

Consider Yourself to Have Been an INTERIM

A United Methodist pastor, crushed by congregational uproar not of her/his own making, receives a comment from another pastor intending to comfort and console: “Just consider yourself to have been an interim.” What went wrong? Two years before, filled with hope and excitement about a new appointment, this pastor walked into a family of God whose conflicts with the previous pastor and the cabinet were barely masked. No one shared the congregation’s history with the new pastor. Who knows what triggered the most recent eruption of conflict? Various called potholes or land mines, these explosive possibilities lay waiting, hidden, carrying no warning signs. There will be a change of pastors. There will not be change within the congregation.

Leadership

A tube sock fits any foot. And, a tube sock doesn’t fit any foot very well. Using only one kind of leadership is like a tube sock. In today’s United Methodist Church, we who would lead must have a variety of styles of leadership and the personal awareness to know when best to use which style of leadership. If we are to “fit” an appointment, we who would lead are the ones who must shape our leadership to

fit specific concrete situations. Required are perceptual abilities to see, conceptual abilities to understand, and behavioral abilities in order to act. Congregations in transition, once anxiety is reduced to a workable level, must endure self-assessment and the pain of awareness before meaningful change can take place. Cabinets must be willing to engage congregations and pastors in this artful dance of transition. I don’t know of any congregation that wants to be anxious and in conflict. I don’t know any pastor or superintendent who wants to be involved with an anxious and conflicted situation. Who will show them a “more excellent way”? (Paul’s prelude to 1 Corinthians 13).

Transition Ministry

There are three general categories of transitional ministry in The United Methodist Church:

1. Filling the gap until the conference “move date.” The most frequent style of interim minister in The United Methodist Church is actually a supply pastor. This person is usually a retired or other pastor not under appointment who fills in until the appointment cycle’s starting date is reached. These appointments do work, to some degree, in that the anxiety surrounding a pastor’s leaving is tem-

porarily alleviated. With “things calmed down,” ministry can begin again. It will invariably be “business as usual” with the newly appointed pastor expected to fill the role just vacated. Changing the culture of the church (systemic change) cannot and will not take place in just a few months. Systemic change must be desired by all involved, worked at by all involved, and have clear goals for change that involve and are agreed to by all parties.

2. Intentional Interim Ministry carries with it a stated agreement for the length of time for the interim service, the tasks to be performed, and who is responsible for these tasks. This is the least used style of transitional ministry in The United Methodist Church. The congregations most needing this style of ministry are a) those in which a pastor has died in a sudden and/or tragic fashion, b) those in which misconduct by a pastor and/or church leader has taken place, c) those in which a pastor leaves after a long pastorate, and d) those in which an internal congregational conflict has exploded, frequently focused on the pastor. Several denominations and several groups (such as Interim Ministry Network) train pastors as specialists in this kind of ministry. Several denominations also require Intentional Interim Ministry when there is any change

of pastor. Intentional Interim Pastors usually serve a congregation for a year or two. Their ministry is to lead the congregation in such tasks as coming to terms with their history, clarifying their congregational identity, and developing new (congregational) leadership. The job is to prepare the congregation to commit to new ministerial leadership.

3. Ordinary appointments are also transitional ministry. This is especially true when an appointed pastor is sent to a congregation where all parties know there are internal issues to be cared for before the congregation can move on. Rarely is there agreement on the issues involved and who is responsible for the transitional tasks. This third and most frequent style of transition ministry in The United Methodist Church is to just send in a new pastor. A few years ago many pastors were trained in transitions in preparation for a concept and skills learned in this fashion were effective. Only a small percentage of pastors under appointment today have received that training.

Anxiety and Systemic Change

Systems (and congregations) under stress tend to serve themselves. We've known that about congregational systems for a long time. Pastor after pastor throws self against the brick walls of congregational navel gazing, attempting to get a congregation to look outside the walls to mission and ministry. These pastors frequently come under attack. We call them "churches in survival mode" and "established churches." Throw in a tragedy or misconduct and the (church) system requires major care and maintenance for many months BEFORE ministry and mission can take place. Again, organizational systems under stress tend to serve themselves.

This is also true of the appointive system. Few of us see anything of this phenomenon in cabinets beyond the decisions that become public. In addition, these two "systems," appointive and congregational,

are inextricably linked. Congregations remember poor decisions by "the cabinet" long after the names and faces have all changed on "the cabinet." No congregational conflict, especially one involving the pastor, can be separated from the cabinet. In one way or another, the cabinet is a party to the conflict.

About Triangles

In a single metropolitan area, in one year, two different male pastors leave their two congregations, surrendering their credentials following sexual misconduct. And what of the congregations? United Methodist culture all too frequently assumes that if we just change the pastors, all will be well. At the same time, we joke about congregations that "eat pastors." What about congregations that seduce pastors? Which is it? The pastor? Or the congregation? Oops, there's also the cabinet. What part does it play? Whether prelude, aftermath, or both, there's more to misconduct than an offending individual.

Could you devise a more perfect (Family Systems) triangle than a congregation, a pastor, and the cabinet? The familiar "drama triangle" of persecutor, victim, and rescuer, is all too frequently lived out in our United Methodist appointments. One of the forgotten realities of a "drama triangle" is that the parties switch roles among themselves. A rescuer becomes the persecutor or the victim. And so around the triangle we go. The upheaval and the anxiety continues with different names and faces, with different players all repeating the same roles. Triangles are rendered safe and sane only when the parties to the triangle, fully aware of the perils of the past, communicate thoroughly and set common goals and visions together. Triangles are the basic relational structures of human society. Relational triangles are not inherently bad!

The Need

"Considering one's self to have been an interim" does not remove the sense of

failure, the bruises from the conflict, or the agony of moving once again so soon. The spiritual anguish of a disrupted call to ministry will be slow to heal for both pastor and congregation.

Would it not have been a better use of clergy resources to recognize the need for Intentional Interim Ministry? Would it not have been better to prepare a pastor to enter that family of God with a more realistic agenda... and the tools to do ministry with that congregation? Since *The Book of Discipline* has nothing in it to prevent Intentional Interim Ministry, what does prevent its use? There is even a recent Disciplinary provision specifically allowing Intentional Interim Ministry. Here and there in The United Methodist Church, Intentional Interim Ministry is taking place successfully. In other parts of the connection there is clear and obvious resistance to the idea. "We're not a call system." "We don't need it." Mostly, it's a concept not yet successfully translated into United Methodist vocabulary, polity, and practice.

United Methodist Interim Ministry Training

At this writing, Intentional Interim Ministry Training is being conducted in a few places throughout The United Methodist Church: at Lake Junaluska and Mount Sequoyah; and in the New England, Iowa, Virginia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Rocky Mountain Annual Conferences. While Intentional Interim Ministry may not be your preference or your annual conference's style of appointments, this training can be very useful in preparing to enter a difficult appointment. Check the Intentional Growth Center Web site for more information. (<http://www.lakejunaluska.com/agency-IGC/IGC-info.htm>) □

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