



Passing the Mantle

The Interim Time Period in the Large Congregation

By: Susan Beaumont

© Susan Beaumont & Associates, 2014
All Rights Reserved

And so it happened. They were walking along and talking. Suddenly a chariot and horses of fire came between them and Elijah went up in a whirlwind to heaven. Elisha saw it all When he could no longer see anything, he grabbed his robe and ripped it to pieces. Then he picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him, returned to the shore of the Jordan, and stood there. He took Elijah's cloak—all that was left of Elijah!—and hit the river with it, saying, "Now where is the GOD of Elijah? Where is he?"

When he struck the water, the river divided and Elisha walked through.

(2Kings 2:11-14, The Message)

A season of leadership transition is ripe with possibility and peril. A congregation in the midst of transition experiences spurts of energy countered by periods of malaise; creativity accompanied by stymying conflict; and hope in tension with grief. In short, the transition season is confusing!

Leadership transitions in congregations rarely embody the flashy passing that Elijah and Elisha experienced. Fire doesn't descend. Rivers don't divide. Incumbent leaders don't mystically ascend, never to be seen again. We have to make due with much less clarity and prolonged periods of murkiness. The mantle of leadership is rarely passed at one clear moment in time, but moves from one leader to the next over a long season of transition.

The interim time period begins when the incumbent pastor signals plans for leaving, or when the congregation begins imagining that a transition is imminent. It continues through the process of departure, search and call (or appointment). It typically does not end until the new permanent pastor is well established and has launched a new chapter. The transition period often spans years, particularly when the departing pastor is long tenured.

The interim period has long been viewed as a special time in the life of a congregation, a time requiring a “different” sort of leadership. Rather than moving from one ministerial relationship immediately into another, the standing practice in congregations involves the deployment of an Interim Minister, a temporary shepherd who leads the congregation through the murky waters of transition.

Developmental tasks of the congregation during the interim time period have traditionally been understood this way:ⁱ

1. Coming to terms with the history of the congregation
2. Discovering a new identity
3. Managing necessary leadership changes in lay leadership and on the staff team
4. Renewing denominational linkages
5. Gaining commitment to new directions in ministry

The vast majority of congregations on the American landscape today are small to medium sized congregations, for whom these tasks may be relevant. Small and medium sized congregations form deep, personal, one to one relationships with their ministers. After years of unexamined leadership, the small or medium sized congregation can lose track of its distinctive identity, its relationship to the community, and its relationship to the denomination. Lay and staff leadership can become ingrown with deeply imbedded practices

that have become dysfunctional over time. Leadership habits that worked in the carefully crafted dance between a congregation and its pastoral leader may not work well with the arrival of new leadership.

Working through these five developmental tasks is notable and worthy work for an interim time period in the small to mid-sized church, and an effective interim minister can help the congregation detach and prepare for healthy reattachment. As the two-staged transition in leadership occurs, from departing senior minister- to interim minister- to new senior minister, the congregation examines unstated assumptions about congregational life and prepares itself for a new chapter in ministry.

During the interim time period the small to mid-sized congregation may experience mild growth in attendance and giving, or it may experience malaise and decline. However, once the new minister arrives, the trends of the interim period are often quickly reversed and a new equilibrium is established under new leadership.

What about the large church? Are the five interim tasks relevant? Is interim ministry the best way to go? The purpose of this paper is to discuss the distinctiveness of the interim period in the large congregation, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the interim pastor role in a congregation with more than 400 in worship attendance. We will examine the distinctive features of large church leadership, redefine the five developmental tasks of the interim time period, and evaluate alternative models of leadership transition.

Distinctive Leadership Dynamics in the Large Church

Role of the Senior Clergy

In the *Professional Church* size category (400-800 average worship attendance)ⁱⁱ, the effective senior clergy leader demonstrates a managerial mindset. This pastor lets go of a purely relational style of leadership and learns to project a caring presence, while adopting a more organizational stance. Pastoral care focus shifts from the congregation at large, to the care of the staff team and key lay leaders, who in turn provide care for others. The pastor shifts attention to the overall performance management of the staff team and governing board.

In the *Strategic Church* size category (800-1200 average worship attendance), the effective clergy leader assumes a strategic leadership focus. A strategic pastor works to keep congregational resources and energy aligned around core mission and a few strategic priorities. This involves paying attention to the right things, saying no to the wrong things, and spending time on the important things. The pastor delegates the day to day management of the congregation. She glides between the balcony and the dance floor, maintaining focus on a larger strategic picture in the midst of day to day activity. She leads with a public persona. Her presence embodies the mission of the congregation and presents a “face” that communicates the congregation’s culture and image.

