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*An Inter-Lutheran Journal
for Practitioners and
Teachers of Pastoral Care
and Counseling*



CARING CONNECTIONS

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THE PURPOSE OF *CARING CONNECTIONS*

Caring Connections: An Inter-Lutheran Journal for Practitioners and Teachers of Pastoral Care and Counseling is written by and for Lutheran practitioners and educators in the fields of pastoral care, counseling, and education. Seeking to promote both breadth and depth of reflection on the theology and practice of ministry in the Lutheran tradition, *Caring Connections* intends to be academically informed, yet readable; solidly grounded in the practice of ministry; and theologically probing.

Caring Connections seeks to reach a broad readership, including chaplains, pastoral counselors, seminary faculty and other teachers in academic settings, clinical educators, synod and district leaders, others in specialized ministries, and—not least—concerned congregational pastors and laity. *Caring Connections* also provides news and information about activities, events, and opportunities of interest to diverse constituencies in specialized ministries.

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Editorial

My first call out of seminary was to a mission congregation in Washington, Ill. At the reception after my installation, the District Mission Exec asked me to take on a vacancy at a small church in East Peoria. I pleaded for 6 months, at least, to adjust to my new situation. Six months later, to the day, I received a phone call from the Exec, and soon I was serving a vacancy as well as my own parish. I had had NO training for interim ministry, but I worked with those folks as best I could and soon found I loved them as much as the people in Washington. A little over four years later, as I left for CPE training, I grieved leaving both congregations. Many years later I was invited back for the 50th anniversary celebration of the East Peoria congregation and found it had grown into a large and thriving congregation with a full-time pastor. At that moment I got an inkling of the feeling an intentional interim pastor might get after completing an interim and seeing the congregation move into a new phase of ministry, with a new pastor.

Intentional Interim Ministry (IIM) has grown over the years to become a unique and specialized ministry, with a particular set of skills and training to prepare the pastoral caregiver who feels called to such a field of endeavor. Folks who receive the July 2011 issue of the *Reporter* (official newspaper of the LCMS) will note that Dr. Bruce Hartung's "Pressure Points" addresses the issue of IIM as well. You might recall that Bruce was one of the four recipients of the *Christus in Mundo* awards at last year's Zion XIV conference.

This issue of *Caring Connections* focuses on a variety of aspects of Intentional Interim Ministry.

- Judy Simonson, the Assistant Director for Ministries in Chaplaincy, Pastoral Counseling and Clinical Education in the Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit of the ELCA (1/4 time), drawing from her own experiences as an interim pastor, defines terms for us, preparing us to peruse the other articles in this issue.

- Prof. Dirk Reek, Concordia University, Nebraska, clarifies the distinction between a vacancy pastor and an Intentional Interim Minister, identifying some of the necessary training elements and the philosophy behind them.
- Paul Svingen, out of his years of work as an Intentional Interim Minister, faculty coordinator with the Interim Ministry Network (Baltimore, Md.) and co-founder of NALIP (National Association of Lutheran Interim Pastors), identifies particular "gifts and graces" the Intentional Interim Minister will need to be successful in this ministry.
- Deaconess Cherryll Hoffman writes about working along with Pastor Gary Bruhn as pastoral counselors in a particular vacancy ministry.
- Dave Solberg compares CPE Supervision (CPES) with IIM.
- Ben Moravitz examines his use of family systems theory in a particular dimension of IIM, diffusing emotionally charged familial and congregational systems.
- Thomas Hanson uses his experiences as an Intentional Interim Minister as basis for suggestions to a pastor about to leave a congregation.

Kevin and I welcome any responses you might have after reading these contributions. Perhaps you have a particular ministry moment of your own that you would like to share. Do you have a different point of view than what is contained in these articles? If so, send us an email (either Chuck at cweinrich@cfl.rr.com or Kevin at kevin.massey@elca.org). We'll include your thoughts in a subsequent issue.

We also want to encourage you to plan for the **Zion XV** conference, scheduled for October 24-27, 2013. The site for the conference is Lutheridge, a Lutheran camp

Call for Articles

Caring Connections seeks to provide Lutheran Pastoral Care Providers the opportunity to share expertise and insight with the wider community. We want to invite anyone interested in writing an article to please contact the editors, Rev. Kevin Massey and Rev. Chuck Weinrich.

Specifically, we invite articles for upcoming issues on the following themes.

Fall, 2011 "Dealing with Sacred Spaces in an Increasingly Diverse Culture"

Winter, 2012 "Pastoral Care and Issues of Criminal Justice"

Spring, 2012 "Immigration and Pastoral Care"

Summer, 2012 "Pastoral Responses to Suicide."

and conference center located in Arden, N.C., about ten miles from Asheville. It is located three miles from the Asheville airport, which is served by six major airlines. The dates arranged with Lutheridge correspond to the peak weeks for fall colors in western North Carolina. The area provides a number of tourist attractions, such as the Biltmore Estate, Thomas Wolf and Carl Sandburg homes, and other historic sites. Asheville is the center for studios that sell Appalachian craft and arts, and the pride of the east coast for pristine mountain viewing is the Blue Ridge Parkway, only five miles away. The theme and key presenters have not yet been selected, but we hope these notes will entice you to make plans to be there.

Do you subscribe online to *Caring Connections*? Remember, **subscription is free!** By subscribing, you assure that you will receive prompt notification when each issue of the journal appears on the *Caring Connections* website. This also helps the editors and the editorial board to get a sense of how much interest is being generated by each issue. We are delighted that the numbers of those who check in increases with each new issue. You can subscribe by clicking on the subscription link on www.caringconnectionsonline.org, or by following the directions given on the masthead (p. 3), or in larger print on page 34.

In and from the Interim

The chaplain is someone who is able to help people work through the issues raised by the departure of the former pastor and begin to look to the future with confidence and hope.

“In and from the Interim” — That was the title I used for the newsletter articles I wrote as an interim pastor for one congregation. When I shared a similar position with another pastor who had taken training as an intentional interim, he objected to the title “interim” and insisted we be called “transitional pastors.” I was, once again, reminded of the variety of ways in which titles are used when someone is serving a congregation that is without a called pastor. Sometimes “interim” is used for all situations, but often there is a distinction made between that term and “intentional interim.” An intentional interim pastor will usually have had specific training for this particular ministry from an organization that exists to provide that kind of training. In addition, there are judicatories that use terms like “vacancy pastor,” or “stated supply,” or even “term call.” While I would define “vacancy pastor” as one who is on call and attends council meetings but does not occupy the pulpit on Sundays, and “stated supply” as someone who does do the preaching but not other tasks, the fact is that not all judicatories use these parameters. Some will simply issue a call for a specific term to a pastor and put the search for a permanent pastor on hold for a while. Sometimes, after the term call is over, that person becomes the permanent pastor. I see this arrangement as having a built-in conflict of interest, but not everyone agrees with me!

For my colleague, “interim” was equated at all times with “intentional interim” and that meant, to him, serving a congregation in which there was a major problem and there needed to be a distinct time span before another pastor was called. Since this congregation did not have a troubled history, it did not seem to require an intentional interim. We were just there for the time of transition.

But, of course, all congregations that are suddenly without a called pastor are experiencing a time of change and the accompanying stress. The loss of the previous pastor is, for many, a significant event. There is always grief of some sort involved. Congregational life will never be quite the same and new relationships will have to be formed.

If a beloved pastor retires, there is grief over the absence of a trusted companion and guide. On the other hand, if such a pastor takes another call (hopefully not to the congregation just down the road), the grief may be complicated by feelings of abandonment. In the worst case, the pastor is forced to leave amid accusations of impropriety or dereliction of duty, and betrayal becomes a factor.



A case in point: The first interim I took on in retirement involved a pastor who had been in ill health for a couple of years, but who refused to go on disability. In fact, he was unable to perform the duties of his office and his ministry was effectively over in that congregation. However, it was not until evidence of boundary crossing with a youth in the congregation came to light that the situation came to the attention of the judicatory. To make matters far worse, he took his own life within twenty-four hours of the accusation.

All congregations that are suddenly without a called pastor are experiencing a time of change and the accompanying stress.

The congregation had been ready for this pastor to leave for a couple of years, but when his ministry ended this way, they felt guilty because they were relieved that it was over. It was especially hard on those who had felt that they were friends with the pastor and had socialized with the family outside of church events.

Another complicating factor was that, in an attempt to cut the job down to a size that his failing health could handle, the pastor had eliminated a worship service and

other programming. Members left the congregation seeking what they needed for themselves and their families elsewhere. It would not be inaccurate to say that even before the events that precipitated the appointment of an interim pastor, the congregation had become severely depressed.

It is just such situations that chaplains are trained to handle. Their everyday work involves dealing with people whose lives have been disrupted, for whom loss is a common theme, and in whom anxiety is a given. Even without such dire circumstances, the absence of a called pastor is a time of significant change and uncertainty about the future. Chaplains walk daily with those whose lives have been disrupted and provide a steady presence.

The chaplain, by virtue of training and experience, is uniquely prepared to deal with such situations — with persons who are asking, “What next?” — and walk with them in faith. It is also a fact that chaplains are often called to less than full-time positions, and are able to serve the church in this way.

Because each judicatory has its own, probably traditional, way of defining and managing vacant pulpits, the first task is to determine the local expectations. It is unfortunate, but true, that the chaplain is often viewed as a kind of passive presence who just fills the pulpit until a new pastor is called. In reality, of course, the chaplain is someone who is able to help people work through the issues raised by the departure of the former pastor and begin to look to the future with confidence and hope. The time in-between is rich with possibilities for growth.

My hope is that both chaplains and their judicatories will find ways to use their considerable skills in interim situations.

Pr. Judy Simonson, member of the Editorial Board for Caring Connections, has experienced interim ministry both from the congregational and judicatory perspective. In retirement, she has been serving as an interim, but prior to that, as an assistant to a bishop for twelve years, she helped match congregations and interims, and provided counsel. Her additional twelve years of experience as a chaplain before that has proven invaluable in both tasks.

Some Brief Thinking about Intentional Interim Ministry

Intentional Interim is specifically different than what has traditionally been known in Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) circles as a vacancy pastor.

I wish to write about the process that has come to be known among us as Intentional Interim Ministry. I first became acquainted with it in 1996 when my district president, Gene Gierke, challenged me to take training for it. I subsequently served as an intentional interim pastor from 1997 until 2004 in four different settings. I have also served in an advisory capacity in several settings. I've been watching it as an interested observer from the sidelines since accepting a call to teach at Concordia University, Nebraska.

Intentional Interim is specifically different than what has traditionally been known in Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) circles as a vacancy pastor. I've done that also, and have served as a circuit counselor with vacancies in the circuit. Unfortunately, to my way of thinking, we have fallen into the pattern of referring to any pastoral care in a pastoral vacancy situation as an interim. This understandable nomenclature can tend to cloud the intent of interim ministry as it was taught when I took training for it. A pastor during an intentional interim in a congregation's history is specifically called to be the full-time pastor with particular focus on pointed concerns in the congregation's life. It is understood that these matters should be adequately addressed so that issues related to the pastoral vacancy do not continue to impact the congregation's future.

