



A Reflection on Interim Ministry

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Interim ministry has been a Godly accident for me. I volunteered to take on a 15 month 'interim' post at a parish to help the parish recover from a period of breakdown and the three-year interregnum which followed the departure of the previous incumbent.

Though the post was fraught with challenges, I enjoyed the process of spirit-inspired change through which it seemed we were led. So much that after six months I spotted an advert for Interim Ministers, and realised that God already had me in the ideal job. I have therefore become one of the early takers in this new programme and it is, on my review of 16 months of IM so far, that this reflection is offered.

My first and rather humbling observation is that I am not an interim minister at all – in the true sense of the term I would have to go through proper accredited training, which is currently only available in the USA and Canada. I am therefore a learner driver in IM, but then I sense, many others are at present too.

My second, is that we may have adopted IM, sensing it is a ministry we really need for this time of transition and renewal in the Church of England - as we explore new ecclesiological shapes of parish and deanery life (such as ministry 'units' or 'areas') –without a full grasp of what it means, how it is done and the implications.

On one level, that's fine, if IM is about change and transition then – like all good IM processes – some aspects of the process need to be discovered and claimed for ourselves. We cannot do IM here as in a North American or corporate context. But there is a good argument for learning from the wisdom of 40 years' experience of doing it elsewhere.

My third observation is that IM roles should not be pitched only at priests with experience at a senior level or those nearing retirement. IMs are those with IM skills (which are akin to change management and transition skills), whether or not they have extensive experience in denominational/parish life. Perhaps IMs may also be lay people. If we are moving towards a more intentional use of IM, there is a need to develop the formal training, skill-sharing and networking between those who are using or developing IM.

Fourthly, we need to inform the rest of the church about how to deploy and manage IMs. Our recent (July 2015) discussions at General Synod about clergy terms of service (which will facilitate the appointment of short-term IMs) raised concerns that: 'a diocese might run in perpetuity with interim ministers.' This is a contradiction in terms and highlights our wider lack of understanding of the nature of IMs.

IMs are not gap-fillers sent to hold together a parish until a new long-term incumbent is in post. IMs are strategic appointments to parishes to help a parish move collectively through a process of re-thinking who they are, what they are about, and how they are going to go forward. It is a time-limited process (though the time taken to get through this task cannot always be pinned down) which focuses on particular tasks, at the end of which the parish will be ready to move into its new configuration and the IM will be ready to move on. If we 'run in perpetuity' with IMs we have completely missed the point of IM in the first place!

I have found IM is a Godly and profoundly contextual process – as several senior colleagues have pointed out, the key to IM is relationship, and change evolves out of good interpersonal, one-to-one encounters, the building of trust and the growing sense of collaborative partnership. It is a space which, with trust and humility, we offer to God to work with us through the Holy Spirit to achieve the change which is most appropriate to this community, in this time and place.

There is other, more detailed work being done on interim ministry in the Church of England at present. There follows a brief overview of IM, its historical and biblical background, what IMs do in parishes, and where do they (or might they) fit in with diocesan life and structures. This concludes with a reflection on the results and learnings from a 12 month Interim Ministry in one parish.

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I. Interim Ministry – the background.

IMs have been described as ‘temporary shepherds’ and ‘facilitators of change’, ‘enhancers, strengtheners, and sometimes even janitors of ministry’¹.

They are deployed in different circumstances: to bridge short-term gaps or lead a brief process of change; to help through periods of transition of 2-3 years; to help recover from breakdown or catastrophe (Emanuel Church, South Carolina, appointed an IM following the shooting of its pastor in 2015).

IM seems most useful in ‘hinge moments’ when church communities transition from one situation to another. These have been identified as: ‘a moment of extraordinary potential – potential for both sorting out and cleaning up problems from the past, and also clearing the way for a new pastoral appointment.’²

IM is not about heroic charismatic leaders being parachuted in - ‘stealth pastors, flying under the radar’³ - but partnership. IMs work from the principle that ‘ministry is already there in the parish... and it will be there when they leave’, so they bring together the collective wisdom, insights and ministry resources which are available on the ground to create a way forward which is mutually agreed and accepted.