Already, we note a fundamental distinction between the interim leadership challenges of the small and the large congregation. The congregant in the small to medium sized church must use the interim period to let go of a personal, one to one attachment to the departing pastor. In the larger church those personal attachments are likely to be more present among the staff

team and among key lay leaders. The larger population of the congregation is attached to a persona, not to a personal relationship. There is still important transition work to be done in transferring attachment, but the transition experience will be different from that of a smaller congregation.

Strategic Identity

Issues of identity and distinctiveness are fundamentally different in the larger church. Smaller congregations often stake their identities around being “caring communities” of family like structures. It can be difficult for the small or medium sized congregation to describe the unique nature of their ministry, the distinctiveness of context, or who they are seeking to serve. In the smaller church, the interim time is designed to be a neutral, reflective time; the congregation stops action to focus its energy on these important identity conversations.

The healthy large church already possesses a unique way of talking about its identity, its context, and the strengths of its market niche. The persona of the current pastor projects this uniqueness. The vision work of the large congregation during the interim does not involve re-inventing the church, but looks for fresh ways to articulate what is already known. During the interim period, the large church claims strategic priorities for the next chapter, and names the attributes of the pastor who will manage and embody the identity.

Conflict Management

Anxiety and conflict express themselves differently in the larger church than they do in the smaller congregation ⁱⁱⁱ. Smaller congregations are constructed around simpler relational cells and networks. When anxiety surfaces in the smaller congregation it is quickly experienced throughout the entire congregation, and must be managed systemically. In the larger church anxiety is likely to express itself in increased interest and speculation across the congregation, but outright conflict is likely to be localized and experienced within pockets.

During the interim period, the overall anxiety of the large congregation will be higher than normal, but the anxiety can be managed through clear and transparent communication. Outbreaks of conflict are best handled from the center and at the source, engaging the staff team and key lay leaders in the important work of conflict management as needed. Stability on the staff team and governing board are critical to keeping conflict healthy and anxiety at a minimum.

The Work of a Liminal Season

In the large church, the interim time period is not a vision neutral time zone. Leading the large church is like steering an ocean liner. The vessel turns slowly and with great deliberation. It is not flexible and nimble, and if momentum is lost during an interim season it will take huge amounts of energy on the part of new leadership to propel the vessel forward again. In fact, a large congregation may never regain momentum lost during an interim season.

The interim time period in the larger church is not a time to “take a break”. I recently worked with a large congregation that started and completed an entire building project during its interim. Another congregation launched a new worship venue and completely overhauled the

program budget allocation process; all without a permanent senior pastor, or interim pastor in place. Both of these congregations understood the importance of creating momentum and a platform for the successful entry of a new leader.

However, while the church is fostering momentum, it must also embrace the work of a liminal season.

Richard Rohr describes liminal space in this way^{iv}.

...a unique position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to entrust and wait, you will run...anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.

William Bridges identifies this season as the neutral zone, the space in between an ending and a new beginning^v. According to Bridges, people in the neutral zone are often confused, uncertain and impatient. Feelings of anxiety, skepticism or low morale are likely to surface. Attendance sometimes wanes and giving may lag. The neutral zone can be a time of confusion, quietness, vulnerability and feeling exposed.

A liminal season is a time to nurture the soul of the congregation by clarifying basic vocational questions: Who are we? Who are we here to serve? What is God calling us to do or become? It is a time to nurture and develop the discernment muscles of the leadership body. In a liminal season, we strengthen the leadership narrative of the congregation, along with systems for communication, decision making and conflict management. It is a time to work through any unresolved grief or shame issues that bind the congregation. And finally, it is a season to reflect upon behavioral norms and practices that might prevent new leadership from entering well.

The large church does not halt activity to tend to its liminal work; it builds the bridge to the next chapter while walking on the bridge. Typically the momentum of the congregation is maintained by the staff team, governing board, and ministry teams, while pockets of leadership pause to engage the liminal work. Consequently, stability within the staff team and among the lay leaders is critical. So is developing a rhythm of work and rest.

Five Developmental Tasks Revisited

This paper opened with a presentation of five developmental tasks historically associated with congregations during an interim time period. How might we restate those tasks for the larger church? Here is the list that I would propose:

1. Aligning and renewing congregational mission and vision.
2. Discerning and articulating the strategic priorities for the next chapter.
3. Improving stability at the core by strengthening staff team dynamics and governance practices.