These procedures are different enough from our custom of serving a vacancy that I also committed to researching and writing about what seemed to be a "temporary call." The thesis for my Masters of Sacred Theology (STM) sought to demonstrate that interim ministry calls were calls to a temporary situation far different from the circumstances of the "temporary call," which is of an understandably questionable value. My research also indicated that Lutherans had practiced authorizing precisely this type of congregational service during the early Reformation. John Bugenhagen was specifically called away from Wittenberg to troubled situations, with the understanding that he would return to his call in Wittenberg when the work was done. Public ministry must always be conducted by authority of a call.

Any transition in the pastoral office has impacts in the life and leadership of a congregation. Some are more difficult than others. Public moral crisis and intense conflict are especially trying periods that merit resolution before the beginning of ensuing pastorates. Unaddressed effec-



tively, these sad situations have been shown to continue to plague a congregation, or even to repeat. These are always matters of spiritual concern not only for the individuals directly involved, but also for the entire body of Christ in a place. But even the more "normal" circumstances of a pastor's accepting another call, or his retirement or death, obviously represent dynamics of grieving,

Even the more "normal" circumstances of a pastor's accepting another call, or his retirement or death, obviously represent dynamics of grieving, uncertainty, and leadership change.

uncertainty, and leadership change. These are times when the congregation as one body is affected. My observation would suggest that the bride of Christ in a place experiences many of the same things as a betrayed wife or a

widow encounters. In fact, Roger Nicholson identifies ten characteristics that congregations often encounter at the time of pastoral change. These include grief, active or latent conflict, uncovered secrets, new openness to the denomination, low self-esteem, lagging stewardship, a rebuilding of management structure, awkward communications, ambivalence about change and mixed emotions.¹

A significant element of training for the intentional interim candidate is a thorough grounding in family systems theory as a tool for conceptualizing the patterns of congregational life. Although this theoretical prism emerged in an entirely secular setting, I would argue that it is invaluable for congregational ministry, especially in troubled situations. It helps to visualize the life of and ministry to the congregation that grow directly out of the perichoretic nature of the Holy Trinity; and that's the core of our ministry . . . baptismal life. Historically and validly, when a congregation set about a self-examination preparing to extend a call for a new pastor, we have focused a good deal on measureable demographic information. Instructive as that is, it doesn't begin to touch what is really happening within the congregation in its life together. Evaluating what's going on with the emotional system is far more revealing, far more instructive for preaching, teaching and pastoral care.

Intentional interim ministry as a specific discipline is of recent vintage as a distinctive feature of pastoral care in vacant congregations. It began with work by the Alban Institute in 1974² that was spun off into the Interim Ministry Network in 1980. This is a non-profit association of interim pastors and church leaders from over 25 denominations officially formed in 1981.³ It is committed to developing the skills and education necessary for conducting effective interim work.⁴ The first pastors of the Missouri Synod to receive formal interim training were Rev. Don Taylor, Rev. Richard Krogan and Rev. Martin Teske.

When the Alban Institute first devised training for intentional interim ministry, it was responding to research done on congregations going through a pastoral transition. The institute discerned that a congregation goes through eight stages during a vacancy: termination, direction finding, self-study, search for a new pastor, decision or choice of the candidate, negotiation,

installation, and starting up.⁵ Experience suggested that for a special interim pastor to be of assistance to the congregation, five developmental tasks were to be undertaken: coming to terms with the history of the congregation,⁶ discovering or re-discovering the congregation's identity,⁷ understanding and experiencing leadership changes,⁸ renewing linkages with the denomination,⁹ and aiding in committing to new directions in ministry.¹⁰ Once identified, these phases often

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become self-evident to most pastors who have assisted in a congregation during a time of pastoral vacancy. More importantly, some of these tasks can be profoundly difficult when the transition is affected by traumatic events in the previous pastorate(s).

It is, perhaps, the increasing number of difficult transitions that have underscored the importance of specialized training for and commitment to interims in congregational life. Forty years ago, Lloyd H. Goetz could write:

Although it is no calamity when the pastoral office becomes vacant in a congregation, it is nevertheless an emergency. It is serious enough to require the personal attention of the District president or one of the vice-presidents.¹¹

As the Alban Institute developed the principles and training for interim ministry, several key emphases emerged. An interim pastor must be the pastor of the congregation being served. There is a mantle of trust and care to be assumed. There are issues that can be addressed only from "inside" the congregation. An outsider, a consultant, will never be enough a "part of the system" to affect it and effect change. And especially in trying situations part-time work will not suffice.

Secondly, there must be a clear understanding that the interim pastor serves the congregation in all the normal

5 Nicholson, "Challenge," 5-6.

6 Bonnie Bardot, "Coming to Terms with History," in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 65-74.

7 Linda Lea Snyder, "Discovering a New Identity," in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 75-86.

8 Andrew E. Carlsson, "Leadership Changes during an Interim," in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 87-98.

9 Nancy Miller, "Reviewing Denominational Linkages" in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 99-107.

10 Philip G. Porcher, "Commitment to New Directions in Ministry," in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, 108-118.

11 Lloyd H. Goetz, "Filling the Vacancy," in *Calls and Vacancies*, ed. Oscar H. Reinboth, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 35.

1 Roger S. Nicholson, "Characteristics of the Interim Congregation," in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry* (Baltimore: The Alban Institute, 1998), 14-24 (All of these characteristics can be easily documented in the experiences of the Saxon immigrants in Perry County, Missouri in 1839, when the pastoral leader, Rev. Martin Stephan, was deposed).

2 Ibid., 4.

3 Roy M. Oswald, "Interim Ministries," *Christian Ministry* 1:29, 31

4 Roger W. Schwarze, White Bear Lake, MN., to Richard J. Bruesehoff, Chicago, 30 July 1998.

pastoral duties; however, the work of the interim is defined as the developmental tasks and preparation for the next resident pastor. Where conflict or indiscretion has torn the body of Christ, that is the principal focus of the interim pastor's work. Once the issue is resolved as best it can be, the interim in the life of the congregation is over, ideally with the next pastor about to arrive. Therefore, the term of the interim pastor is understood to be ad hoc, or temporary for the circumstance of the transition alone.

The interim pastor will serve the congregation only during this time period and may not be considered as a candidate for a resident pastorate in the congregation. This prevents the congregation from turning the time the interim pastor is with them into a trial period. Because the interim pastor is trained not to mesh with the "family system" of the congregation, accepting a role as a resident pastor would completely subvert the interim work. The very nature of interim work requires that the pastor be present to the congregation, but not drawn into its patterns and future. The interim pastor maintains an objective, non-anxious stance, assisting the congregation to shape its future under the Lord's direction. The interim pastor never formally joins the congregation as a member, and ideally leaves the community physically on a regular basis to underscore and maintain objectivity.

Intentional interim ministry focuses not only on the pastor's contribution to problematic circumstances, but also the congregation's role in the situation. It emphasizes the congregation's plan to focus on the concerns of the transition, a process of reviewing their history, facing problematic issues, assessing God's mission for them and preparing to call their next pastor. To underscore the point, the term "interim" emphasizes this time period in the congregation's history, not on the length of the pastor's stay with the congregation. This specialized approach to pastoral vacancies is best defined by its aims and application. It recognizes there are *spiritual issues* affecting the entire congregation in a pastoral vacancy, and the emotions surrounding them are best addressed directly before the congregation is ready to proceed. The interim pastor's work will aim at these, along with the normal work of the pastor.

Much could be written about this most valuable approach to times of transition in a congregation's life. Interested readers are encouraged to consult these publications:

Deffenbaugh, Nola. "Benefits of an Intentional Interim," *Leadership* 14:123-125.

Mead, Loren B. *Critical Moment of Ministry: A Change of Pastors*. Baltimore: The Alban Institute, 1986.

Nicholson, Roger S. ed. *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*. Baltimore: The Alban Institute, 1998.

Oswald, Roy M. "Interim Ministries." *Christian Ministry* 1:29, 31.

Phillips, William Bud. *Pastoral Transitions: From End-*

ings to New Beginnings. Baltimore: The Alban Institute, 1988.

Steinke, Peter L. *How Your Church Family Works*. Baltimore: The Alban Institute. 1993.

Rev. Dirk Reek is an Assistant Professor of Theology at Concordia University, Nebraska, where he has taught theology and philosophy since 2004. Prior to that, he served as an intentional interim pastor from 1997-2004 in four different settings. He was a parish pastor from 1974 until 1997. He has written out of an abiding interest in intentional interim ministry, the parish, and how theology must have legs.

Gifts and Graces

To be aware of the call for leadership in this tenuous emotional environment is one of the critical moments that demand the very essence of love for the people of God.

In this article I intend to identify and discuss some key 'gifts and graces' that characterize the effective functioning of an intentional interim pastoral leader.

Background

The context for my reflections includes more than twenty-five congregational interim pastorates served mostly in program and corporate-size congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) over a thirty-three year period of time. In addition, my reflections scan the cumulative training coordinator experiences of thirteen years with the Interim Ministry Network and eleven years of leading the Basic Education for Intentional Interim Ministry Program through a partnership with NALIP (National Association of Lutheran Interim Pastors) and KAIROS (Lifelong Learning at Luther Seminary).

Currently at Luther, we are completing the 24th consecutive six-month Basic Education Program for pastors and other leaders considering the practice of Intentional Interim Ministry. In those 24 years at Luther alone, more than 850 pastors and church leaders have participated in this training program. Functioning primarily as a practicing intentional interim pastor, I have been privileged to enjoy continuous 'live learning laboratories' (congregations) with which to interface and thus both inform and testify to the clergy training groups that have brought their pastoral 'gifts and graces' to the classrooms at Luther Seminary, Trinity Seminary, Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center, and more than a dozen inter-denominational training centers across the country.

Intentional

The operative term in the ministry context for which my experiences and insights will hopefully offer helpful information is the term *intentional*. Clearly, the concept of *intentionality* should, in some sense, define the parameters of all practical ministry, parish or non-parish. What is lifted up here is the fact that first, a congregation makes the decision, hopefully in consultation with its judicatory partner, to intentionally set aside a designated period of time for healing and discernment following the departure of a pastor, in order to deal with numerous transition emotions. As a leadership feature of that designated interim period they engage a qualified and rostered pastor in good standing who is appropriately gifted and trained to intentionally serve as their interim pastor in order to guide them in their forthcoming interim process. The concept of intentionality applies to both the congregation and the interim pastor.



Initial Gifts and Graces

Since the earliest training paradigms for equipping intentional interim pastors for this specialized parish ministry evolved in the mid 1980's, several personal and professional qualities have been recognized as essential to the

A congregation makes the decision, hopefully in consultation with its judicatory partner, to intentionally set aside a designated period of time for healing and discernment following the departure of a pastor, in order to deal with numerous transition emotions.

willingness and ability of a pastor to serve effectively in this specialized parish setting. Some of these are:

1. Willingness and ability to be geographically mobile.
2. Willingness and ability to demonstrate theological, liturgical and organizational flexibility as to method and style of leadership.
3. Ability to know and to claim one's spiritual centeredness.

4. Ability to enter an emotional system quickly and to exit it gracefully and completely when the agreed-upon interim ministry is accomplished.
5. Ability to balance 'play' and 'work,' 'congregation' and 'family.'
6. Ability to craft a responsible interim ministry working agenda with congregational leaders, and be responsible for the effective communication and administration of that interim process.
 - a. Preaching and teaching the five developmental tasks
 - b. Teaching the eight stages of the interim period
 - c. Attending to corporate grief
 - d. Addressing congregational conflict
7. Ability to not count equality with God (the God of permanence) a thing to be grasped, but to empty oneself (of self), become the epitome of humility, and become obedient unto death (of your interim role there), even death on a cross (of not always knowing where you shall serve God next, or when).