IMs have been used in North America since the 1970s, and in response to this growing ministry, the Interim Ministry Network (IMN - <http://imnedu.org/>) was established. There is a considerable body of academic and resource materials available through the Alban Institute at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina (<https://alban.org/>). There are interesting historical examples of IM techniques being used in the development of the church in the New World. One example cited is Henry Muhlenberg, 18th Century patriarch of the Lutheran church in North America, whose thinking and methods in developing the church influenced IM.

Interim Management has also been used in the UK corporate sector for over a decade, at senior levels in the public, private and charitable sectors. The Institute of Interim Management (<http://iim.org.uk/>) has existed since 2001, evolving out of a special interest group at the Institute of Management. Its function was to provide professional standards bench-making, ongoing training and access to information and networking.

The IIM says: “Interim management is the provision of effective business solutions by an independent, board or near-board level manager, over a finite time span. Such complex solutions may include change, transformation and turnaround management, business improvement, crisis management and strategy development. Interim managers are often experienced in multiple sectors and disciplines.” One of the leading companies in this field, Odgers Interim notes: ‘The most effective use of interim management is when it is deployed in a focused and controlled way with outcomes and timescales clearly defined and managed. Another leading company, Interim Partners notes the role requires: ‘a broad mix of skills, from intellect and experience through to personality type and resilience.’

Since interim managers represent a short-term and cost effective management solution, the corporate and public sector took up interim management with increasing enthusiasm. Tax regulations were subsequently introduced to ensure that this did not amount to ‘casualisation’ of executive employment. There are clearly parallels in the role of interim ministers and managers, and indeed perhaps also in the wider church’s anxiety about the ‘casualisation’ of ministry at a time of rapid change.

It seems the patterns of IM can be found wherever humanity responds to the cycles of change, transition and renewal (also perhaps in our theological understanding of death, resurrection and ascension). A particular dimension of the role which is explicit to Interim Ministry, and not to Interim Management, is the expectation that this is a Godly process – a time of holy listening, encounter and direction finding which the IM leads.

¹ Loren Mead, *Transitional Ministry*, Church Publishing, 2009, pg viii.

² Loren Mead, *Transitional Ministry*, Church Publishing, 2009, pg vii.

³ Lawrence L Hand, *Transitional Ministry*, Church Publishing, 2009, p156.

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Bishop Peter Hill notes that interim ministry seems to arise in the context of 'Zones of Uncomfortable Debate' (ZOUDs) – perhaps those times when there is a need for transformation, but the conditions, capacity, resources – even the will - don't yet exist locally to bring about this change.

Bp Peter comments: 'Change management theory suggests that 95% of real and lasting transformative change derives from this context, yet institutions spend only 5 per cent of their time on this zone, due of course to the discomfort. In effect disturbance is necessary for transformation. I believe we see this again and again in the New Testament with Jesus and the disciples, he was constantly taking them into the ZOUD.'

Indeed ZOUDs, and interim ministry within them, can be seen in key episodes in biblical history, among them:

Moses, the original transition leader, who led his people out of their old situation (slavery in Egypt), reconnected them with God and their history; helped them discover a new identity as the people of God; developed his local leadership; and led them into a new direction (the promised land). The challenges, conflicts and uncertainties of IM can also be seen in this process, as can God working throughout with his IM to bring them into this new future.

Jesus, especially after the resurrection, where he enables the disciples to come to terms with history and the grief of his death; he renews their connections and links after they all scattered; he supports and encourages the new leaders of the church; helps them to discover a new identity through the Holy Spirit; and finally he helps them to commit to a new future of going out and preaching the Good News and pastoring his sheep.

Saints Paul and Peter exhibit IM tendencies as they lead the early church through a process of understanding their history and connectedness to Jesus (whether Jew, Gentile or anything else); developing and appointing local leaders; helping them to be followers of the new way; and encouraging and supporting them as they go forward in this task.

