

Transitional Consultations (Adapted from IIM Training)

Most churches view the time between the resignation of one pastor and the call of another as unproductive, fallow time. Some feel it is wasted time. Others fear the congregation will lose members or dollars. Still others are in a rush to call a new pastor as quickly as possible so that things can return to normal.

Significant studies of hundreds of congregations over the past twenty years are now showing that the interim between pastors can be an important time in congregational life. R. Neil Chafin, an experienced consultant to congregations, says, "The way a congregation chooses to use its transitional time will shape congregational growth, identity, and health for years to come. We also know that what is done in the transitional time really determines whether the new pastor and congregation will form a solid ministry team."

Congregations which fail to make wise use of this interim period tend to repeat their history with the new minister. This can lead to pain and confusion for the minister and prevent the congregation from providing a context of spiritual growth for its members and ministry to its community.

The circumstances which have led to a transition of ministers is an important factor in determining the shape of an interim period. If the transition to a new minister is a healthy planned hand over following a full term of ministry there may not need to be an interim period. However if the pastor has resigned mid term due to conflict, was terminated due to incompetence, or became ill, burned out or maybe even died in the position, there is likely to be a need for a carefully facilitated transition period. The other common circumstance is the departure or retirement of a long serving pastor.

Changes in churches also impact the need for a transitional consultancy. Membership in many churches is decreasing. Many congregations are unsure of their future. Each generation has differing expectations of church. A ministry transition is the best time to talk about and clarify these hopes and questions about church life.

Research led by Loren Mead has identified five tasks of churches in transition.

The five tasks are:

- **Coming to terms with history**
It is vital to make time for healthy closure and resolution within the congregation and for putting the service of the former minister in perspective. There must be a time of letting go of the former minister and for discarding old expectations, wounds, patterns, and baggage of the past. Only when the congregation has let go of the former minister can a new minister be fully accepted. There may in some circumstances be a need for healing following a unhealthy closure with a former leader. Even a long pastorate that has been healthy needs a thoughtful process of re-examining the church system after the pastor has gone.
- **Examining leadership and organisational needs**
Every congregation needs to be conscious of developing new leadership for the tasks of ministry and for incorporating younger and newer members into its body. Transition is prime time for reviewing the lay leadership structures, the congregations leadership needs, its ways of organising, and for making decisions on how to best structure itself for growth and wisely use its resources.
- **Rethinking denominational linkage**
A congregation has often learned to see the denomination through the eyes of its former leader. It is important that each local congregation clarify its theological emphases, missiological perspectives and congregational values. A congregation

that does not deal with this aspect of its life runs a strong risk of calling a minister who does not align with the congregation. This can be a difficult experience for the minister and congregation and can lead to a mismatch resulting in congregational conflict. It is important to connect to the denomination at this point and rethink the nature of the congregation's linkage.

- **Deepening a sense of identity and developing fresh vision**

A congregation must periodically redefine a sense of purpose, direction, and what distinguishes it from other churches in the community. The interim period is an appropriate time to do this. It is also an ideal time to reflect on changes in church membership and in the local community. A church that over time disconnects from its community and loses a sense of mission and ministry becomes an endangered church.

- **Preparation to welcome new pastoral leadership**

When a congregation has completed the four preceding tasks, it is ready to carry out the search process and discern with pastoral leadership candidates who may be a good match for the congregation. During this phase of the transition, the congregation prepares to welcome a new leader.

These are the five important developmental tasks of a congregation in search of a new pastor. If these tasks are done thoroughly with wide participation by congregational members, the chances for effective ministry with a new pastor are greatly enhanced. If they are hurried, neglected or minimised, the next pastor may well be an unintentional interim and only last a short time.

Leading Transition

There are trained Intentional Interim Ministers available to churches to lead them through this process. However not all churches are not able to find an intentional interim or choose to follow this route. Some churches decide to manage the interim ministry themselves with assistance from the denomination. They then may choose to call a consultancy team to facilitate the transition process. An interim minister (Not IIM trained) may also be appointed to serve the church through preaching, teaching, pastoral care and administration and the church may decide to invite a consultancy team to focus on the transition.

The process of transition is accomplished by the church and facilitated by consultants or an Intentional Interim Minister. Congregational leadership for the process is vested in a group of church members chosen by the congregation. This group is called the **Transition Team**, and it is selected by asking church members to identify four or five people that they most trust to guide the church through the transition process with the assistance of the consultants. The team should be representative of different groups in the congregation, including men and women, younger and older people. This team can have up to 7-8 members depending upon the size of the church and the diversity necessary for it to be broadly representative of the congregation.

The Transition Team works through the developmental tasks of the transition process. With the consultants, they look at ways to involve a congregation in reflecting on each of the developmental tasks of the church. The Transition Team is responsible to the congregation for recommending when the process should be concluded and the search for a new minister should begin. The membership of the Transition Team and its appropriate functioning is a key to the church experiencing the full benefits of the process. This team is guided by the consultants.

How Long Does It Take?

The transition process typically takes anywhere from 6 to 18 months from the decision of the congregation to begin transitional ministry until the installation of the next pastor. However, certain circumstances can shorten or extend this period of time. Experience indicates that if

the previous pastor had a long tenure of service of more than 10 years, then the interim time will be extended. If the church had a significant conflict with the previous pastor, that also will likely extend the interim time. The amount of time that it takes for a church to do intentional interim ministry is determined by the Transition Team that guides the process. It also is determined by the length of time that a Search Committee requires to find an acceptable minister to serve as pastor. There are no hard and fast rules. Most of the time, a church commits to work with an Interim pastor for around one year, working with consultants can be shorter. The covenant can be renewed after that time, if the church so desires.

Myths about Transitional Ministry

1. *A transitional process is only for troubled churches.*

Transitional consultancy is designed from experience with healthy congregations. Certain congregations in difficult situations may find the process particularly valuable. However, any church can benefit from self-reflection and clarity about who it is before it calls a new pastor can benefit from the process of transition.

2. *The transition consultants will tell us what we need to do.*

The consultancy team provide a guide to help the process. The work of transition is a work of the church deciding and doing what it needs to do.

Does This Process Work?

Transition works differently in every church because it is a process designed and developed by the congregation's leaders not an external process imposed from outside. It is an effective and valuable process when a church takes ownership of the five tasks and works through them with care with the coaching of trained consultants.