Research Insights

One of the earliest studies coming out of the 1980's research towards clarity of the rationale for defining interim ministry as *intentional* came through the work of Loren B. Mead, founder and then president of the Alban Institute. His research findings are recorded in his early book: *New Hope For Congregations*. In this study he has identified six characteristics of an interim pastorate that qualified it and its designated pastoral leader as *intentional*. These characteristics are:

1. **The intentional facing of conflict** (both congregation and interim pastor are committed to utilizing conflict as a vehicle of healing and growth).
2. **The utilization of a problem-identification process** (some issues in congregations are problems to be solved and other issues are ongoing concerns that defy resolution. Together with the interim pastor and [sometimes] the judicatory, the leaders must determine which problems to be solved are essential to the interim work and which will be better addressed when the conventionally-called pastor arrives on the scene).
3. **The use of a 'contract' or 'covenant' to define the interim agenda** (this is not the Letter of Call [from the synod council] but rather the working description of the mutual expectations of pastor and people as to areas to be specifically addressed during the interim in preparation for the work of the call committee. Compensation data is also a part of this document, which is signed by interim pastor, congregational president and synod bishop).
4. **The use of outside consultation** (During the interim period, the interim pastor may request

council support for the recommendation of an outside consultant to specifically address staff conflict, a theological issue, stewardship development, etc.).

5. **Awareness of the unique gifts and personality traits of the interim pastor** (as addressed earlier in this article).

Leadership implies stewardship of gifts, and among the gifts that each of us has been given for which to be responsible users, at the very top is the opportunity to excel in the management of "self."

6. **Planned termination and closure** (It is important that all are aware that this interim period will conclude and the interim pastor will move on . . . even though some will wish s/he could remain. The interim pastor is responsible for communicating and maintaining the 'temporariness' of her/his position at all times in order to keep the interim ministry seen as "preparatory to" that of the time when the conventionally called pastoral leader arrives. It is important that a designated congregational event is planned to celebrate the work of the intentional interim period and bid farewell to the interim pastoral leader).

Honest Self-Appraisal

As my own claiming of the gift of intentional interim ministry, and the effective and responsible practice of it has evolved since the time when I wrote my Doctor of Ministry thesis paper about it in 1990, it has become crystal clear to me that the leading front most appropriately addressing intentional interim ministry, and those who would claim the 'gifts and graces' to practice it as an art-of-sorts, is the overall arena of leadership.

Leadership implies stewardship of gifts, and among the gifts that each of us has been given for which to be responsible users, at the very top is the opportunity to excel in the management of "self."

So I must ask, as I picture myself serving as an intentional interim pastor, can I answer and live with my answers to these questions:

- What kind of a pastor have I been in the congregations where I have served up to this time?
- What are the pastoral gifts others have observed in me? Are they there?
- What are the leadership gifts observed,

developed, and validated in my ministry up to this point?

- How do I function in the emotional arenas where conflict is present?
- How do I function as a key agent in the management of change?
- Am I willing and able to be away from home and family for extended periods of time and yet function effectively in my ministry?
- Can I imagine myself spending at least half of my time guiding ‘the process’ that characterizes intentional interim ministry alongside ‘the content’ (preaching, teaching, counseling, etc.) that presents itself in the congregation I am called to serve as a temporary shepherd?
- Can I serve a congregation without the need to make it “my own”?
- How would it be for me to live alone many days of the month, and yet maintain healthy relationships with those “at home”?
- How comfortable am I at saying “good-bye” and “hello”?
- As to the pastoral role, have I learned the difference between “role” and “real”?

Systems Thinking

In my experience, the introduction of systems thinking into the intentional interim ministry training curriculum has radically changed my understanding and practice of parish ministry in general as well as intentional interim ministry.

As to “gifts and graces” essential to the practice of this specialized parish ministry, I would place systems thinking at the forefront of the leadership paradigms critical to the claiming of interim pastoral leadership as the management of emotional processes. At the departure of a pastoral leader, the congregation’s emotional system unlocks. The need for fine-tuning of the interim pastor’s self-awareness of her/his own emotional intelligence quotient is never greater.

It is because “emotionally opened” congregations, although often self-unaware, are thus more prone to make premature emotion-based leadership decisions that the interim leader must intentionally lead them to higher “brain” ground. It is the neo-cortex, the higher brain, where congregations must be invited to live, to think, to work, to discern, and to follow when they have been thrust into the emotional and spiritual wilderness of the interim time. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “Don’t be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may know what is good, and right, and acceptable; what is the will of God.” It was about God’s call to live and grow on higher ground. Here is the workplace of the intentional interim pastor.

All of this higher brainwork is hard, especially when hearts are broken, hopes dashed, parishioners feeling

abandoned, plans interrupted. Wherever there is loss, there is grief. Grief is the umbrella under which every congregation adapts to the wilderness, and when it rains the varied precipitation of grief, the drops are unevenly distributed. To be aware of the call for leadership in this tenuous emotional environment is one of the critical moments that demand the very essence of love for the

A church organization is a human system that behaves as though it were a person or organism with a life of its own, with its own internal connectedness, multiple contexts, structures and stories.

people of God. “To Love the Lord, to love people, to have good health, to read a book, and to have a sense of humor” were five qualities the late Dr. Morris Wee proclaimed as essential to the faithful service any pastor could render to her/his flock, interim or otherwise. These personal and professional qualities of character are among the essential “gifts and graces.”

Process Tasks of the Interim Leader

The insight of long-time friend, interim ministry and seminary faculty colleague, David Sawyer, into systems thinking resulted in his identification of five ‘process tasks’ that are the exclusive work of the intentional interim leader. Sawyer suggests that the term “system” in this context serves as a reminder that a church organization is a human system that behaves as though it were a person or organism with a life of its own, with its own internal connectedness, multiple contexts, structures and stories. These five leadership tasks parallel the five developmental tasks of the congregation (history, identity, denominational linkage, leadership shifts and commitment to a new future) and focus on the processes of a human system, such as patterns of organization and behavior, relationships, communication, and decision-making. They are:

1. **Joining the emotional system of the congregation.** The effective interim leader must have skills to quickly find ways to make significant connections with fellow staff, elected leaders, informal leaders and youth leaders. The leader must adopt a few local customs to be seen as both interested and caring about and for the congregation. At the same time as the leader is intentional about ‘joining the emotional system,’ s/he must maintain a level of detachment. To be seen as one able to function as both an insider and an outsider increases the power of the interim pastor to be of service to the congregation.

2. **Analyzing the congregation as a human system.** This task requires both skill and wisdom on the part of the interim leader. To assess the level of anxiety, as well as the degree of dependence or independence characterizing the relationship with the former pastor, and to assess the strengths or weaknesses of the lay leadership are key skills required for this interim leader. To take note of both the presence and/or absence of conflict is a key skill. Ability to take note of unresolved issues with the previous pastor, generational relationship patterns of leaders, alignment of informal authority with constitutionally granted authority, and the recognition of emotional triangles and secrets in the system are all skills required in the role of intentional interim pastor. Additionally, the ability to craft a working hypothesis as to what is going on in the system is that gift which enables the critical decision as to what the appropriate focus and leadership responsibility is, and to then embrace it.
3. **Focusing and assuming responsibility.** This process task rests on the leader's understanding of role and responsibility. The skills and experiences the interim leader brings to the position bear directly on her/his effectiveness in focusing and assuming responsibility. To discern appropriately the openness of the system to change is a helpful gift, as well as her/his understanding of God's call to her/him in this particular setting. Examples of intentional interim ministry focus areas are: clarification of the congregation's vision for mission, healing from grief or reconciliation following conflict, clarifying staff and lay leader roles and responsibilities, assessing the functioning relationship between council and staff, and appraising the effectiveness of the existing organizational and leadership structures relative to congregational size.
4. **Connecting with the denominational leaders.** Judicatory officials are flooded with multiple program and leadership needs of the larger church. Yet, they maintain a vital interest in the congregations within their jurisdiction. It is essential that the interim leader take the initiative to keep the judicatory office informed of the proceedings of the interim process. Inviting officials to visit the congregation during the interim period to preach, teach, and listen beyond their eventual interfacing with the call committee is a unique opportunity the interim pastor has to help heal and build greater understanding and trust in support of a healthy partnership between the congregation and the middle judicatory levels of the church.
5. **Exiting and evaluating.** In some cases the departure of the preceding pastor was abrupt,

involuntary, long overdue, or in some way poorly handled. The departure may have been void of a farewell blessing. The intentional interim pastor can work to ease painful memories by arranging, at the time of her/his departure, for a congregational farewell event that is well publicized and

To be seen as one able to function as both an insider and an outsider increases the power of the interim pastor to be of service to the congregation.

structured to affirm the growth that has occurred. A litany of farewell should be structured in to the concluding worship services. An exit interview with key leaders should be scheduled to allow both interim pastor and congregational leaders to own what did and what did not happen during the interim period. It is the interim pastor's responsibility to take the initiative to be sure that these closure components are set in place.

Transition Task Force

These five process tasks provide the framework for the developmental work that can be done prior to the formation of the search/call committee. This critical developmental work is accomplished through the efforts of a 12-15 member Transition Task Force, which is authorized and appointed by the church council at the outset of the interim pastor's term of service. This task force, an arm of the council, is commissioned in public worship so congregants have opportunity to add their blessing to the work of the interim period, its transition task force, and its coach, the intentional interim pastor.

Normally this task force works for a period of 6-9 months as three study teams, with one each primarily addressing mission/vision, self-study and staffing needs of the congregation. It is the honest appraisal of the combined efforts of these three inter-related foci that provide the current 'snapshot' of the congregation and its shared vision for the future it hears the Gospel calling it to create. The task force has authority only to gather data and make recommendations to the church council. These are the recommendations that inform the council or the call committee in the crafting of the pastoral position description, which then brings to the interview process a relatively full and candid report of the expectations of the new leader to be called. So, coaching abilities are among the "gifts and graces" required of an intentional interim pastor.

My Hope

It is my sincere hope that this article has both informed and interested you the reader . . . be you a practicing, potential, or former interim pastoral leader. Intentional interim ministry, living less than 30 years in the processes by which it has developed to its current state, is yet, in my opinion, a pioneering ministry. The congregational members, much less the pastors who accept new calls to congregational turf that was far more readied than might otherwise have been the case, are truly the primary beneficiaries of this specialized ministry, as well as those of us ministers privileged to answer God's call to serve the Church of Christ in this particular manner.

Suggested Resource Material

Roger S. Nicholson's *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry* (Alban Institute 1998) is the most comprehensive work available for congregational leaders, outlining the essentials of the interim process.

Loren B. Mead's *A Change of Pastors and how it affects change in the congregation* (Alban Institute 2005) is a helpful tool in helping congregations understand that the interim period is a time of unparalleled opportunity for reflection and renewal.

Peter Steinke's *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Alban Institute 1998) is an excellent analysis of how congregations act when change causes the emotional system to unlock.