As can often be seen in these episodes, IM is not always straightforward. There are moments of joy and celebration, but it can often feel like a time of struggle in the 'wilderness', where people experience fearfulness and anxiety. The IM is there to bring a clear process, outside perspective and non-anxious presence to this time.

2. What do Interim Ministers do?

Parishes usually commit to the IM process and to working with an IM before the appointment starts. This is important as it ensures there is buy-in from parishes from the beginning. A failure to get commitment may result in the parish refusing to engage with the IM tasks.

The Archdeacon of Harlow, Martin Webster, endorses the need to get buy-in from parishes. He notes it is important not to assume that the nature of the IM role and arrangements for embarking on IM have been heard and understood by parishes at a first meeting, but given the newness of the approach, perhaps require several encounters, supported by the Area Dean, with a form of words endorsing the IM approach from the bishop.

The IM will have a defined start and end period, and the process will generally be led by the IM with a 'task force' of key people; it will involve connecting with people widely through personal interviews and parish 'focus groups', whole parish events; it will include monitoring and evaluating progress, and ensuring there is a good exit and handover from the process.

It is generally accepted that IM focuses on five main development tasks which run alongside a series of process tasks which are about starting and connecting with the parish; helping them to focus on the tasks; analysing what is happening, evaluating and planning the exit/handover.

The five development tasks are (not necessarily in this order):

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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, archdeaonries 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.

Different IMs have used different tools and methods of achieving this, many borrowed from others areas of change management and community development, such as participatory strategic planning, 'appreciative enquiry', family systems theory and congregational systems analysis, but the tasks have remained a central focus of all IM processes.

It is important also to note that different parishes will require different emphases on the tasks: some may require more time on Coming to terms with History (e.g. following conflict or abuse), while others may need to focus more on Discovering a new identity (e.g. following pastoral reorganisation).

Generally, one IM will work with one parish at a time through these processes. However, we are in an unusual situation in Harlow where an IM has been engaged to work with three parishes –one which is emerging from an IM process; and two which are going through this process as part of a vacancy period; the whole being drawn, with a fourth parish, into a new configuration of ministry – a covenant – as part of wider take up of ministry units.

3. What systems, structures and supports are needed for Interim Ministry?

IM is quite a unique ministry that brings different blessings and struggles. IMs come into a period which is inevitably unsettled. Many people resist change, and it can expose feelings of anxiety, loss and anger. The IM is the focus and symbol of change, and as the change-maker, they can be vulnerable.

Though they maintain the rhythms of parish life, IMs do not generally have the same pastoral involvement as the settled minister – they are not the parish priest, nor can they engage too deeply in the day-to-day life of the place; though most people in the parish will struggle to grasp that, and there is a risk of unfulfilled expectations.

Furthermore, there is a need for advanced planning on how occasional offices will be managed during the vacancy – in a busy parish with many weddings, funerals and baptisms, pastoral services could overwhelm the IM and distract them from the transition process.

IMs may be the subject of suspicion and hostility, especially in a situation where there has been considerable hurt or conflict, which may come both from parishioners and other fellow clergy.

There is a need for IMs to be prepared to work with a deep desire for good interpersonal relationships, with great self-awareness, and have an ability to interpret the process as it moves forward and changes. They need a sufficient degree of empathy and pastoral engagement to build trust and gain traction for change with people; while keeping enough distance to retain an outsider perspective and maintain the strategic momentum of the process.

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IMs in the US are generally peripatetic, often travelling large distances to appointments and unsettling friends and families to take up short-term posts. Therefore past experience is that IM has the potential to be quite a lonely, isolating ministry. Perhaps the geography of the UK will allow dioceses to overcome some of those issues through creative appointments and the strategic use of vacant posts, resources and interim licences.

