion of national visits and especially of time spent in Scotland is that an interim minister has to be able to collaborate with the local leaders. Most of the discussion there was on how to form teams within the congregation and Presbytery Council, which sounded roughly the size of a deanery, and how to develop the mutual learning and support between interim ministers. There is widespread agreement amongst interim ministers in England that the co-operation of the congregation, especially of the PCC, is crucial for a good outcome. In one parish I visited the renewed lay leadership was a clear sign of effective turnaround, but the priest appointed in the longer term attempted to squash that voice.⁴⁷ As ministerial vacancies grow in length and significance in the life of the local church such action may be increasingly less acceptable. IM indicates the extent of the resources and attention which is now given to congregations.

The aversion felt by many in the Church of England to the word 'congregation' is deeply rooted. 'Congregationalism,' the autonomy of each worshipping community, is to be avoided in an episcopal church. As recently as 2005 a book on congregational studies in the UK was entitled 'Studying Local Churches' as a result of the editors' concern that the word 'congregation' would alienate Anglicans.⁴⁸ The priest is appointed to the 'cure of souls' of the parish; it is the geographical unit which defines the extent of the ministry, not the affiliation or commitment of people within it. Yet it is arguable that, in a post Christendom, missional, church there is an increasing focus on membership of the congregation as the significant marker of religious affiliation and that even the Church of England is becoming more congregation-focused. As John Tiller wrote, 'A communal approach to the church's mission to its neighbourhood can and should be combined with an associational basis for membership. Indeed, only in this way can the proper communal mission be accomplished.'⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Turnbull, Michael and Donald McFadyen, *The State of the Church and the Church of the State: Re-imagining the Church of England for our World today*. 2012. London: DLT. p. 150.

⁴⁶ Jordan, Elizabeth, 2015.

⁴⁷ Jordan, 2018a, p. 15

⁴⁸ Cameron, Helen. Richter, Philip. Davies, Douglas and Ward, Frances, *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook*. London: SCM Press, 2005. , Private correspondence with Helen Cameron, email 26.7.2019.

⁴⁹John Tiller The Associational Church and its Communal Mission in Ecclestone, Giles, ed. 1988. *The Parish Church? Explorations in the Relationship of the Church and the World*. Oxford: Mowbray. pp. 89 - 97:

A crisis in attendance in the church has been met with a plethora of literature on church growth. Much of it has assumed that the work of the minister is to increase the size of the worshipping community, the congregation and that focussing on the spiritual health of that congregation will result in its growth and effectiveness in community outreach.⁵⁰ Even when the word 'parish' or 'church' is used it is usually congregation that is meant. Thus the 'fresh expressions of church.' advocated by the Mission Shaped Ministry report are actually fresh expressions of congregation.⁵¹

Both a fall in regular attendance and decreasing levels of income were seen as reasons for intervention in the Chelmsford Turnaround Project. Deploying IMs to foster the health of the congregation as preparation for mission is a logical consequence of regarding a healthy church as equivalent to a healthy congregation. The overall objective for the Turnaround Project in Chelmsford dioceses was 'understood as being to develop the capacity of the diocese to become financially sustainable and more effective in its mission as the Church of England in Essex and East London.' The role of IM within this was to help key parishes towards growth and transformation by addressing underlying issues of leadership, governance and stewardship; helping them make the most of their buildings as centres of mission; and, where appropriate, develop pastoral reorganisation.⁵² Although the word 'parish' is used, the objective makes little sense unless it refers to the churches and their congregations as there are few other structures that could be touched by a diocesan initiative. In *'Re-imagining the Local Church'* Turnbull identifies church buildings as essential places of mission and proclamation and the local church as key to making change work.⁵³ The regular, worshipping, members of a local church are increasingly seen as key to the future of the national church.

Since existing literature about IM, just as much material on church growth and leadership, comes from N America it has had a congregational focus. IMs have found that the main difficulty in using this literature's approaches to congregation development has been with the size of congregations rather than the need to consider interaction with the wider parish.⁵⁴ A focus on the congregation addresses their concerns. The challenges for the church in the 21st century and the resources available to meet those needs have combined to change the aversion to talk of the congregation to a desire to pay it close attention.