Paul N. Svingen, D. Min., is an ELCA pastor ordained in 1975. Since 1978 he has served as interim pastor in more than 25 congregations. He has served in program and executive leadership, board development, and as faculty coordinator with the Interim Ministry Network (Baltimore, MD) and for NALIP (National Association of Lutheran Interim Pastors), which he co-founded in 1994. He currently leads the 24th annual six-month Basic Education in Intentional Interim Ministry Program for KAIROS at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn. His home base is at PineStone on Island Lake, Backus, Minn., which he shares with his wife, Susan and English Springer Spaniels, Leviticus and Shiloh.

Pastoral Counselor(s) in an Interim Ministry

Pastoral Counseling Ministry . . . is a human touch that gives . . . new life to a community of faith.

I am a Lutheran deaconess, a pastoral counselor, and a member of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC). As a counselor with Lutheran Family Service (LFS) of Iowa for eighteen years, I provided care to people from many Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregations within the Iowa West District. Being trained in both psychodynamic theories and Lutheran theology, I felt limited because of the lack I experienced of integration between these two philosophies of care management. They were considered to be worlds apart in those early days of my counseling profession — one applied to religion and the other to the secular world. However, I found that when therapeutic language is applied to a person's story, new understanding of the human condition is discovered and God's Word becomes more relevant to the situation. As I explained this to a group of clergy at their "Winkle" several years ago, I described a couple who reported after many sessions of marital therapy that their pastor's sermons meant so much more to them now. One pastor exclaimed, "Then psychology is the Law that opens the way for the Gospel!" He apparently caught a view of psychology as a means to look inside oneself and thus appreciate God's love and healing grace.

The decision to pursue a D. Min. degree was made out of the awareness there is much to be done in this area; as well as a means, hopefully, to share what insights I have gained with the church at large. My thesis was, in essence, my Theory of Ministry. The research project that evolved out of this was entitled, "Ministry to Those Separated from the Community of Faith." I graduated from Luther Seminary in 2006, the same month that I retired from LFS.

About that same time Bethany Lutheran, a small congregation in Sioux City, had contracted with LFS to provide a vacancy pastor for their congregation. My former colleague, Rev. Gerry Bruhn, accepted this assignment. He would conduct the Sunday worship and care for the sick and shut-in members, considering it as 1.5 days of his counseling ministry with LFS. However, he came to understand the situation at Bethany was not a typical 'vacancy,' where he would serve until they called a full-time pastor. It became more like an interim position.¹ As



Pastor Gerry tells it, "The parish was declining and the few who remained were beginning to look at the agonizing question of whether or not to close." He requested that I join him to begin an outreach ministry, also on a part-time basis. I agreed and contracted with Bethany for two days a week.

When therapeutic language is applied to a person's story, new understanding of the human condition is discovered and God's Word becomes more relevant to the situation.

That was five years ago. Many of the members of Bethany had previously withdrawn, moving to sister congregations or not attending anywhere. Worship consisted of six to twelve people, with no young families. In addition,

¹ This position is not technically an "interim" position since neither Gerry nor I had the specific training required for "Intentional Interim Ministers."

five elderly men, leaders and founders of the congregation, were called to their heavenly home within eighteen months of the new arrangement. They had provided the only internal structure for the parish until that time.

Today there are thirty-five families who are active members. Worship attendance is thirty-five to forty adults and children. They continue to struggle financially, but are experiencing a spirit of revitalization. They exhibited the flavor of a mission church as they celebrated their 60th anniversary as a “New Beginning” in 2009, with Gerry and me as two part-time ‘interim’ servants.

Pastor Gerry and I believe the Holy Spirit has used the combination of God’s Word and Sacraments plus the gifts each of us brings from our counseling ministries to facilitate healing and new life in what was a declining parish. I stated in my D. Min. thesis that I believe my model of ministry to the interior world of meaning² has value for public ministry as well as the counseling ministry.³ The parish, when viewed as the client, is seen as experiencing a transitional crisis. People tend to distance themselves and even withdraw when in crisis, leaving spiritual and relational issues unresolved. An additional systemic problem exists in that the people in a community typically react to withdrawal behavior in ways that are less than helpful. This happens to congregations as well as to marriages and families. The church may even recognize there is a crisis, but does not always realize the availability of the tools a pastoral counselor may provide.

The mass exodus of members from Bethany was definitely a transitional crisis. My initial Ministry of Outreach was two-fold: helping those members who remained give voice to their grief, as well as hearing the stories of those who were no longer members. I find that much of the therapy I provided as a pastoral counselor involves normalizing the human experience, such as the various stages of development, the paradox of our human need to belong and to be separate at the same time, or the burdens that we carry from unresolved loss or unmet needs in relational experiences. These same tools were helpful in my visitations with former members and with the newly organized bi-monthly women’s Bible study. These tools speak to accepting the human condition as God’s developing creation. They provide a way of being present in a way that God’s Spirit can join with the human spirit to bring about change in relationships, with each other and within self. They engage with people at an unconscious level of the heart and soul — relationally — empowering the person to become the person he or she is attempting to be. When applied to a theological understanding, these tools give an “aha” meaning to possibilities of what God’s Spirit might be doing in one’s life. I found that they provided new options for life together

2 My basic theory as a pastoral counselor is Object Relations, which emphasizes the role significant others play in the development of the self.

3 Hoffman, Cherryll, “Ministry to Those Separated from the Community of Faith,” thesis for Doctor of Ministry degree, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, 2006, p. 15.

as a congregation and for ministry at Bethany.

Gerry’s training as a social worker provided him with a behavioral approach. He follows a Family Systems model that empowers people to relate to one another in a new way. He was initially trained as a Catholic priest to listen for how God comes across to people. He rejects theological language that condemns people, using instead the language of brokenness, which Jesus heals.

I find that much of the therapy I provided as a pastoral counselor involves normalizing the human experience...these same tools were helpful in my visitations with former members...[and] provided new options for life together as a congregation.

He believes that Jesus focused on the Gospel and that law was directed at the self-righteous religious leaders. It is the Good News Jesus taught that changed, healed, and restored the broken hearted and alienated. This is the message Pastor Gerry continues to bring through his sermons and interactions. The members at Bethany speak of the humanness of their pastor. He is open about his own person and operates out of his own personhood. He wants the people to know God is with them as a strong force in their lives.

As professional counselors who integrate psychotherapy and theology, Gerry Bruhn and I often share our gratitude for the opportunity to serve as interim servants for a congregation like Bethany. This parish ministry is so similar to seeing clients who come to Lutheran Family Service. You hear their stories; you assess the need for healing and restoration in their relationships with self as well as with others; you assist in rebuilding the internal structures; you facilitate their new sense of self and what that means for their life. It is not always possible to say what is psychodynamic and what is theological. It all is God’s work through the relationship between therapist and client and through this human relationship and the Holy Spirit’s recreating work.

The description I have just given is similar to what we have experienced at Bethany. A member of the women’s Bible study related at a recent congregational meeting what she learned through all this is that God is a Holy Spirit. It has been God’s Spirit that led to a missional vision for an outreach program to neighborhood children. This includes a Monday afternoon children’s group, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and a special Palm Sunday children’s worship service/Easter egg hunt. The next step is a youth group for the growing group of teens. The members recognize a special gift for hospitality, look-

ing for any excuse to have a “pot luck.” Guests typically comment on the warmth and acceptance they experience at Bethany. This new identity is believed to have evolved as they determined to focus on new *ministry* rather than new *members*. The people do ministry; the Holy Spirit gathers those who become members.

Gerry and I, along with our spouses, Joan and Ken respectively, have been blessed along with the people at Bethany. We pray that our ministry is actually “interim,” and that there will again be a full time pastor at Bethany. We also pray that Pastoral Counseling Ministry may be a valued partner whenever crises occur among God’s people. It is a human touch that gives new meaning to such experiences and, in Bethany’s story, new life to a community of faith.

Cherryll Hoffman graduated from Valparaiso University, 1960, and was consecrated as deaconess at her home church, Trinity Lutheran, Sabin, Minn. She served as Intervention Specialist for Jackson Recovery, Sioux City, Iowa, before joining Lutheran Family Service (LFS) in 1988. She was endorsed by the LCMS and certified as a pastoral counselor in 1990, and retired from LFS in 2006. Cherryll has served on the Board of Directors of the Lutheran Deaconess Association, and has served on an LCMS task force for recruitment of specialized ministers.

Gerry Bruhn, LISW, has served as a pastoral counselor at Lutheran Family Service of Iowa for the past 10 years. He received a Master in Divinity from the St. Paul Seminary, St. Paul, MN in 1981 and a Masters in Social Work from the University of Minnesota in 1989. From 1989 to 2000 Rev. Bruhn was a Counselor at a Family Practice Clinic in the Twin Cities. He completed colloquy and was rostered by the LCMS in 2000. In 2001 Rev. Bruhn received his first call to ministry, as an LCMS pastor, to Lutheran Family Service of Iowa as a pastoral counselor. He served as vacancy pastor to Grace Lutheran, Correctionville, Iowa, (LCMS-Iowa District West), and currently at Bethany Lutheran since 2004.

Interim Ministry and CPE Supervision

Part of the discernment process in both CPE and IIM consists of coming to grips with dysfunctional patterns that limit and/or thwart the healthy practice of ministry.

As a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I was certified as a CPE Supervisor in 1972 and served as a chaplain and CPE supervisor until 1999. When I retired from chaplaincy, my wife and I moved to a log cabin in Northern Minnesota as part of our dream. Shortly after we arrived I was asked to do some pulpit supply. This turned into an intentional interim ministry. It was during that interim that I experienced a call to interim ministry that continues to this day. I am currently in my sixth intentional interim.

In this process I have discovered some definite similarities between CPE supervision and intentional interim ministry.

First, both CPE Supervision (CPES) and Intentional Interim Ministry (IIM) are time bound. A unit of CPE is usually 12 weeks; an extended unit is negotiated for a period of time. As an intentional interim I negotiate a year's contract that can be extended month-by-month. My longest interim to date has been two years. The extension of the contract depends on two things: the length of time needed for what I call a "discernment process" and the length of time needed to call a new pastor.

Second, both CPES and IIM are discernment processes. In CPE a student discerns his/her personal and pastoral identity and how to integrate the theology and skills of pastoral ministry. In IIM a congregation engages in a process of discerning God's Mission in the past, present and the direction the congregational ministry is to take into the future. Part of the discernment process in both CPE and IIM consists of coming to grips with dysfunctional patterns that limit and/or thwart the healthy practice of ministry.

Third, both CPES and IIM involve the negotiation of a learning contract. I always begin an interim ministry with the negotiation of a clear contract as to what is to be accomplished in the time-bound transition process. In my current interim, in addition to providing pastoral leadership in pastoral care and worship, my interim contract includes special attention to Mission, Vision, Values, Stewardship, Membership, and the Transition Process.

Fourth, both CPES and IIM are process education and process facilitation. In CPES the supervisor and the student form a relationship. The student negotiates a learning contract with the supervisor and the CPE group. The



supervisor facilitates the process of learning as the student lives out the negotiated contract.

In IIM the interim pastor negotiates a contract with the congregation. There is a bonding time between the interim pastor and the congregation. Then a transition team is appointed, consisting of representatives from all factions of the congregation. The transition team forges

Both CPES and IIM ask that the supervisor and the interim pastor be self-differentiated persons who provide a non-anxious presence for the CPE group and the congregation, a person who responds rather than reacts.

a discernment process: looking back, examining the present and visioning the future of the congregation's ministry. The results of the Transition Team study are shared in dialogue with the congregation as a whole. When the discernment is completed, the Transition Team completes a "Ministry Profile" for the congregation that is given to a call committee and shared with the Synod.