It is clear that IMs need solid support structures in order to maintain the ability to be the 'non-anxious' presence in transition: both personal - in terms of secure living arrangements, a life-giving prayer discipline and sustaining family/friendships; and professional - in terms of diocesan/deanery systems such as supportive, sympathetic and engaged archdeacons, mentors and colleagues, and prayer support. Alongside this goes the need for self-care; an ability to manage conflict, identify and resolve problems; recognise the value of an encourage others leaders; maintain a love of God and people and keep their sense of humour!

Best practice in IM appointments seems to have the following features:

- IMs are recruited on the basis of needs analysis, have evidence of appropriate skills and training.
- Good and effective communication about the IM and their task.
- Appropriate systems of monitoring and evaluation, with appraisal and exit interviews.
- a sound contractual basis to the post;
- appropriate housing arrangements, travel and expenses, and professional development;
- there is a good beginning and ending, with a litany of welcome in IM churches and a good ending and celebration of what has been achieved;
- IMs are plugged into and supported by structures – deanery synods, chapters, diocesan/national structures and networks.

Good support systems provide an important mechanism for review and accountability, including regular meetings (with IMs and key players in the parish) with the Archdeacon and Area Dean, and it is suggested that this should include the bishop at key points. Archdeacon Martin Webster also notes: 'Senior players ought to be aware and be careful of the pressure they can be applying to the situation in terms of timing and expectations.'

The experience of the Lutheran Church in North America was that it took time and persistence (15 years) and sustained investment to develop IM. It also required a commitment to develop a more collaborative and collegial style of leadership with ongoing learning opportunities. But this gave rise to a more missional flavour of ministry – even one of their bishops completed IM training.

4. *Learnings from a year on the IM Journey*

The following is offered as an early reflection on the use of IM in one parish. While in practice many know where it is, out of sensitivity to those who have been involved (including previous incumbents) I have not assigned any names. The five IM development tasks have been used as the basis for the analysis, though there were not followed during the post, as I was not aware of them at that time.

Task 1: Coming to terms with history

The parish is a rural one on the county and diocesan fringe. It is very conscious of its history and the role of the church in this – the Christian community dates back to Anglo-Saxon followers of St Cedd in the 7th Century. The ancient, picturesque, and rather remote parish church was built in the 12th Century, and a modern church and community hall was built by 'public subscription' in the growing commuter village nearby in the 1960s.

The parish had experienced a 3-year-vacancy, following a period of conflict. The two previous incumbents had left unhappily. There followed a fruitless appointments process that only deepened the sense of frustration and anger.

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This had followed an apparent 'golden age' of church growth with a much-loved priest and their team, and a fairly settled history of traditional priestly ministry. Conflict had therefore been a great shock and disruption to community life, and had involved the community and neighbouring parishes. As a consequence the parish lost about 40% of its electoral roll.

Conflict, in the case of both latter incumbents, had emerged out of plans for change and from the way it was led. There was a sense of disconnect between the incumbents and the some members of the parish. In the second case, there was a split response with some finding the incumbent's approach refreshing and invigorating, while others experiencing a sense of hostility.

A major task of the IM process was reflecting on this history and the many different experiences of it: some felt hurt and rejected; others felt angry; some felt abandoned by those who left; others grieved the loss of recent incumbents; some felt guilt at their going. Longstanding members of the community lamented the loss of the past; some were frustrated by the breakdown and wanted to move on; newer members of the church struggled to understand what the fuss was about. Many were angry with the diocese for leaving them in the situation for so long.

Because of split opinions within both the congregation and village community this history was explored privately through a 'listening exercise' of one-to-one meetings – to do so publicly risked deepening the conflict. Interviews focused on personal involvement in the church, significant changes, experience of conflict and hurt, hopes and fears for the future of the church, and ways they could be involved in future.

It was important to allow people this 'safe space' and time to share their grief, anger, hurt and sadness and to just listen to how it had been for them, honestly and openly. To talk it through with a neutral IM, without blame being attached to either side, gave people the freedom to develop a more balanced view, to acknowledge that there had been strengths and weaknesses on both sides.

