

Interim Ministry - running with the wind of change.

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. Within the Church of England there is an increasing interest in the needs of churches during a ministerial vacancy. Rather than being a time in which nothing must change, it is now seen as a period of potential loss of church membership. But this survey of the published experience of churches which have deployed Interim Ministers is that that this period can be a time of healing, refreshment and growth.

The literature - books and church websites - are in agreement about the range of situations which might benefit from an IM, skilled in guiding a church through transition. Appointment of an IM provides space for healing in the period following a pastoral breakdown, bereavement following a long and 'successful' ministry, or fresh vision at times of pastoral re-organisation. Each of these three situations was present in the churches to which I was licensed. Dealing with such unfinished business during the interim time helps prepare a congregation for a successful ministry with its next long term minister: the IM is not a substitute for such, but one who prepares the church for a fruitful relationship in the future.

The Interim Ministry Network was established in 1980 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.¹ This validates comparison between the experience of churches overseas and in this country and encourages a comparison between a variety of denominational practice.

Loren Mead, founder of the Alban Institute, identifies 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.² This analysis may be compared with that of the Mission Shaped Church report³ 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.⁴ Despite the

¹ Molly Dale Smith, *Transitional Ministry: A Time of Opportunity* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), viii.

² Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute Publications, 1994).

³ Graham Cray, ed., *Mission Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

⁴ e.g. Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002).

differences between churches, a shared sense of being in a missionary situation is held in common.

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 ministerial transition find themselves. The Interim Ministry Network makes much use of Bridges' identification of three stages in a transition: letting go, the liminal period of uncertainty, but also creativity and new possibilities, and the beginning of the new state.⁵ He distinguishes between change - what happens, and transition - the process of dealing with change, and transformation, as the new shape which emerges after change.

Rather 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.⁶ Changes will happen during the vacancy regardless, so the opportunity for *healthy* development should be embraced.

The URC routinely appoints an Interim Moderator who fulfils this role in addition to their continuing duties elsewhere, whether as a Minister or as an elder/lay person. An Interim Minister might also be appointed, to help the pastorate work through major transitions. In the Church of Scotland which has engaged IMs since 1996, the central Ministry Council itself employs Interim Ministers, who are deployed on the advice and direction of the Presbyteries, the regional bodies, not at the request of individual churches.⁷ Intentional Interim Ministry slows down the appointment process, allowing the congregation time to make well-informed and deliberate decisions regarding the future course of the church: as in a time of bereavement and re-adjustment after individual loss, it is not deemed advisable for the church to act speedily.⁸ Though appearing at first sight to be a clerical intervention, preventing lay leadership, an IM may be best placed to promote lay ministry by widening participation and identifying fresh voices.⁹ The Uniting Universalist Congregation warn that if an intentional interim minister is not appointed, an unintentional one may arise.¹⁰ Mead highlights the danger of giving additional responsibility to someone from the 'home team' since the first action of the incoming minister, consciously or not, is to demote them.¹¹ Both these comments are implicitly critical of the common practice of the Church of England.

⁵ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Nicholas Brealy Publishing, London: 1995)

⁶ Loren B. Mead, *A Change of Pastors...and How it affects change in the congregation* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute), 82

⁷ See also the Interim Ministry handbook of the United Church of Canada (Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational), found at <http://www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/interimministry.pdf>, accessed 20.12.10, for the distinction between Interim Ministers and Interim Moderators.

⁸ Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, 4.

⁹ <http://www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/interimministry.pdf>

¹⁰ www.uua.org/documents/mpl/transitions/transitional_ministry.pdf Internet accessed 22.1.10

¹¹ Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 71.

Bridges emphasizes the importance of good endings as the beginning of transition. The IM 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.¹² 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 left to the individual minister to arrange - at a time when he or she may be least able to discern the best practice.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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 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 may need the protection and encouragement of the IM, 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 IMs 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.