The call committee then interviews pastoral candidates for the desired position. The interim pastor is the facilitator of this transition process.

Fifth, both CPES and IIM are contextual. Units of CPE focus on the discernment of pastoral ministry in a particular “clinical” context. IIM involves the discernment of congregational mission and ministry in a particular socioeconomic, political and community context.

Sixth, both CPES and IIM ask that the supervisor and the interim pastor be self-differentiated persons who provide a non-anxious presence for the CPE group and the congregation, a person who responds rather than reacts.

In the interim literature there are many descriptions of the “interim” or “transition” process”. Most of them involve the following:

- Maintain the viability of the congregation
- Bring closure to the previous pastor’s ministry (a grieving process)
- Reinforce the ministry of the laity
- Clarify the mission of the congregation
- Address specific and special needs of the congregation
- Provide for a congregational self-study and development of a vision, mission plan (the discernment process)
- Strengthen denominational ties
- Prepare the congregation to enter the call process.

My primary theological focus for interim ministry centers on God’s Mission and the congregation’s participation in God’s Mission in the context in which the congregation is located. It is God’s Mission that has a church, not the church that has a mission. My preaching, my pastoral care and my interim facilitation are informed by God’s Mission. The texts I use most often are:

Isaiah 43: “But the Lord says, ‘Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for a new thing I am going to do. It’s happening already; you can see it now. I will make a road through the wilderness and give you streams of (living) water there.’”

2 Corinthians 5: 17-21, “God was (and is) in Christ reconciling the world to God’s Self and giving to us the ministry of reconciliation . . . So we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Two books, among many, that are helpful for me in this ministry are: *A Door Set Open*, by Peter Steinke and *The Practicing Congregation: Imaging a New Old Church*, by Diana Butler Bass. As a part of my continuing education I attend the yearly Missional Consultation held each fall at Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minn.

I also participate in a monthly interim ministry group of pastors of the Minneapolis Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that meets for support and continuing education.

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, since retirement from chaplaincy and CPE in 1999 I have experienced a call to interim ministry. I am having “fun,” if I can use that word, in helping congregations re-assess

I am blessed in having an interim mentor that I meet with monthly.

their participation in God’s Mission and their ministries amidst all the enormous changes happening in the 21st century. The congregation I currently serve is located in a rapidly changing neighborhood. The demographics and culture of the neighborhood are becoming quite diverse. The congregation then is in transition from the maintenance of a homogenous, ethnic, established congregation to a culturally diverse, mission-focused congregation. In this process the congregation developed a new mission statement: “TO BUILD COMMUNITY WITH GOD AT THE CENTER.” It has also set forth eight core values to guide the congregation into the future. They are: LOVE, JOY, HOPE, COMPASSION, SPIRITUALITY, FORGIVENESS, ACCEPTANCE, and RESPECT. The congregation has voted to become an RIC congregation, openly welcoming LGBT people. The congregation’s transition team is currently developing specific objectives for the immediate future and then for the next five years, based on the new mission and the core values. When that is completed they will be ready to call the next pastor, who can lead them into the future.

I am blessed in having an interim mentor that I meet with monthly. The story of my “interim mentor” is a significant one. In the early 1990s a pastor who was having trouble in his parish applied and was accepted into an extended quarter of CPE that I supervised. In the process of his discernment he focused on his sense of pastoral identity and the connection of his heart with his head in pastoral ministry. As an outcome of this unit of CPE he left the parish he was serving, entered training as an intentional interim minister and has capably served in that capacity for the last 20 years in 13 different congregations. When I entered intentional interim ministry I felt the need to have someone with whom I could confide and who would give me ongoing feedback on my interim ministry. I asked him if he would be willing. He was, and we have been meeting monthly for the past three years. Incidentally his fee for his mentoring service is a bottle of good wine each month. He is a wine enthusiast and connoisseur. Both of us enjoy a good bottle of wine together now and then.

David H. Solberg is an ELCA clergy person who has been a chaplain and CPE Supervisor since 1972. He graduated from Luther Theological Seminary St Paul, Minn., in 1964. After serving three years in a parish in rural North Dakota he completed a two-year CPE residency at Fairview Hospital in Minneapolis, Minn. Following his residency he served as chaplain and CPE supervisor in Anchorage, Alaska, North Memorial Medical in Robbinsdale, Minn., the Ebenezer Minneapolis, Minn., North Dakota State Hospital, Jamestown, N.D., and most recently, HealthEast Bethesda Rehabilitation Hospital, St. Paul, Minn. Since his retirement from chaplaincy and CPE supervision in 1999, David continues to serve the ELCA as an Intentional Interim Minister. Throughout his chaplaincy process David completed a Master of Theology degree with focus on Spirituality and a Doctor of Ministry degree with a focus on community-based spiritual care.

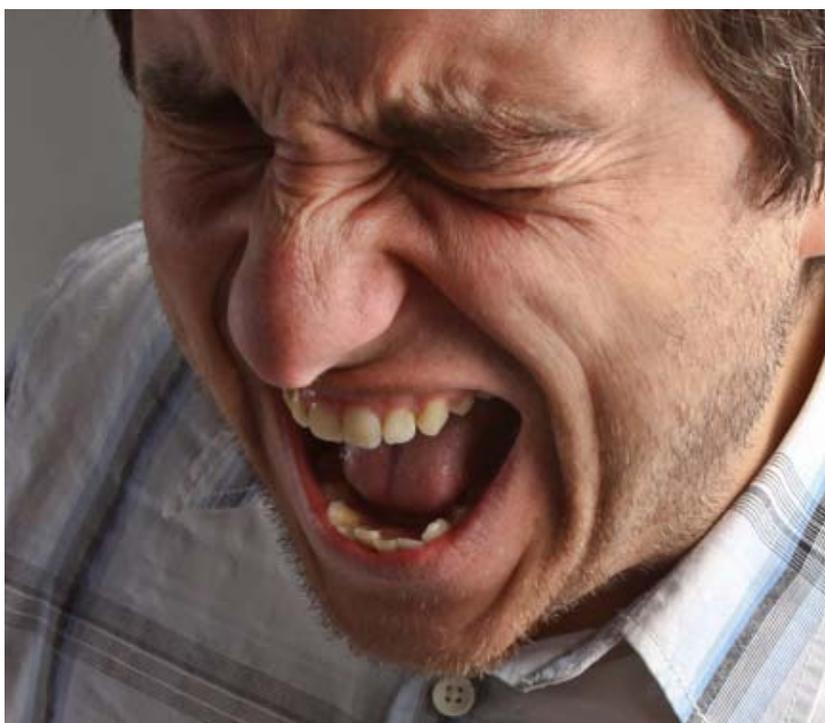
“I Want You to Speak Only to Me”: Facilitating Emotionally Charged Meetings

How could I help the congregation address the recent and ongoing conflicts in a way that would contribute to the congregation’s sense of self-understanding and wholeness, help them to get “un-stuck” from conflict, and move to focusing on their mission?

Six years ago, I was appointed as interim pastor for a small congregation that had recently been through a period of conflict. Their pastor had resigned without another call. The congregation was divided into several groups that were at odds with one another. The interim process went “by the book.” This year, the congregation and their new pastor will celebrate five years of ministry together. It may be that anyone appointed to the congregation who provided a structured process could have reached the same positive result. There is one intervention that I used with this congregation that I think was particularly helpful. The purpose of this article is to describe a technique that I borrowed from couple and family therapy, how I used it in this particular interim ministry, and how I have used it with other large groups.

As I assessed the congregation to which I had been appointed, I was concerned with the level of energy devoted to conflict. Congregation members had strong opinions and feelings about the previous pastor, the process of the pastor’s resignation, and the losses of congregation members through the conflict. These opinions and feelings were both positive and negative. In my experience, this is not the sort of thing that can be ignored or that time alone will heal. In world history, the winners of wars get the privilege of telling the story, naming the heroes, and vilifying the vanquished. The congregation contained within it a number of viewpoints. I believed that all were important; none should be silenced. With these concerns, the question was one of method. How could I help the congregation address the recent and ongoing conflicts in a way that would contribute to the congregation’s sense of self-understanding and wholeness, help them to get “un-stuck” from conflict, and move to focusing on their mission?

After several months, I proposed to the congregation council that cottage meetings be held to address a number of issues. The topics to be discussed included the congregation’s history, its current identity, its mission opportunities, its pastoral leadership needs for the future, and the recent conflicts in the congregation. The first four of these are pretty standard topics for any con-



gregation needing to update its congregational profile. The later was potentially divisive and would require some skill to address.

As I assessed the congregation to which I had been appointed, I was concerned with the level of energy devoted to conflict.

I decided to use a technique I had learned from Edwin Friedman, author of *Generation to Generation*. I had been using this technique with couples and families in my pastoral counseling practice. In the fall of 1995, I at-

tended a workshop¹ conducted by Friedman in which he presented a videotape of himself working with a couple to demonstrate how he did couple therapy. In the session, Friedman did not allow the spouses to talk to each other unless he directed them to do so. He insisted that they speak only to him and only one at a time. When one interrupted the other, he would stop him and tell him to wait his turn. If one looked at the other while speaking to him, he would tell her to trust her own memory rather than to rely on her husband's memory. If it appeared that one was gauging the other's emotional reaction as he spoke, Friedman would tell him that if he was concerned about how his wife would react he would likely not tell the whole truth. Friedman would listen and respond to the one who was speaking to him and then he would turn to the other member of the couple and say something like, "While she and I were talking, what went through your mind?" After listening to that one speak to him for a while, he would respond in some way and then turn to the first one and repeat the same thing, "While he and I were talking, what went through your mind?" So it would go, back and forth, turning from one to the other.

Friedman thought that the most important matter to be addressed in couple and family therapy is what Murray Bowen called "differentiation of self."² Bowen defined differentiation of self in two ways, first, the ability to be a separate, autonomous self while at the same time remaining in emotional contact with others, and second, the ability to distinguish one's thoughts from one's feelings. Bowen observed that rather than express one's individuality, persons will create a pseudo-self that hides differences in order to be more like others. A well differentiated self is able to tolerate the anxiety of taking what Bowen called an "I position," defining his or her own perspective while still remaining in relationship with others.

At the workshop I attended, Friedman said something like this: "Family therapy is like skinning cats. Every day it's the same old thing, day after day, skinning cats, that is, facilitating the process of self-differentiation." His goal was to encourage persons to be their own authentic selves and at the same time to be in relationship with others. This is what I thought would be helpful for the congregation I was serving, to encourage members to express their opinions and experiences honestly and openly and to have the opportunity to hear and appreciate the opinions and experiences of others.

As I work with couples and families in therapy, I regularly use Friedman's method of allowing only one person to speak at a time and insisting that they speak only to me unless I direct them to do otherwise. Usually, in the first session I explain my reasons for working in this way.