4. Managing necessary changes in leadership roles while maintaining leadership stability and momentum
5. Creating a good ending, honoring the neutral zone (or liminal space), and preparing for a new beginning^{vi}.

The reader will observe that the first four tasks listed here correlate to four of the developmental tasks in the smaller church. They focus on vision, discernment, and leadership transition. The statements have been revised to emphasize sharpening strength, while maintaining stability at the core.

Strengthening ties with the denomination is not an interim developmental task for the large church. The interim time period in the larger church may not be a particularly productive time to reflect on the congregation's role in the denomination, or its relationship with the middle judicatory. This work happens more naturally with the arrival of the new pastor.

Most of the interim and pastoral search policies and procedures that exist within denominations are designed to serve the needs of small to mid-sized congregations. Large congregations often feel misunderstood and poorly served by denominational resources. Consequently, the large congregation may look outside of the denomination for help during the interim journey. Middle judicatory executives and staff are often caught between meeting the needs of the large congregation (their largest revenue contributor) and the perception that they are giving "special consideration and undue attention" to the large church.

As a result, the large church often experiences increased tension with its middle judicatory leaders during the interim period, rather than a renewed sense of relationship. (Of course, this does not have to be the norm, and some large congregations work quite well with their denominational leaders during the interim.)

A new developmental task on this list emphasizes creating a good ending, honoring the neutral zone, and preparing for a new beginning. The leaders of large congregations are inclined to ignore liminality. Large congregations like to push through, carry on, and add energy, to avoid the malaise of liminal space. They are not inclined to reflect and refine. A new beginning cannot take place without a good ending, and the measured pace of reflection in the neutral zone. Large congregations need focused work in this area.

So, what model of leadership transition works best to help the large congregation engage these developmental tasks? Is an interim minister the best way to go?

Interim Pastor, or Not?

The traditional interim ministry model is a two staged transition process. The congregation transfers leadership to an interim pastor, followed by a second leadership transition to a permanent senior pastor, some 12-24 months later. Increasingly, large churches are looking at alternate models of transition that involve a more seamless, single leadership transfer.

One such model involves an existing executive pastor, who steps up to assume leadership of the church as the senior pastor exits. (In this approach an outside preacher(s) is often brought in to fill the pulpit until the arrival of the permanent new pastor.) The executive pastor steps

back into his traditional role upon arrival of the new senior pastor. While this model bears some similarity to an interim pastorate, it is really quite different. The executive pastor already knows how to lead the system and has developed a reservoir of leadership capital that is trusted. Consequently, there is greater forward momentum with this model, compared to a traditional interim. This approach will feel like a single leadership transition to most members of the church. One of their own is leading until the new leader is identified and appointed or called.

For this model to work effectively, a number of conditions must be met. The departing pastor must effectively delegate full leadership authority to the Executive Pastor at appropriate moments in time, leading up to the senior pastor's departure. The executive pastor must have the skills to provide strong and capable leadership in the interim period, and be prepared to step back into a traditional role once the new pastor arrives. This requires leadership savvy and humility on the part of the Executive Pastor. Finally, the new senior pastor must make a decisive and clear leadership entry, or the executive pastor won't be able to release the reigns of leadership.

Another model involves a co-pastorate approach. In this model the congregation actively begins the developmental tasks of the interim period, while the existing pastor is still in place. A search committee works to identify a new senior pastor. The new senior pastor is brought on board for a brief period of time as co-pastor, alongside the departing pastor. The transfer of full leadership authority between the old and the new pastor happens gradually over a period of time (typically a few weeks to a few months). By the time the departing pastor actually takes his or her leave, the congregation has already completed a good portion of its adaptive work.

The benefits of a single transition in a large congregation should be self-evident. Single transition models provide the leadership stability critical to sustaining momentum and energy in the large church. The depth of leadership in the large church allows the congregation to genuinely engage the developmental tasks of the interim period, without the direct involvement of the senior minister. The staff team and governing board are protected from two periods of upheaval so that they can provide consistent and strong leadership, while the congregation is engaging its developmental tasks. The anxiety level of the congregation tends to remain low. The present senior minister is available to mentor the executive pastor and/or the incoming senior minister, and is able to help strengthen and transfer the mantle of leadership.