One of those challenges has been the scandals concerning the abuse of children and vulnerable adults in the church. These have identified the need for a corporate sense of responsibility and less secrecy within church life. My research for Chelmsford diocese indicated that IM could increase the discontent experienced in the local church as enhanced lay leadership asserted a right to take initiative but discontent, conflict even, may be a sign of growth and developing maturity! Many commentators on the state of the Church of England, as of other denominations, identify the development of clericalism as an unhealthy co-dependence between ordained and lay Christians which has inhibited the flourishing of each.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Examples include Jackson, B. 2015. *What makes Churches Grow?* London Church House Publishing. Warren R. 2012. *The Healthy Churches Handbook*. London: Church House Publishing.

⁵¹ Cray, Graham ed., *Mission Shaped Church* 2004 London: Church House Publishing.

⁵² Diocese of Chelmsford, 2016. The Turnaround Project. Unpublished papers

⁵³ Turnbull, 2012, pp 138 and 154

⁵⁴ Jordan, 2018b, pp. 9-12

⁵⁵ e.g. Wilson, G. B., 2008. *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press.

The increasing focus on the worshipping congregation was demonstrated in the reporting structures used by the interim ministers in Chelmsford. Though it was recognised that income and attendance are inadequate ways to evaluate ministry, each is easily recorded and a 10% growth in attendance in one deanery or full payment of the parish share was reported as evidence of the effectiveness of IM. The interim ministers' work was primarily concerned with building the confidence and vision of the existing worshippers, rather than acting as priests for the parish. In Percy's eyes this does not distinguish them from those with longer term appointments, as he identifies the shift in the Church of England from a comprehensive institution to narrower, member-based organisation.⁵⁶ 'Church and clergy are now engaged in encouraging conversion to a faith rather than sharing of love of God for all, since a comprehensive national ministry is now funded by *congregations* rather than central or parochial sources.'⁵⁷

The nature of congregations. As local congregations increase in significance for the Church of England IM has provided rich insights into their nature. This is partly because much research and literature arises from denominations in N America where the study of congregations is well developed and where interim ministers have acted as ethnographers. There is a danger in only looking at abnormal situations but the patterns of transition, life cycles, spiritual types, and the value of an asset-based, appreciative approach has been identified by English interim ministers as congruent with their experience.⁵⁸

The core identity of a congregation as systemic has been a central focus of this approach. Interim ministers need to understand the characteristics and relationships within the local church very quickly and have identified a systemic perspective as essential.⁵⁹ The congregation is better seen as a network of emotions and affiliations than as a group of individuals. Enquiring about the connections between people, through blood, friendship and role is at least as useful as knowing people as individuals. Many Cof E congregations identify themselves as a family, finding personal and spiritual support in an environment in which they are distant from their birth family and that does not affirm their faith.⁶⁰ The re-discovery of identity at St C, for example, was closely linked to the understanding of its family language. Whenever something happens with one subsystem, the systems thinker looks for connections and parallels in other subsystems.⁶¹ Interim ministers who work in conflict situations have learned to identify the situations and relationships which are expressed in some people's behaviour rather than labelling that individual as a trouble maker.

Local churches often acquire reputations that can be challenged by an interim minister taking time to investigate the situation. It was said, for example, that St M was ungovernable but the interim minister said it had had very inadequate priests for 11 years and members of the congregation spoke of their confusion and lack of direction, esp. during vacancies. A systems approach enabled he

⁵⁶ Percy, 2017, p. 7

⁵⁷ Percy, 2017, p. 75

⁵⁸ Nicholson, Roger S., 1998. *Temporary Shepherds*. Herndon, VA. The Alban Institute. pp. 65-73.

⁵⁹ Friedman Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* New York: Guilford, 1985, Steinke, Peter. 1996. *Healthy Congregations – a systems approach*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

⁶⁰ Jordan, Elizabeth. Prof Doc, available at ARRO <http://hdl.handle.net/10540/605485>

⁶¹ Nicholson, 1998, p. 27.

interim minister to identify the factors which had created an unhealthy interaction between members and structures which meant that changes could be made to reconfigure the situation.⁶²

The systemic, relational nature of local churches extends outwards to ecumenical partners (at P) and the involvement of other churches in the Mission and Ministry Unit in Ba.⁶³ A significant benefit resulted from the restoration of these relationships. The lay leaders expressed relief that they were no longer isolated, expected to survive on their own. If the church is understood as an open system, in relation with its environment, adaptability rather than income or numbers are perceived as indicators of future viability. As the nature of each congregation is studied more closely interim ministry is also indicating ways in which ministry may be evaluated.