1 Held at Decatur First United Methodist Church, Decatur, Ga., and sponsored by the Emory Center for Pastoral Services

2 Murray Bowen (1985). *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson. p. 362 ff.

First, since I am a relative stranger, I find that people speak to me in a more polite manner than they do in speaking to their spouse or other family members. That takes some of the "edge" off of complaints and criticisms. If one partner is overhearing the other tell me about his or her behavior, the content of the statement is easier to hear if the description is a narrative told to me in the third person rather than if it is an accusation that uses the

As I work with couples and families in therapy, I regularly use Friedman's method of allowing only one person to speak at a time and insisting that they speak only to me unless I direct them to do otherwise.

second person. It's the difference between hearing, "He always . . ." and "Well, YOU always . . ." I tell my clients to observe how I respond to their partners. I don't know all that they think they know about one another. I am curious to learn more about their experience. Since I am psychodynamically trained and not a Bowen "purist," I am also interested in feelings and emotional experiences. I ask questions a spouse or partner might not ask. I listen reflectively. As someone who is curious about another's experience and who has nothing to defend, I am able to draw out more of a client's experience than a spouse or family member is usually able to do. I model this behavior in sessions in the hope that my clients will learn to imitate my way of expressing curiosity and interest once they get home.

As one member of a family speaks, often another will become defensive. The second will attempt to interrupt and to tell his or her side of the story. I don't allow this. I tell clients that I am interested in what they have to say, but I want them to practice listening to what their spouse or other family member is saying without making corrections or defending oneself. I will ask for their side of the story when I am ready to give them their turn. One of the difficulties people have in communicating is that they are often more focused on thinking of how they will defend themselves than they are on listening to what another has to say. I tell clients that waiting one's turn is intended to be an opportunity to practice their skills at listening and attempting to understand another person's experience and perspective.

I want clients to speak directly to me. Sometimes a husband, for instance, will be speaking to me about his wife, but will turn his head and look at her while he is speaking to me. Sometimes it looks like the client is trying to make a point with the spouse. This is clearly evident when shaking an index finger is involved. I don't allow this. I interrupt and ask the client to look me in the

eye and to speak only to me. I want to know about the client's experience. The spouse is there to overhear a conversation between the client and me, not to be lectured. Sometimes when a wife looks at her husband, it appears that she is scanning his face and body for nonverbal clues indicating the emotional impact of what she is saying. I don't allow this either. I find that clients are clearer about what they think and feel when they look at me rather than at their spouse or other family members.

Couples and families often assume that everyone in the family should feel and think the same way about things and they edit themselves to leave out their differences. I want to hear the differences. I want clients to express their real selves, not what Bowen called their pseudo selves. If clients speak directly to me without consulting their partners or other family members there is a chance that they will be more direct, open, and honest. In Bowen's terms, they will "have more self."

I try to keep this description of the therapeutic process brief as I introduce clients to couple or family counseling. Portions will be reiterated in detail when clients attempt to bend or break the structure that I have imposed upon them. I tell clients that I believe that they have reasons for whatever it is that they are doing and that my job is to be curious about their experiences and whatever may be contributing to what they are doing. My hope is that they will become more curious about one another and that they will learn to appreciate their differing perspectives.

I used this technique in cottage meetings with the congregation I described above. I began the meetings by explaining how I worked with couples and families and telling them that I wanted them to follow this structure in order to facilitate open sharing of opinions and experiences in the hope that it might lead to a better understanding of the diversity of the thoughts and feelings present in the congregation. In addition to the basic ground rules of speaking only to me and not interrupting one another, I asked participants not to respond to anything that a previous speaker had said. I told them that I wanted to hear their own first-hand statements of their ideas and experiences, not defensive responses or reactions to the ideas and experiences of others.

My experience of using this process in cottage meetings was that it went very well. I was impressed by how openly congregation members communicated when they learned that I would attempt to accurately reflect back to them what I heard them saying and that I would attempt to communicate understanding of their perspectives. I got the impression that congregation members listened to one another respectfully and that in spite of the disagreements and hurt feelings that they expressed, they tried to understand one another's differing perspectives. At each meeting there was a volunteer who agreed to take notes. The notes reflected this diversity of perspectives and experiences. I used these notes to write a summary of the meetings and had this disseminated to the congre-

gation. The summary included a section describing the participant responses to the meetings and the process. This is what I wrote in my report to the congregation based on my own impressions and the notes submitted by the recorders:

Participants were asked to reflect on the process of the meetings. Some suggested that more time could be spent on looking forward and less time be spent on history. Some observed that persons were able to talk about recent events in a way that felt safe. Persons expressed appreciation for hearing the perspectives and experiences of others in the meetings. Some of the sharing by members was characterized as "venting." Most was reflective. Persons expressed relief at finding that they could talk about the challenging experiences of the past year without generating upset feelings.

My attitude regarding the conflicts this congregation experienced was that I was not there at the time and that all I had was second hand information.

My summary of this feedback is, of course, colored by my own perception of the meetings. I hope it is fairly accurate and speaks to the success of the technique I used to facilitate the process of sharing and listening.

When using this technique in couple and family counseling, it is necessary for the therapist to remain neutral and not to take the side of one family member against another. My attitude regarding the conflicts this congregation experienced was that I was not there at the time and that all I had was second hand information. I could not make judgments about who was right or wrong. All I could do was assume that people had reasons for their thoughts, feelings, and actions. I believed that helping congregation members to express these had the potential for contributing to acceptance of their differences and understanding.

Subsequent to this interim appointment, I have used this technique for facilitating conversations with other groups. In one instance, I was invited to consult with a congregation that was in the midst of an intense conflict. I suggested that the congregation could benefit from having an open forum where persons could express their opinions and experiences and be heard by others in the congregation. It was arranged to have a congregational meeting during the Sunday school hour. After I was introduced to the gathering of about two hundred persons, I described the purpose of the meeting and laid out the ground rules I had used in the cottage meetings with the interim congregation. I added one additional ground

rule. Congregation members were asked to limit their statements to only two minutes. A timekeeper would keep track of the time.

I took a chair on the stage in the front of the auditorium, seated at a ninety-degree angle to the audience. One after another, congregation members came and sat in a chair opposite mine and told me what was on their minds. Occasionally a participant would start to turn away from me and to begin making a speech to the congregation. Just as I do in couple therapy, I interrupted them and directed them to speak directly to me. I noticed that when I insist that people look me in the eye when they are speaking, their emotional intensity eases and they seem to become more thoughtful. Congregation members spoke of disillusionment and pain, revealed congregational secrets, and even recounted traumatic experiences, to which I responded with my pastoral and therapeutic best. People voiced a wide range of opinions, experiences, and beliefs. My response to each was the same, to mirror, to clarify, and to express understanding as best as I am able. Nothing was decided at the meeting. Congregation members only voiced their opinions and experiences and listened to one another. After the leaders of the congregation had their next council meeting they asked me to come back and conduct another session just like the previous one.

Having had positive experiences using this technique in cottage meetings with the interim congregation and in this congregational consultation, when I was invited by my synod and by a neighboring synod to moderate public forums for gathering feedback on what was at that time the draft version of the ELCA Statement on Human Sexuality, I was confident that I had a solid technique and enough experience with it to facilitate those meetings. Human sexuality can be an emotionally charged issue in the church. My job as moderator was not to reach any particular outcome, only to facilitate a process that encouraged persons to express their opinions and experiences and to listen to one another as they did so. I laid out the same ground rules as with the congregation consultation described above. In order to prevent persons from making speeches to the group, sometimes I moved from where I was standing and placed myself directly in the speaker's line of vision, quite literally "getting in their face." I find it amazing how well someone can focus their thoughts when they have someone they can look in the eye as they speak. In my experience, conducting those feedback sessions on the social statement was a lot like Friedman's metaphor for family therapy, like skinning cats. My job was simple: encourage persons to express themselves in the hope of being understood. I was surprised at how well participants behaved while voicing strong disagreement over a contentious, emotionally charged issue.

It takes "nerve" to get this technique to work. The therapist or facilitator must be willing to be directive, to interrupt persons, and insist that they respect the

ground rules for the meeting. "I am interested in what you have to say, but right now I want you to practice listening and waiting for your turn." "I'm sure that you have another way of looking at this and I am interested in your perspective, but I can listen to only one person at a time." "Tell me about it." "I'm afraid that if you start making a speech to the group they will stop listening to you and some will want to argue with you. I want

When I insist that people look me in the eye when they are speaking, their emotional intensity eases and they seem to become more thoughtful.

you to speak only to me." These are interventions I use frequently. They keep the focus on having a one-to-one conversation. While taking such an active, self-centered role with a group may resemble the judge in a television courtroom, it can provide a consistent structure if the facilitator remains more focused on the process of the meeting than on the content of the issues raised.

Reflecting on my experiences in couple and family therapy and in facilitating group discussions, I have identified a useful metaphor for thinking about this way of working with groups. Ivan Böszörményi-Nagy, one of the early founders of family therapy, described a method of working with families that he called "multi-directional partiality." As Nagy interviewed a family, he attempted to hear and to understand the perspective of each individual and to communicate this understanding back to each of them. He attempted to show partiality toward every member of the family equally. His hope was that as he communicated understanding of each family member's perspective, each would come to understand the other members of their family better. For Nagy, understanding was one of the building blocks of trust.

Like families, congregations that experience conflict can get stuck and fail to move beyond it. Like Nagy, I believe that understanding is a basis for trust. Trust is part of the foundation from which congregations can move beyond conflict and become re-engaged in their mission. I believe that understanding and trust are products of honest and open communication and appreciation for the differing perspectives of others.

In the foregoing, I have described a technique from Edwin Friedman's method of couple therapy that I have used for facilitating group discussions in interim ministry and with other groups. At the heart of Friedman's method is the belief that the primary function of the marriage and family therapist is to facilitate self-differentiation. Managing the therapeutic encounter by insisting on direct one-to-one conversation is a technique he used

to move toward this goal. I have also provided examples of how this technique can be useful for facilitating communication in interim ministry and with other groups.

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So, You're Leaving: A Letter to Pastors in Transition

Your leaving, no matter what the circumstances, does not mean that you have failed or that you are abandoning your flock.

Dear friends,

So you're leaving your current ministry site — good, I think. That can be a tough time for you as well as your congregation. There are all the relationship ties and all those unspoken “thank yous” and “I’m sorrys” that make leaving difficult and very emotional. You may not think about it with all the changes going on around you now, but how you leave a congregation shapes the future for you, your congregation, your new congregation, and the pastor who follows you.

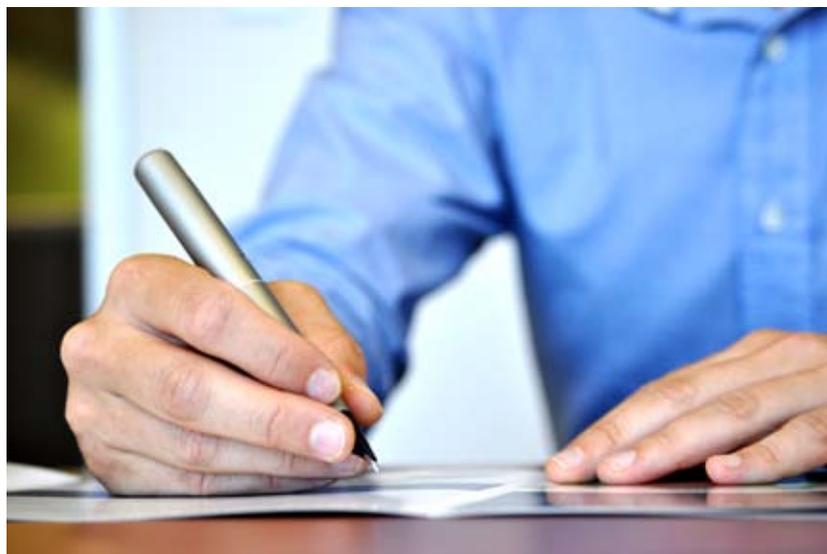
This letter is best described as ruminations and insights gathered over ten years of interim ministry; it's not a scientific or clinical analysis. I hope what I have to say will help to make the transition smooth, healthy, and fulfilling for all and for the sake of the church.