The five goals of Interim Ministry, which were developed by the IMN have been widely adopted.¹⁵ Firstly, The IM is to enable the church to examine its history and come to terms with the past, so that the new ministry is not hampered

¹² Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 24.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 35.

¹⁵ Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, 30. See also www.imn.org.uk, US Lutheran Church (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod)(www.nalip.net/history.asp, accessed 30.11.10)

by its legacy. Secondly, the IM is to claim the current identity of the parish; recognising the gifts and vocation of that particular expression of Christian community. The process of drawing up a profile of the parish for the advertisement for a new priest happened very soon after my arrival: the Patronages (Benefices) Measure 1986 appears to aim to keep the vacancy as short as possible, requiring the parish to meet to decide on a number of crucial issues within four weeks of receiving the notice of vacancy from the Registrar. Though the description of the church's needs can be delayed over several months, until it forms a satisfactory document for the role description, this may not give a church sufficient time to identify it's character and vocation apart from in partnership with the past minister. A third task is to encourage new leadership - while valuing the old. The former leadership may have worked well with the former pastor and it should not be assumed it will be the right personnel or structure for the vacancy. Fourthly, to re-connect with denominational structures: there can be distrust and even resentment of Diocesan structures, sometimes encouraged by the settled ministers to deflect criticism from themselves. At the time of vacancy the local church is powerfully reminded of its link with the larger church, through the appointment process. And the final task is to prepare to welcome new pastor.

In order to achieve these goals the training and character of an IM is seen as distinctive. The IM must have a set of skills which come from experience in parochial ministry, speedily joining and connecting with the local Christian community. They must know how to help the congregation to focus on the future of the parish and encourage lay ownership of the church. They will be able to analyse and articulate the current vision and direction of the church. They will also need some particular skills: problem solving, group facilitation and transition management, long and short-terms planning, stress management, community and team building and administration are all suggested!¹⁶ Smith also recommends an understanding of family systems as it relates to congregations,¹⁷ use of the skill of appreciative enquiry¹⁸ and advanced pastoral skills. Bardot reminds prospective IMs that they may have to act as a kind of modern scapegoat, hearing and holding the painful past and carrying it away with them, but may also help congregation to realise what they really want and need.¹⁹ They will also, therefore, need to understand the causes of conflict in local churches and have the skills to make creative use of it.²⁰ So the IM must act without the need to be well-liked, and to be unafraid of controversy. They will be able to exercise a variety of leadership

¹⁶ Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, 33,34 and the Interim Ministry Handbook of the United Church of Canada, <http://www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/interimministry.pdf>

¹⁷ See David R. Sawyer, "The church in transition as a human system," in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 26-38. In this analysis, Sawyer (Nicholson) views the church as a human system, held together by rules, roles and rituals.

¹⁸ Rob Voyle Smith, "What is the appreciative inquiry approach to transition?" in Smith, *ibid.*, 75-88

¹⁹ Bonnie Bardot, "Coming to terms with history," in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 65-74

²⁰ Terry E. Foland, "Understanding Conflict and Power," in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 39- 51 Foland notes that churches fight about the kinds of issues that IMs are appointed to address: identity, worship, role expectation of leaders, limited resources, and clergy misconduct.

styles and be flexible about theological emphases since they are not appointed to guide the church to their way of thinking, but to enable it to realize its own potential. They need to be calm, objective, and trustworthy, experienced in parish ministry and able to manage themselves in a context of uncertainty.²¹

Training is provided in the States by the Interim Ministry Network, by the Intentional Growth Center in N Carolina and by the Lutherans, who emphasize the particularity of their own theology of ministry.²² The denominations vary in the extent to which they control who may act as an IM. In the United Church of Canada, for example, no one acts as IM without at least 60 hours of training in theory and additional field work: individuals may then seek official recognition. Similar restrictions operate in the Church of Scotland and the URC.