A critical moment was a service of reconciliation on Good Friday in which anonymised comments both positive and negative were shared, and during which the area bishop sent an apology for the diocese' failings and prayed for the healing of the community. This was a significant milestone in recovering from conflict.

There was no expectation that matters would be instantly healed after this event, but it felt like a cleaner wound which has been exposed to God's love for cleansing: all that needs to be said, has been said, pain and joy has been shared, apologies have been made, forgiveness sought. The wound can therefore heal better, instead of festering, and the parish can move on.

Task 2: Discovering a new identity

Like many parishes that have been through breakdown, there was a general lack of confidence in the future. This had not been helped by the failure of the appointments process to recruit a new priest. One of the biggest fears emerging from the interview process was of imminent closure, decline to the point of unviability, and that a priest would never be appointed. It was not exactly a church bursting with self-confidence in its future.

A series of visioning meetings were organised, open to all in the parish, which worked through the community's self-image, its strengths and weaknesses; its vision for growth for the future; its community and their needs; and opportunities for growth - where the church could be a blessing.

A major boost was re-starting worship in the small village church, closed for Anglican worship some years earlier – another source of conflict and sadness in the community, as a result of which some had ceased attending. A visit by the diocesan bishop early in the IM really blessed the church and community, affirming the reopening of the village church, and giving a renewed sense of confidence and optimism.

Many positive attributes of self-image emerged through this process: it was a church which longed to live in friendship, unity, tolerance and welcome; to be hospitable – its emblem was cake and coffee cups. It longed for growth and unity; to reach out to new people and families. It had these gifts and attributes but all had been suppressed by the climate of conflict and decline.

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The visioning process, which took about 12 months resulted in a clear set of mission priorities – focusing on spiritual growth; enriching worship; sharing fellowship and caring for those in need. There were two priority actions: Encouraging, inviting and informing our community (communicating better) and redeveloping the small village church as a ‘community hub’.

After a year of the IM process there was a refocusing on the present and future, rather than the troubled past. There was greater awareness of strengths and limitations; previous members of the congregation and community had begun to re-engage and there was a greater sense of trust, excitement and experimentation, which was most evident in the new pattern of worship which emerged.

Task 3: Helping the local/lay leaders to grow and change

One of the impacts of conflict and prolonged vacancy was the pressure which had been placed on a small group of people to sustain and maintain the life and worship of the parish and the churches’ fabric, including an open churchyard serving the village.

The churchwardens in particular bore a huge amount of responsibility and this had been a draining burden at times, especially during and in the aftermath of conflict. The long vacancy and appointment process itself had moments of intense disappointment and conflict with the diocese. Both wardens in turn resigned in effort to ‘recharge their faith batteries.’ Nobody was sufficiently confident to replace them. The IM therefore joined the parish at a time when it was without churchwardens.

The church was not without good lay leadership, however. The PCC was led by well organised and competent people, and there was a very effective administrator to manage cover, organists, funerals and baptism arrangements and handle parish enquiries. The parish therefore functioned fairly smoothly during the vacancy period.

The ‘listening exercise’ did allow the IM to develop a closer understanding of the gifts and skills of lay people, and towards the end of the first year, one of the original churchwardens was persuaded back into office, with the support of three deputy wardens, who would take responsibility the following year. The PCC was expanded and made more diverse by the inclusion of people with additional gifts and from different services. The year concluded therefore with a stronger and more energised PCC, enhancing and supporting the existing lay leadership.

There was increasing confidence growing in taking on new roles in worship such as serving, reading and intercession. Two lay people joined the IM on the Leading your Church into Growth (LYCIG) course and are now part of a small church growth team which is generating new ideas (such as starting an informal café-style worship at the village church), setting up a nurture course, planning a PCC away day and reviewing the impact of these.

Task 4: Renewing denominational linkages

Since the IM process involved close collaboration with the Archdeacon and Area Dean, who was acting as incumbent, there was an inevitable renewal of denominational linkages. While relationships had become somewhat strained during the vacancy process, the IM process allowed for more positive and forward-looking discussions.