In my last weeks of seminary, seniors were required to attend a class that was called, “Parish Administration” or something like that. It was an attempt on the part of the seminary to cram in all the practical stuff we were never taught in the academic classes but that we would soon discover would be absolutely necessary in the parish.

What I remember most is the auditorium filled with antsy seniors who were sure we knew everything about ministry. Thankfully, the unanxious presence of Dr. Loren Halvorson was there to lead us through the intricacies of what lay before us after we were ordained. I'm sure none of us took many notes, but I still remember him saying something like, “Remember, you are not the first pastor to bring the gospel to your congregation, nor will you be the last.” That knocked us down a notch or two. This humble dictum was underscored for me years later in Roger Nicholson's bible for interim pastors and congregations, *Temporary Shepherds*¹: all of us serve only a short time.

The wisdom of Halvorson and Nicholson have been formative in my own ministry experiences as a resident pastor and as an interim pastor. All pastors, permanent or interim, are but stewards of the congregations they serve and there will come a time when they will pass on the responsibilities to another temporary shepherd.

Just as it is important to strive for a successful ministry, I believe it is equally important to strive for a successful leaving. Embracing the idea that you are the next link in God's long-term plan for a congregation, and not the



whole chain, makes day-to-day ministry much less stressful and thus more fun for you and the people.

My interest in healthy pastoral transitions arises out of my own experiences as an intentional interim pastor during the past ten years. I learned that the healthier the departure of the resident pastor, the easier my job was as interim pastor and, more importantly, the easier the transition for the members of the congregation.

How you leave a congregation shapes the future for you, your congregation, your new congregation, and the pastor who follows you.

Finally, I hope to stimulate reflection and conversation among active, resident pastors over the idea that how pastors plan to leave a congregation is just as important as how pastors plan to lead a congregation. We all are, after all, only temporary shepherds.

But before I address specific issues, there is one thing I want to say briefly that should be evident to all: When you leave, leave. This is foundational.

For good reasons, most judicatories have rules about

¹ Nicholson, Roger. *Temporary Shepherds*. Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 1998.

former pastors returning to congregations to preside at weddings, baptisms, funerals, wedding anniversaries, and so forth. In a word, don't. Those life transitions are the responsibility and the joy of the interim or new pastor.

Think of it this way: Would it be wise to date a former lover now married to another? Or theologically: As St. Paul counseled the strong not to encumber the faith of the weak by eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:9-10), so you may be able to discern the change in your relationship status, but the people may not. And your weaker brother or sister, the new pastor, may not be as self-assured and strong as you are in handling transitions in relationships.

BEFORE YOU KNOW IT:

Growing apart before moving apart

By definition, interim pastors know they are temporary shepherds; it's written into the job description. As an interim pastor, I know that the day I begin my ministry in a congregation is my first day of leaving. Indeed, the central purpose of interim ministry is to leave the congregation healthier and more invigorated for its own ministry than when we came. In a similar way, that could also be the guiding principle for resident pastors at the beginning and throughout their ministry.

Amid all the excitement of beginning a new call as the resident pastor, your leaving begins the same day you begin. To know the truth of this, on your first day, take a long-term member with you and walk past the framed portraits of your predecessors. Listen to the stories. That walk through the gallery should be your first clue that you are not the first to bring the gospel to these people, nor will you be the last. You will leave here soon enough. As the weeks turn into months, I recommend that you have some continuing, long conversations with those pictures on the wall. They will have much to tell you about the congregation, how to lead it and how to leave it.

Of course, as you begin a new call, leaving is the farthest thing from your mind or the minds of your people. That is as it should be. The focus and energy of the congregation and you must be on current ministry and envisioning the shape of your future ministry together. But there will come a time when the idea of ending this ministry and seeking a new call will enter your mind (pray that it enters your mind before it does your congregation's!).

The transition from serving to leaving begins even before you know it, and you are often the last to know. It begins the moment people even suspect you are leaving — whether you are or not. Congregations are often more aware that pastors are temporary shepherds than are the pastors themselves. The people are sensitive to any sign that you might be leaving them, whether they love you or merely tolerate you. Each person will have his or her own reasons. You will find, as Edwin Friedman says, “the most intensely negative members of a congregation fam-

ily are as interested personally in the spiritual leader as those who are the most positive.”²

The Disappearing Pastor³

Pastor Mike Thilges had served Good Shepherd for eight years. He and his family loved the congregation and the small town they lived in. In June, Mike's youngest child graduated from high school and left for college in August. Mike and his wife Jan were officially empty-nesters. At the September council retreat, Mike noticed aloofness in some of the council members. He sensed that some

I hope to stimulate reflection and conversation among active, resident pastors over the idea that how pastors plan to leave a congregation is just as important as how pastors plan to lead a congregation.

were not as enthusiastic as in past years, cautious about starting anything new. In meetings over the next two months, Pastor Thilges felt that he was being overlooked, his opinions were not listened to with the same seriousness, and he felt invisible.

“Am I losing it?” he asked. By December, he and his wife felt as if both had been cut off from the congregation. Coolness had settled in, and it wasn't weather-related. After Christmas, he met with the mutual ministry committee and shared his concerns: “I feel as if I'm disappearing around here. Sometimes I feel as if I'm being ignored or just tolerated.”

The committee reassured him that there was no conspiracy afoot to get him to move on. All seemed equally unsure of what was happening. Then one member said, “Maybe it's because people like you so much that they are getting ready for you to leave. They see that, since Tim left, you and Jan are now empty-nesters. They want the best for you and think you may want to go somewhere new and exciting, now that your kids are out of the house.” With no indications from him, the congregation unintentionally anticipated Pastor Thilges' next professional move — accurate or not. They assumed that he and his wife would choose to move on now that their lives had changed.

The case of the disappearing pastor is even more evident when the pastor announces his or her resignation. Initially, there may be increased expressions of closeness and comments about how much the congregation depends on the pastor. But then comes the inevitable awak-

² Friedman, Edwin. *Generation to Generation*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1985. p. 264.

³ Names and circumstances of pastors and congregations have been changed or made up from whole cloth to preserve confidentiality.

ening that the departure will take place. Everyone starts to withdraw.

Reflections

Leave-taking is difficult in any relationship; it is especially so in relationships which are as intimate as the pastor and people relationship. All have invested much in it, even those whom Friedman calls, “the most intensely negative members.” The natural reaction when facing someone’s departure is to protect oneself from pain, or at least to prepare to face it. Sometimes this is exhibited in distancing, and at other times it becomes an even deeper attachment. Both the pastor and congregation experience the push and pull in different ways and at different times. Be prepared for the changes that will come to your relationships.

One of the unfortunate undercurrents of people anticipating a pastor’s move is that it may be a reflection of low self-esteem on the part of the congregation: “Why would a pastor want to stay with us when there is the opportunity to move up?”

At times like these, the pastor’s capacity for self-definition is vitally important. Your identity does not depend on the attention the congregation pays to you; your identity comes from the leadership you provide. Likewise, the congregation’s identity does not come from you, but from their long-term identity as the church and as a community led by temporary shepherds.

When you are not leaving, and you hear rumors that you are, it is time to reaffirm publicly your commitment to the congregation and to your shared ministry. If you *are* leaving, it is up to you to honestly acknowledge the imminence of your departure and to fight the tendency to disengage from them. Help the congregation see that there is a tendency for people to disengage in these situations. When they know this, they will be able to name what they are feeling and not be troubled by the strange feelings about a disappearing pastor. In this way, you and the congregation can use the closing time positively to affirm your shared ministry and to prepare to move your separate ways.

PREPARE AND PLAN:

Endings and beginnings

How pastors plan to leave a congregation is just as important as how pastors plan to lead a congregation. The effects of leaving may be just as significant and long lasting as one’s legacy of leading. Friedman observed that congregations, like families, are always experiencing gains and losses; how the family functions at such times is usually dependant upon the functioning of its leader at the time of the loss. But when the loss is of the leader, the effect is primarily a result of how the leader functioned before he or she was lost.⁴ What is required in all aspects of successful ministry is awareness of yourself and of the effect of your actions on those who look to you as leader.

Take responsibility.

The Abandoning Pastor

Pastor Ted Carson was much loved by his congregation, Grace Lutheran. He had come to them when they were at a low-point, and had helped them regain their mission and financial footings. After seven years at Grace,

Your identity does not depend on the attention the congregation pays to you; your identity comes from the leadership you provide.

he received his dream call: senior pastor of St. James, a congregation just down the road, with almost 4,000 members, four clergy, a full-time cantor, youth director, and director of Christian education. In addition, there was a suite-full of assistants and administrators. On top of it all was the church’s elementary school, with its staff. It was a huge step up for him.

Anxious to get to work, he called a special meeting of the congregation council one hot July night. The first thing he did was to distribute a copy of his letter of resignation. As they were reading it, he pointed out that his last Sunday would be in just two weeks.

“The constitution says you are to give us thirty days’ notice, Pastor,” reminded Bill. “Yes, I know, but I have two weeks of vacation coming and a couple weeks of continuing education, so my last official day will be thirty days from tomorrow, but I’ll be done here on Sunday the fifteenth,” said Pastor Ted. “We can figure out the details later.” There was not much the council could do. He was right. He had it all figured out and was soon gone.

What made his leaving even more troublesome was that all of this happened in the middle of summer when many people were on vacation or at weekend summer homes. There was no time for the congregation to plan a farewell party or even to properly notify the membership.

When people returned after Labor Day, they realized that Pastor Carson was gone. It was then they realized that they did not have the opportunity to say goodbye, and they felt abandoned.

Reflections

By the time I started at Grace as interim pastor, the people were not only grieving sadly, they were angry — although they did not fully realize it. They were hopping mad over his too-rapid departure but didn’t know how to express it. How can you be mad at someone you love and whom you thought loved you? That’s hard to understand for anyone.

4 *ibid.*, p. 220

I lasted only six months as their interim pastor. By mutual agreement, I resigned. I was never able to be Pastor Ted. Nothing I did was right or “the way Pastor Ted always did it.” They were like children waiting for their dad to return. Because he had been such a big part in their restoration, they thought they could not continue without his guidance.

I can only hope I took with me some of the anger many of them experienced when Carson abandoned them. Fortunately, the interim pastor who followed was very successful in refocusing the energy of the congregation toward who they were, and not who Pastor Carson was.

Friedman⁵ says that there are four components of leaving that we should pay attention to:

1. Recognize your own emotional reaction to others;
2. Permit emotional reactivity in others;
3. Have a non-anxious presence, be part of the transition process;
4. Stay in touch but continue to detriangulate (disengage).