THE EVALUATION OF MINISTRY

Turnbull writes that 'asking whether church is effective is like asking whether a marriage is effective:' it's not impossible but there are many factors to consider, and each situation is unique.⁶⁴ Attention to the phenomena of IM, though, indicates criteria for evaluation of a local church and the work of ministry.

As previously noted, using the criteria of income and number of attendees is deceptively simple, though both have their value. As well as making a church and its mission financially possible, Hopewell commented that 'money is frequently an *emotion*-laden metaphor that both expresses and provokes the identity of a particular congregation.'⁶⁵ The 'fiscal narratives' of a church can instruct the denominational leaders about the state of the church.⁶⁶ Similarly, a drop in numbers can indicate the faithful preaching of the Gospel which challenges complacency but it also, and more probably, can indicate severe problems in the local church.

Interim ministers have been expected to justify their appointments in the Chelmsford diocese, making regular reports about what they had done and the outcomes which they observed. My questions to lay leaders were similar - what did they remember taking place and what did they think were lasting legacies. Effectiveness was assessed in terms of participation in processes. It was an asset based evaluation of ministry that, as much as measuring buildings, cash and numbers, assessed the work done to fulfil the vocation of that particular church. I looked for pride in the place of worship, members taking responsibility for aspects of church life and planning and care for the future. The interim ministers helped the churches look at their histories with honesty and develop hope and a vision for the future. Many tried to develop a corporate leadership who can work with priest rather than a compliant parish that will return to the control of priest or diocese. Several interim ministers commented that it hardly mattered which tool they used, whether mission action planning, SWOT analysis or whatever: the fact that attention and care was demonstrated in an appreciative way was more significant.

⁶² Jordan, 2018a, p. 12.

⁶³ Jordan, 2018a, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁴ Turnbull, 2012, p.71

⁶⁵ Hopewell, James. 1987, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. London: SCM. p. 8.

⁶⁶ Percy, 2017, p.79.

In evaluation it's important to focus attention on the church rather than the minister or perhaps the relationship between the two: smart individuals, writes Turnbull, are over-rated.⁶⁷ The church is intrinsically social, an organisation whose role is to bring people together. The system is the proper focus, not the star turn. The Interim Ministry Network has proposed five developmental tasks for the interim minister. My research showed that these were being used by Interim ministers in this country not as an agenda for their own work so much as a way of monitoring their it's effectiveness in the parish. The tasks are⁶⁸

Task 1: Coming to terms with history: understanding and sharing the story of the parish, accepting the joys and challenges of the past (and may include conflict resolution); building on what is positive, letting go of what is not.

Task 2: Discovering a new identity: reflecting on parish life; needs, challenges and opportunities in the local community; assessing resources; developing a vision of the church's future, and agreeing goals and objectives.

Task 3: Developing local leadership: assessing and encouraging local parish leadership and organisation, exploring how this can be better supported, improved and developed, building confidence and competence to lead in future.

Task 4: Renewing and strengthening denominational linkages: This is a moment when the parish is open to help, support from and co-operation with deaneries, archdeacons and dioceses, and therefore it is a good time to re-connect with the wider church and engage with what it means to be an Anglican (or whatever) in this time and place.

Task 5: Committing to a new direction in ministry: building commitment to the way forward within the whole congregation; agreeing/defining a set of next steps (which may include a new appointment), ensuring a good exit.

A local church that had the capacity to address these issues could be deemed to be in a healthy state and intervention that aided movement towards that capacity could be deemed to be effective ministry. The presence of conflict, in particular, in the church might give rise to alarm, but Avis declares that '[*conflict*] is not necessarily unhealthy, a sign of ecclesial pathology. In some ways the "normal" state of the Christian Church is to be seething with argument and controversy.'⁶⁹ 'Reaching equilibrium means death and decay.'⁷⁰

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that the work and experience of IM sheds a light on the state of the Church of England as the reasons for the increasing numbers of interim ministers and their close observation of local churches provides a rich picture. If Percy is right, that Anglican ecclesiology is done through narrative,⁷¹ the stories which are told are indicative of the changing nature of leadership, the congregation and the church's future. The relational nature of ministerial leadership is emphasised by the effort invested in the diocese's relationships with local churches and the interim minister's attention to conversation and encounter as tools of change. The increasing significance of the worshipping congregation as the source of funding for and as an instrument of growth is evidenced

⁶⁷ Turnbull, 2012, pp. 112/3

⁶⁸ Nicholson, 1998, pp. 6-12.

