

What is the Work of the Congregation and Transition Team?

Three words are associated with the interim period in a congregation:¹ **change**, **transition**, and **transformation**.

Change can be defined as the inevitable movement of life's forces. Inevitable means it is going to happen, and movement means we will become different. This is true for churches as well as individuals. In fact, for a faith community, the interim period between senior clergy is the time that change becomes most obvious.

Transition is the process by which individuals and congregations deal with change. The late William Bridges, a leading professional on the topic of transition states, "When change happens without people going through a transition, it is just a rearrangement of the chairs. What can be done that will create the best opportunity to handle change in a healthy way?"

Another way of understanding the relationship between change and transition is that change is situational, but transition is psychological. So, it is not change that we resist. We resist the losses and endings that come with transition. With every change, a piece of somebody's world is being lost.

Transformation is the new shape that grows out of this time of transition. Transformation is the result of individuals and congregations managing change and transition and dealing with the losses and endings. Transformation is what gives the church new life and new possibilities and new energy as the people claim their place and purpose in God's Kingdom.

The Exodus story is about a transition from the end of one experience (slavery) to the beginning of another experience/setting (freedom). In the process of going from Egypt to the Promised Land, the people are seeking and discovering and clarifying God's will, direction and movement in their lives.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus. John has a purpose. He moves about in the wilderness with a consistent and urgent message. Nevertheless, throughout the entire journey, John continues to seek and discover and clarify God's will, direction and movement.

Also, in the Gospel of Matthew, we learn that early in Jesus' ministry, he is led off into the wilderness. He spends 40 days and 40 nights in prayer and fasting. He is earnestly seeking and discovering and clarifying God's will, direction and movement. Jesus emerges from the wilderness, but not before he has clarity about what God is calling him to do.

Jesus dealt with change, transition, and transformation. Yet, the transformation also cost him his life.

You cannot transition through change and experience transformation without giving up the old and taking on the new. In Matthew 9:17, Jesus is credited with saying, "Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

This period called the "interim time" provides congregations an opportunity to put new wine into the fresh wineskins. It is a time when the people can objectively decide what meaningful parts of their history, tradition and practice will continue to be carried with them and what will be left behind.

Interim ministry also is about seeking effective ways to organize for ministry, recruit, train and develop new leadership. It involves assessing the way decisions are made and determining if there are more inclusive ways to handle this task. This is a time to look at how the members of the congregation relate to one another, the surrounding neighborhood, and the wider church. Finally, this is a time for a congregation to **discover their identity apart from the pastor**. This is an **opportunity to develop a vision** that will help meet the spiritual needs of members and enhance their ministry beyond themselves. With this kind of clarity, the congregation can find a new leader who will equip them to follow what they believe to be God's will, direction, and purpose.

¹ I am indebted to Warren Schulz for introducing me to the distinction of these three words in the book, Nicholson, Roger S. Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry. Alban, 1998, p.12

Revised from article by Dr. Leslie Robinson. FCUCC 09/23/2022