Are there significant differences between the situation of the churches who have extensive experience of IM, and the Church of England? Firstly, denominational structure, which affects appointment and employment. In most of the N. American Churches the congregations will be employing their ministers directly and form individual contracts with IMs. The Church of Scotland, in contrast, employs IMs centrally and the Ministries Council may decide that a local church cannot have a permanent Minister before they have engaged with an IM.²³

Even in N. America, though, denominational authorities are expected to take a lead in establishing a letter of agreement between the IM and the local church, an issue stressed many times in the available literature.²⁴ This agreement will identify the goals and tasks of the Interim, the roles and responsibilities of the IM, the length and terms of service and remuneration. The introduction of Common Tenure within the Church of England will make such a role description essential for anyone who holds the Bishop's licence. But a central principle of Common Tenure is that fixed term appointments should not be permitted unless they are title training posts or reliant on external funding, or in exceptional and closely defined circumstances. There is no current definition of an 'interim minister' and the flexibility which enables creative work to be done in a time of transition itself prevents the precise definition that would satisfy the legislation. In my own case, at the end of the six month licence, the vacancy continued and my appointment was extended, but with a Permission to Officiate, not a licence.

As well as marked differences in finance and denominational involvement, it is noteworthy that all the N. American literature deals with *congregations*, as do

²¹ Svingen, in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 58. See also The Intentional Growth Center, which trains Interim Ministers for the United Methodist Church, for personal characteristics of the IM <http://events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/event?oeidk=a07e33sdk7mbda197be&llr=ozzg4xn6>

²² See Intentional GC website and <http://www.nalip.net/education.asp> Pres Church of Canada, training resources, http://www.presbyterian.ca/bookroom/pcc/Church_Life/interim_ministry_procedures.pdf lists several in US,

²³ Angus Mathieson, Ministries Support Officer, Church of Scotland, email 16.12.10

²⁴ Ken Ornell and Molly Dale Smith, "Why have a letter of agreement?" in Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, 38 – 47.

the Church of Scotland and the URC. Each has a congregational focus, whereas the Church of England has appointed priests to the cure of souls of the geographical area of the parish. Does this significant difference affect the operation of IM? My own experience has been of a parish-wide ministry, which has resulted in many funeral services for non churchgoers, at the crematorium rather than the church, and visits to schools, nurseries and old people's centres. But 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. Deploying IMs to foster the health of the congregation as preparation for mission would be an effective use of this transitional period.

There has not been extensive evaluation of Interim Ministry. Centralised deployment has enabled the Church of Scotland to maintain oversight of those who are deployed in this way, but a critical evaluation has not taken place. The Presbyterian Church of Canada has a strategic study on its website.²⁵ I have found one critical voice: that of Richard Floyd, retired Church of Christ pastor.²⁶ He notes the way that Interim Ministries have grown in length to two or three years, while settled pastorates have declined in length, so that the only distinction between the two is the intended length of stay. He claims that the family system model, used to analyse congregations, assumes dysfunctional relationships and the trauma occasioned by the departure of the leader, which creates the very situation it purports to solve. He questions whether reliance on 'psycho-social systems theory and/or corporate management theory' is an adequate understanding of the church and notes the thinness of theology in the IM literature. Percy, however, warns against any attempt to delineate a theology of the church or ministry without taking account of a wide range of disciplines, so as to take note of implicit understandings and practices.²⁷ There is ample room for both the social sciences and explicitly Biblical and theological study to illuminate the practice of Interim Ministry. A practical theology of interim ministry is required: experience so far has demonstrated the wisdom of paying attention to the life of a congregation during a ministerial vacancy. The experience of churches which have experience of interim ministry is that much can happen during this period: indeed that change will always take place. The challenge, and the opportunity, is to work with the church so that the change is positive and prepares the ground for the effective ministry of the settled minister.

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²⁵ Criteria for Evaluation. www.presbyterian.ca "A Study of the Effectiveness of Interim Pastors" is now complete and accessible at <http://www.pcusa.org/research/interimpastors.pdf>. *

²⁶ <http://richardfloyd.blogspot.com/2010/08/ten-theses-about-interim-ministry.html>

²⁷ Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

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