A renewal of positive links came early on with the visit by the diocesan Bishop, and by the Area bishop on Palm Sunday. The apology and prayers by the Area bishop on Good Friday were an important part of the healing process. This was further supplemented during the year by an invitation to members of the PCC to join centenary celebrations at the cathedral and by confirmations at the Cathedral at Easter.

The parish sent representatives to be part of strategic discussions in the diocese, and has been more pro-actively participating in deanery events. The result of the renewal of denominational linkages has therefore been increased engagement and willingness to participate in the wider life of the Anglican church.

Further, the IM process renewed links with other church communities in the village and resulted in a stronger ecumenical partnership, with shared services for Remembrance, Advent, Christmas and a shared Walk of Witness on Good Friday.

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Task 5: Commitment to a new direction

The participatory style of visioning meetings meant that the priorities which emerged were a shared effort in which all had ownership. There was no difficulty therefore in getting the church to commit to a new direction since the participants themselves had generated it.

Towards the end of the IM process it was agreed that the IM would stay on in the parish as Priest-in-Charge with an expanded set of responsibilities for IM in the Harlow deanery and diocese.

While Interim Ministers never become permanent appointments, there was good cause in this instance. It was a necessary part of the parish's ongoing healing and recovery to have a stable period of ministry. To have moved into a new vacancy process after such a prolonged and troubled vacancy period risked tipping the parish back into crisis and undoing the positive work of the previous 12 months.

Insofar as the parish is part of a wider process of interim change, moving into a ministry partnership with neighbouring churches, the IM process is still ongoing. The new focus needs to be on sustaining the growth and development and preparing the parish for a new way of working in partnership with other parishes.

So, has the Interim Ministry process achieved what it intended? A major advantage of IM is that it allows a parish to enter openly and willingly into change. Because it is a time limited process, there is a need to just get on with it, and this can shift barriers and create a climate where people are willing to think more progressively and openly about the future.

A feature of this IM is that it has been intuitive rather than intentional – the diocese hadn't intended to appoint an interim post at that stage and nor had the priest intended to become one. Fortunately, God was in the intuition so the process had positive outcomes! As we move forward and become more intentional in our use of IM tools and processes and share outcomes we will improve the methodology.

4. *Going forward with IM - some ideas for further development.*

If we accept that we have an inadequate understanding of Interim Ministry and we want to use this way of working, and those who have the skills to deliver it, effectively, how can we move forward?

Networking - We need to recognise the unique nature of IM and the importance of sharing understanding and gaining support and ideas from others working in IM roles across the UK. The Diocese of Chelmsford is committed to initiating networking opportunities for those involved in IM.

Offering Training - The Diocese of Chelmsford is exploring the need for specialist training for those wishing to train as IMs or explore it further (Archdeacons, Directors of Mission and Ministry).

Create space for awareness raising and debate – develop awareness of IM at Deanery, diocesan and General synod and in paperwork and publications (e.g. a special report in Church Times/The Month)

Supporting IMs - Binding IMs and the principles of IM into local systems and structures, especially as part of emerging ministry units/covenant groups – it is important that lay people and clergy understand IM.

Offering Stability for IMs: The Church of England may be able to offer stability for IMs through pairing IM appointments with other roles. It means IMs can focus on IM without the process being artificially skewed by funding constraints or time limits. Additionally, it gives the IM a secure base of operation with parish and collegial support and encouragement. How can we develop this, placing IM Associates in teams/ units?

Create a resource base - Develop publishing partnerships with the Alban Institute and others on key IM texts.

Develop the gospel of transition - Help our church communities to stop fearing change and start sharing and supporting transition through study and prayer together on key biblical texts of transition.

Develop the evidence base of using IM here in diocese/CoE - Sharing examples and case studies of our learnings and experiences of IM so far in different parts of the country and in different situations.

Comments, feedback and further suggestions are welcome. Email: hsgheorghiu@btinternet.com.