⁶⁹ Avis, Paul. 2008. *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology*, T&T Clarke International p.93

⁷⁰ Reed *The dynamics of religion* London: DLT 1978. p.110

⁷¹ Percy, 2017, p.5

by the appointment of interim ministers to maintain the viability of local churches. Such appointments demonstrate that the ministerial vacancy, now seen as a time of change, is also a time for the development of *lay* leadership while at the same time providing a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of professional ministry.

If, though, the appointment of interim ministers is an indication of the situation across most of the local churches in the Church of England, it could be argued that such appointments are a distraction from more radical changes that need to be made. Some of the interim ministers I interviewed expressed a frustration that an earlier and more honest intervention would have more speedily resolved the difficulties that they now encountered. They did not wish to be seen as a 'stop gap,' delaying effective change, but as the catalysts and facilitators of fresh approaches.⁷² IM, having exposed the situation of the church at local level, might indicate the need for pioneer ministry in the future.

⁷² IM Conference report. *Recognising the elephant in the room*. P.18.

Appendix A Paper for Archdeacons

- **Early discernment of the churches' needs**, whether for the appointment of someone with particular skills to meet the challenges of a changing situation or an IM to tackle elements of crisis. Area Deans and Lay Chairs are probably best placed to know when a parish is in need and how it will cope with vacancy. They should be given additional resources for this vacancy responsibility. Early discernment, if possible before the departure of the existing priest, will facilitate the appointment of an IM who can start without delay. There is a growing consensus amongst the IMs in the diocese that a major review of the task and the capacity to achieve it should then take place 6 weeks after their appointment, by which time the IM will have a much clearer idea of the needs of the church and whether they are the right person to meet them.
- In other, less urgent, situations the review could focus around gathering of details for advert. This can then be a longer, vision-building exercise, involving the whole congregation.
- **The place of the church within the deanery or Unit plan** should be a significant factor in this review. It is apparent the Area Deans are already carrying out considerable amount of transition work during vacancies and close partnership is needed between the Area Dean/Pastoral Committee/Unit Council and Archdeacon or person responsible for the vacancy. Joint training and resources focussing on this task could be provided.

The vacancy will be a period of transition for all parishes, though their capacity to cope with this will vary. Intentional Interim Ministry might be an appropriate response for the few that are unable to provide the resources to effect change but most will be able to contribute, in varying degrees and with assistance, to their own transition. One of my recommendations to the diocese was that Area Deans, Lay Chairs and Churchwardens receive further resources as both the number and length of ministerial vacancies increase. Area Deans and Lay Chairs are well placed to alert Archdeacons to potential problems, paying attention to lay leaders who are anxious about their clergy and often protective of them.

Extra work may not be involved; though proper resourcing may result in more effective activity. Work should begin **as soon as the vacancy is announced** and the co-operation of the departing minister required. This discernment will identify areas of potential growth and threat and open communication with ecclesial and third sector partners.

At the outset of the vacancy appreciative and asset based inquiries will be used, looking for positive qualities rather than addressing problems. Working with the lay leadership and associate clergy a transition group within the church is formed to lead change.

During vacancy the church is helped to understand its past and look to the future. The vision, governance, relationships and activities of the church is analysed. This may be expressed as who? where? how? and what? (see sheet B). Lay leadership is empowered and participation of as many f parish and congregation as possible encouraged. Issues of conflict, governance and mission are addressed- mediation skills, modelling healthy relationships. When the church is at a mature enough stage to frame a new parish profile, including changes in understanding of past, vision, mission opportunities and connection with wider church, the interim minister assists with this process and prepares to leave.

Handover: A further convention that needs to be challenged is that the new minister is not informed by, nor communicates with former ministers. Various dioceses' parish vacancy documents require a

handover document (e.g. from Edmundsbury and Ipswich
http://www.cofesuffolk.org/uploads/2016_Guide_to_Parish_Vacancies.pdf) Exit conversations will
be held with the departing interim minister and the newly appointed minister will be briefed. *Crucial
importance of legacy and handover.*

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