



Ministry in the Meantime

Interim as a Time of Transformation
A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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If we define interim ministry narrowly as the time between two moving vans when one settled pastor leaves and the next one arrives, we may miss a prime opportunity for transforming congregations. Actually, aren't we all interims? Isn't all ministry done in the meantime?

Having done a half dozen interims, here are two sets of observations. First, here's a short list of some benefits, banalities and blessings of the interim season in a congregation's life cycle. Second, is a brief look at some faulty assumptions about interim seasons that may need revisiting.

The Benefits, Banalities, and Blessings of the Interim Season.

Benefits:

1. Provides time to critically reexamine the congregation's mission at the macro level.
2. Is an opportunity to re-boot and reinvent. Addresses more than a technical change *do-over*.
3. Occasions reconnection with denominational roots and a revisit of ministry context.
4. Makes open space for grace and spiritual growth.

Banalities:

1. Sometimes, churches slip into mission sleep mode.
2. Activity levels quietly shift into *slo-mo*—a skeleton crew provides maintenance.
3. Conflict arises over old wounds from the previous administration.
4. Contribution and attendance patterns may shift unpredictably.

Blessings:

1. Interim season can be a breath of fresh air; a true renaissance of the spirit.
2. Members often thoughtfully re-examine why they joined, and intentionally *re-up*.
3. Locked-in patterns get loosened and new configurations emerge.
4. Permission to experiment allows new things and energizes interest/kicks up objection; which provides the *kairos* moment for meetings of the mind to take place.

For a congregation determined to piggyback on the interim period as a time of transformation, it could prove quite helpful to discuss these benefits, banalities and blessings in open class forums then compose their unique Benefits/Banalities/Blessings list as one way to keep expectations on track with the transformation process during the leadership changeover.

Brief Look at a Few Faulty Assumptions

Interim seasons can also create an occasion for long-buried and unexamined assumptions to get stated out loud, aired and clarified. Here are some typical assumptions that may well need revisiting.

1. *All we're doing here is changing ministers, not reinventing the church.* Driven by fear of change, it's easy to minimize the scope of change. It's all on the table when a minister change occurs because one of the major forces is missing. This unbalances the leadership equation. Assuming that the future is only the past projected forward is not a safe assumption given the pace of change in post-modern America.
2. *We can afford to sit on critical decisions that impact congregational progress.* Out of anxiety for what the future holds, leaders may try to lock down the decision process and wait for the new minister when key issues beg to be addressed and engaging this conversation could be a potentially providential opportunity.
3. *Interim is just business as usual, so staff/program resources don't need reallocation.* While change for its own sake is wasted energy, interim seasons can provide time to test: do we have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Shifts and changes require staff to come out of their silos and dialogue about their ministry fit and evaluate their contribution to the total mission. This dynamic becomes even more critical when a current staff member requests consideration as a candidate.
4. *Let's just wait for the new minister.* Understandably, congregational leaders don't want to waste leadership capital working through tough decisions that have consequences for the new pastor. On the other hand, you don't want your new minister to spend the leadership chips they bring into the honeymoon period on matters that could have been dealt with during the interim. Leadership could at least set the table for a good decision that could be an easy early victory and confidence builder.
5. *If we ignore our messes, they will clean themselves up.* Conflict avoidance creates touchy spots that have a way of surfacing at the most inopportune moments. Core congregational leaders have the respect and history to identify and attend these matters before they splatter and create more messes. Pay now or double up later.
6. *We don't need an expensive study, just dust off what we've already done.* In many traditions, to call a settled pastor, an extensive self-study is required. This step can be viewed as merely a paperwork hoop to jump through in order to secure the names of candidates. Transforming congregations use the self-study process to provide a unique opportunity to understand their historic roots and help the search team do their homework so they can speak with even greater confidence about who we are as a congregation to prospective candidates.
7. *Our past mistakes need a name in order to be properly blamed.* In an attempt to explain the dynamics of what happened in a critical period, the easy way out is to simply blame someone. Past patterns certainly need critical examination and analysis, but without the burden of blame. Wherever a congregation is able to acknowledge and articulate their more complicated circumstances without intimidating blame or indicting, it is a sign of health. Transforming congregations believe the best autopsies are autopsies without blame.
8. *When we have a new minister, we'll talk to the congregation.* Yes, the search team needs to operate discretely with complete confidentiality, yet regularly communicate their process and concerns to the congregation. Not doing so allows room for the creep of negative dynamics. During a settled pastorate, money and attendance are the usual prime indicators and provide the focal point for conversation about the congregation's health. These markers may fluctuate unpredictably during the interim. All the more reason for leaders to regularly communicate clear expectation: a) some variances are normal during the transition b) this is a blip on the screen, not our future pattern. c) let's refocus on our intentional goal: using the interim season to do a piece of significant transformational work.

The standard numbers box printed in the Sunday bulletin may indicate if we in the red or black, but not paint the fuller picture. Holding a series of 'town hall' meetings in which disclosure and transparency are modeled by the up-front leaders can help calm nerves. Here anxieties, fears, uncertainties and concerns may be voiced without rancor or recrimination. The conversation needs

to stay well above the complaint department level, while real concerns are addressed in a forthright and prayerful manner. Defining progress strictly by the numbers fails to address the strategy of using the interim period as a fulcrum, a springboard, a multiplier of transformation. While dealing with policy issues and procedural matters can enhance the mission outlook, the leadership cannot afford to lose sight of the transformational process that requires change well beyond the level of technical modifications.

Summary

Settled pastors serve effectively as good shepherds, leading their flock by green pastures and still waters. Interim pastors often serve more like Sherpa guides, navigating the higher elevations and trickier turns of transitional passages toward the transformational paths for the congregation.

Important Things to Know

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