

## Tools for discernment

*Elizabeth Jordan*

### When should an IM be appointed?

The IMN has worked on the basis that this is advisable:

After a very long and happy pastorate; After a very short pastorate, After the death or severe illness of the pastor, where there has been conflict (Nicholson, 'The Challenge of the Interim Time', 4–5. ) but is now recognising that the task may not be to restore the church to the situation that it was in previously, but to help it manage change (Transition Ministry Today

### As vacancies are known:

At present the assumption is made that local churches have the capacity and emotional maturity to discern, with a little assistance, their needs and that of their parish. In a few cases it is recognised that a church is so far from this situation that it requires the assistance of a short term, intentional appointment of an Interim Minister. My suggestion is that most churches fall between these two extremes and that all vacancies should be treated as opportunities for assessment, assistance and possible intervention.

The Demise Curve, a tool from Interim Managers suggests that the optimum time for change is when the situation indicates that change is required but before it has deteriorated to the point that it is impossible. Change thrives on dissatisfaction with the present. **Most local churches are in a situation in which change is desirable because the environment around them is changing at such a rate. Some churches are in need of change because their internal structures and relationships are inadequate or damaged.** Additional assistance is required when the existing congregation cannot make that change for themselves. As a vacancy is known the Archdeacon, Area Dean or person responsible for managing that vacancy should ascertain the level of support needed.

Suggested questions to ask at the outset of all vacancies:

Do people recognise need for change, but don't know what to do?

Do people recognise need for change, but resist it - 'it'll see me out?'

Do people recognise the changes that are needed, but resist them?

Do people, or a small group, want to change things themselves, regardless of denominational structure?

Do people, or at least the existing leadership, recognise the need for change and can identify some of the changes needed and are able, with diocesan assistance, to describe this in a parish profile and job description?

## As an Interim Minister begins to assess the state of the church

The previous exercise may have indicated the need for Interim Ministry, but the actual situation will not be known until the Interim Minister has been *in situ* for a time. The consensus among IMs is this period is approximately 6 weeks. It has been said that the 'IM network's Congregational Systems Inventory is particularly hard to adapt to the UK situation.' The following is an amalgamation of that Inventory<sup>1</sup> and the work on congregational life cycles by George W. Bullard, Jr,<sup>2</sup> both contained in the IMN resource book.

I have re-phrased Bullard's topics as vision, relationships, activity and governance, and look for maturity in well established congregations, rather than pre-supposing obsolescence. Combining this with the who, where, how and what questions a number of perspectives on the state of the church may be obtained:

Who: heritage, belonging

Where: context

How: processes of decision making

What: programme of events.

Vision: the view of the future

**WHO/RELATIONSHIPS** Ask who is involved - both individuals and the relationships between them. Be aware of systems thinking, which examines the links between people as much as their individual characteristics, but NOT only in order to discern difficulties: support systems can be a great blessing!

**WHERE** Ask about the context of the locality of the church. A big topic, but initially, find out how the church relates to its context: what is the congregational members' perception? Past and immediate presence is most important. Are there any historical events that influence the present and recent changes that have upset the pattern of living. Where are the connections with the surrounding area, such as schools and where are there 'no go' areas which have no connection with church.

**HOW/GOVERNANCE** Ask how decision are made and what policies and practices are in place for finance and safe-guarding.

**WHAT/ACTIVITY** Ask about events and activity in the church, both regular and special.

**VISION** Ask what the vision of the church is - what would be an ideal state?

PCC minutes and the parish profile could be good sources of information, both to see what is recorded and how much space and attention is given to each of the above topics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Which analyses the church in terms of Who – heritage, belonging, Where: context, How: processes of decision making and What: the programme of events.

<sup>2</sup> This analyses a congregation's life by looking at the cycle of vision, relationships, program and maintenance. It assumes that last is sign of decline and that, indeed, age = obsolescence.

Listen to people' stories, without commenting on their objective truth. Expect to hear contradictory versions. What actually happened is of much less significance than what people thought happened! Try to understand why that version is believed.

Listen to both those who have been in the church for a long time and those recently arrived.

**Two building blocks of conversation analysis:**

How do people tell their stories? Do they use first person 'I' second 'we' or third 'they' when talking about what has happened and what might happen in the future. This might indicate whether they expect to have a say in what happens or have abandoned agency.

How do people respond to each other - in adjacency pairings. For example, when one person says 'it's a family church' another might say 'we all support each other.' Or the second person might say, 'no-one has any secrets here.' It's easy for the minister to understand the first comment in the light of their own experience and expectations - but it's better to see how the congregation members interpret it.

**After 6 weeks**

**The outcome of these questions** can then inform the work that the IM does. It may, indeed, indicate that a set of skills not possessed by that IM is needed and another should be appointed.

For example

Who: heritage, belonging – feeds into work on owning the past

Where: context – feeds into connecting with community

How: processes of decision making – indicates where governance issues should be addressed

What: programme of events – indicates the vocation of that church

Vision: the view of the future – beginning work on the next appointment.