Single transition models are not appropriate for every large congregation. There are indicators that suggest whether a single transition or the more traditional two-staged interim is most appropriate. A single stage model of transition is viable when^{vii}:

- The departing pastor is a long-tenured retiring pastor who is well received and much loved by the congregation.
- The departing pastor has a wide network of relationships and resources that can be passed along to his or her successor.
- The departing pastor is in a position to actively signal the passing of his or her personal power and prestige to a successor.
- The departing pastor is emotionally open and aware of his or her leadership strengths and weaknesses.

- The departing pastor is capable of allowing the congregation to engage its future developmental work, without interfering with that work in inappropriate ways.
- The anxiety level in the congregation going into the transition is at fairly normal levels and will allow for good decision making.
- The existing staff team and governing board are functional decision making bodies, in healthy relationship with one another and the congregation.
- The congregation already has a developed sense of its mission identity and strategy.
- Normal tension and healthy equilibrium exist among subgroups or “voices” in the congregation.

A more traditional, two-staged interim transition may be more appropriate when the above conditions don't exist, and/or when the following conditions are present:

- Dysfunctional conflict is openly at work in the congregation.
- There is broken trust in the relationship between the congregation and its clergy (either the departing pastor or the remaining clergy staff team).
- The departing senior pastor is leaving due to termination or forced retirement.
- The departing pastor has not given the congregation enough notice (i.e. 18-24 months), to fully engage a search process and the co-pastorate leadership period, before her departure.
- The congregation does not have a well formed strategic identity.
- The congregation does not have a high-functioning staff team and/or governance structure.

Help From the Outside

Working with a single transition model imposes several conditions on the system. The congregation must begin its adaptive work, its five developmental tasks, while the present senior minister is still in place. And, the senior pastor cannot be the leader of those developmental tasks. Most congregations are not capable of initiating truly adaptive work without the help of an outside presence. This is where an interim consultant comes in. The interim consultant can be a denominational representative, or an independent consultant, or a combination of both.

The right consultant(s) can augment and shape the adaptive work of the congregation in a manner that fully engages leadership and allows the present senior minister to remain at arm's length from the developmental tasks. An interim consultant can offer the following support services:

- Educate congregation leaders about the dynamics of change during a time of pastoral transition (ending, neutral zone, new beginnings).

- Nurture discernment practices and liminal awareness among leaders.
- Advise the governing body in the selection and appointment of a healthy search committee.
- Support the search committee and governing body as they define a process for congregational self-study and reflection.
- Guide congregation leaders as they clarify congregational identity, community context, and mission/vision for the next chapter of congregational life.
- Support congregation leaders as they identify gifts, skill sets, characteristics and experiences desired in the next pastor, as well as an accurate description of the position being filled.
- Facilitate wide-spread congregation involvement in the completion of the above.
- Consult with the search committee in the preparation of a comprehensive, accurate and imaginative congregation profile.
- Support the search committee as they design and execute an effective search process.
- Support the staff team as they renegotiate roles and behavioral norms during each stage of the transition process.
- Support the governing body as they identify and strengthen behavioral norms in the areas of communication, decision-making, conflict management, handling of complaints, and leadership.
- Guide congregation leaders and the new pastor in the creation of an effective entry strategy.
- Encourage openness in communication and participative decision making throughout every aspect of the transition.
- Mediate and facilitate the transfer of leadership power and authority between the departing and arriving senior clergy.
- Help the congregation bring healthy closure to its pastoral relationship with the retiring pastor.
- Encourage open dialogue and healthy communication between the congregation, the consultant and denominational representatives.

The use of single stage transition models in pastoral transition are still in the experimental stages. As more and more large congregations engage these transitions we will have increased opportunities to study their effectiveness. For the time being, it is exciting to consider a new way of transitioning that holds promise for the unique needs of the larger church.

ⁱ Roger Nicholson, “Temporary Shepherds: a Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry”, (Alban, 1998), 6-12.

ⁱⁱ Susan Beaumont, “Inside the Large Congregation”, (Alban Institute, 2011)

ⁱⁱⁱ Gil Rendle, *The Needs of Large Congregations During Ministerial Transition*, a whitepaper delivered at the UUA Gathering of large congregations, Santa Barbara, CA; March 3, 2006.

^{iv} <http://sojo.net/magazine/2002/01/grieving-sacred-space> (April, 2014)

^v <http://www.wmbridges.com/pdf/getting-thru-wilderness-2006-v2.pdf>

^{vi} The language of endings, neutral zone and new beginnings is adapted from William Bridges, “Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change”, (Perseus Books, 1991)

^{vii} Rendle, p 3.