Pastor Carson, in his own anxiety over leaving a congregation, forgot to take care of himself and of the congregation. He forgot his own humanity, his own need to say goodbye and to ask for forgiveness for his failures. He forgot the congregation’s need to say their goodbyes and to offer their best wishes or express their sorrows at his leaving.

In short, your call to the congregation is not finished until you have led them into a period of change and transition. That happens best when you are aware of the emotional reactions you and the congregation will have, and you plan for them (See “Practical Considerations” below). As the one in control of your leaving, it is up to you to provide appropriate pastoral care and counseling to the people who have looked to you for leadership. You will not see the end of the transition, but you can be assured that you and they are well on the way to healthy new ministries.

HONESTY AND CROSS-BEARING:

Speaking the truth, even when you are crying
Pastoral calls do not always end on a positive note. This section will concern itself with situations where there is conflict that cannot be resolved or failures that cannot be mended that bring about the painful decision to end the call relationship.

Note: *This section does not address situations where the pastor is leaving because of violations of sexual boundaries, marital infidelity, or the like. Because of their sensitivity, those troubling issues must be dealt with differently than conflict or failed expectations.*

In most cases, breaches in ministry expectations are caused by failures, mistakes, missed opportunities, or as

a result of personal problems, bad matches, or soured relationships that cannot be fixed and trust restored. As in broken marriages, healing can happen and the relationship can become even stronger. It will take time, lots of energy, and perhaps assistance from outside counselors, but it is worth the work. Sometimes, however, it is best to call an end to it all, no matter who is labeled the guilty party. In all the congregations I have served and studied,

Your call to the congregation is not finished until you have led them into a period of change and transition.

there is more than enough blame to go around for all. In the end, fixing blame on another does not really solve anything. It merely draws out the pain, increases guilt and shame, and drains the spirit of the congregation, the pastor, and the pastor’s family.

The first goal of leadership is to assure the well being of the congregation and, second, to move the community toward a mutually desired goal. These goals get aborted during conflict and division, so that someone has to move. Because of the nature of a congregation (brick and mortar, flesh and bone), it is finally up to the pastor, the “temporary shepherd,” to leave, no matter who may be most at fault. This is the point at which a pastor’s vow to be a good shepherd is surely tested; for you may have to sacrifice yourself for the sake of the people and Christ’s church. But remember: self-proclaimed martyrs seldom are venerated.

First Call Blues

My first call was to St. Timothy Church, an active, urban congregation. It ended three years later in a “train wreck,” with a mutual agreement of separation.

A month after my installation as associate pastor, St. Tim’s beloved pastor of 25 years announced his retirement, leaving me alone in a church of 1250 members. In the months that followed, my own “puppy pastor” mistakes and blind oversteps, together with the congregation’s anxiety over the loss of their pastor and the process of calling of a new pastor, led to the “train wreck,” and we all knew it. With the strong guidance of the lay leaders and the wisdom of the new senior pastor, who came a year into my turmoil, I am thankful for the grace-filled way we worked together so that my leaving would be beneficial for me and for the congregation. There were no bad guys or blaming.

When leaving St. Tim’s, I publicly acknowledged my love and appreciation for them as my first call. I acknowledged my missteps and failures in serving them. Likewise, the leadership thanked me for my service and acknowledged their missteps and failures in their expect-

5 *ibid.*, p. 257

tations of me as a brand-new pastor trying to lead a large congregation at a difficult time. In their graciousness, they supported me as I enrolled in one quarter of CPE, before I began my next call. That has proved very helpful throughout my ministry. But most importantly, we departed as friends.

“It’s Your Fault!”

What if I had fought the good counsel of the lay leaders to resign as pastor of St. Timothy? What if I had turned those who liked me against those who were disappointed in my performance or who truly did not like me? What if I complained from the pulpit about all the extra work and in the newsletter about the high expectations poured out on me following the pastor’s retirement? What if my wife snubbed those she saw as “enemies” and whispered against them with her friends? What if I had written a letter to the bishop and the congregation trying to force a vote to call me as the new senior pastor?

Who would have won, whatever the outcome?

Even if I was right and stayed, even if their expectations were too high, even if most of the people loved me, the immediate cost to the congregation’s well being and to their long-range ministry goal would have been damaged, and my own ministry there would always have been under a cloud.

And if I agreed to leave but had refused to acknowledge my own failures, placing the full blame on the lay leaders of the church, think of the damage that would have done: continued suspicion, continued blaming, continued guilt in all of us for not doing enough.

Reflections

Jesus said, “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” (John 10:11). I believe these words are John’s way of having Jesus say, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-35). I am not talking of bloody martyrdom here, and not even of a spiritual laying down of one’s life. What I hear in Jesus’ call is a call to live for the sake of others, to put others’ needs ahead of your own. If what we preach is true, our salvation is already assured. We already know that we are the forgiven children of God. What harm can come to us? What can separate us from the love of God?

In the end, it is up to you to be honest with yourself and with all the people in the congregation, as much as possible, concerning the reasons for your departure. You don’t have to bare your soul and stand naked before the crowds, but failing to recognize, articulate, and own your part in the conflict can lead to continued suspicion of you and the leadership of the congregation.

For the sake of the church, both you and the leadership must share the same narrative and share the same responsibility. I have seen people leave congregations because

they believed the pastor “got a raw deal” when, in fact, all parties found themselves in difficult situations, but all were seeking to deflect the blame away from themselves. What should have been a time of reconciliation and forgiveness became divisive and harmful of the reputations of all. It broke up a congregation. Truly, failure to speak honestly and openly, even when it hurts, brings long-term pain to all.

In the end, it is up to you to be honest with yourself and with all the people in the congregation, as much as possible, concerning the reasons for your departure.

During such times, it is vitally important to get counseling for you and for your family. Transitions are never easy nor without some measure of pain, but if they have come with turmoil and conflict, it is even more important that you seek professional help. Most denominational judicatories have such services available. Your health insurance may also provide mental health assistance. As for the congregation, it will be up to the interim pastor to provide the necessary counseling.

No matter how strong you think you are, it is likely that at some time the events just endured, but not dealt with, will come back to haunt you and endanger your next call and the people who look to you for leadership. Face the situation honestly, acknowledge the pain, and seek help.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Clean out your desk

Dr. Halvorson said, “You are not the first pastor to serve the congregation and you will not be the last.” To that I must add, “After you leave, you are no longer the pastor of your church, but you still have responsibilities for the church’s ministry.”

Some stuff is easy: Letting the incoming interim pastor know the times of worship, office hours, monthly council meetings, and the location of the office coffee pot. But if you are like most pastors, you carry in your mind hundreds of other details of ministry and administration that also need to be maintained. Only you may know all the members who are homebound or in nursing homes. Only you know the curriculum you are using for confirmation class and the plan for the program. Only you know the names of prospective new members. Paying attention to these practical considerations is just as important for the health of the congregation as is paying attention to the interpersonal tasks of leaving.

The lay leaders of congregation are always uncertain of what to do when their pastor leaves. They often don’t

know how the office runs, when the newsletter gets distributed, or where the parish records are kept. Like most people, they have not paid attention to the myriad details you have managed, all the things that just happen because “that’s what pastors do.”

“The Book of the Kingdom”

When I arrived as the interim pastor at Cross River Church, Todd, the chair of the evangelism committee, gave me a list of all the people his committee had visited in the month since Pastor Gary David had left. On the list were the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the shut-ins and nursing home residents. Also included was the last time each had received Holy Communion.

Todd told me, “Pastor David asked me to be certain you knew about each of these people, our saints.” We had a great conversation about these saints and I learned much about them and about the history of the congregation. The next morning, Rhonda, the secretary gave me a note from Pastor David. It simply said: “Look for a blue notebook in the bottom left desk drawer. — Best regards, Gary.”

The notebook contained several pages of handwritten notes he had pulled together in his last few weeks at the church. There was another copy of the list of homebound and nursing home members, some had short comments following the name. There were two pages with the name of the confirmation students with phone numbers, the name of the curriculum he was using, what chapter they were on, and where the materials were stored. There was also a syllabus calendar and a copy of a letter to the parents with the expectations of the confirmation program.

With each page I turned, I learned more and more about the day-to-day life of the congregation: the names and phone numbers of the council members, the names of families who had experienced death in the past year or so, a calendar of “special events” not in the official liturgical calendar, a page from the telephone book of the county’s social and medical services, the names and phone numbers of neighboring pastors and churches, and so forth.

The notebook was not particularly well organized. It was just a collection of handwritten notes of things Pastor Gary thought were important enough to be passed on.

I was personally struck by the last page: it contained the names and phone numbers for Pastor David’s personal physician and dentist, “Just in case you need to see a doctor or dentist while you are here. I told them you were coming. Both said they would be pleased to see you at any time.” He was concerned about my welfare, too.

About a week later, I received a letter at my home from Pastor David. In it, he listed the names of people in the congregation he was especially concerned about and a short description of his concern for them. He also gave me a “heads up” about a couple of people he had not gotten along with at Cross River. He wrote, “I’m sure

you will do just fine with them. It was probably just some strange chemistry between us.”

When I ran into him at synod assembly, I thanked him for his notebook. He smiled and said, “Well, just do the same for others.” Since then, I have passed on blue notebooks to the pastors who follow me. Sometimes it was a notebook, at other times it was a set of well-marked files.

Your concern for the congregation is reflected in the care you take when you hand over their lives to the care of another.

That notebook might be a good thing to start compiling from the first day you arrive.

Finish Your Work

Below are ten things I encourage you to do before you leave. They will make the first days of the incoming interim pastor much easier.

1. Plan an “Uninstallation Liturgy” for your last Sunday as an acknowledgement of your ministry. It will mark an ending for you and the people.
2. Request a “Farewell Reception.” It doesn’t have to have a meal or a fancy program. Just provide time for people to informally take your hand and say thank you. Let them share with one another your years together. Carry extra handkerchiefs.
3. Clean your desk. Get rid of all the eraser crumbs, dead pens and markers, stacks of insurance company notepads, tangled paper clips, and all the flotsam that accumulates in the bottoms of the drawers.
4. Go through all the files. If it’s a legal or official document or file, find a permanent, fireproof file drawer other than in your desk or office. The pastor’s office is not the archive of the congregation. It is your workshop.
5. Empty the file drawers. Nobody wants your planning notes for the 2008 council retreat or the minutes from the property committee from six years ago. Use this rule: *If I didn’t take it, the new pastor probably won’t want it.*
6. Empty the bookshelves and dust them. Use the same rule as for files: *If I didn’t take it, the new pastor probably won’t want it.* Leave only the hymnal, a current membership (picture) directory, and the local telephone book.
7. Remember to make your blue notebook for the interim pastor.

8. Every pastor has enough crosses to bear; take your bric-a-brac decorations and wall hangings with you. The same goes for coffee mugs, padded devotional books, and lacy cross-shaped bookmarkers.
9. Convince your property committee to shampoo the carpet, buy a new desk chair, fill the nail holes in the walls, and give the walls a fresh coat of paint. That will win the admiration of any interim pastor.
10. Write a note to your successor wishing her or him well. Pray for your successor and for the congregation every day for the first two months you are gone; ask that they do the same for you.

Reflections

Ministry is about taking care: it is about concern for the well being of the people in the congregation. Your concern for the congregation is reflected in the care you take when you hand over their lives to the care of another.

CONCLUSION: We are in this together, friend
Your leaving, no matter what the circumstances, does not mean that you have failed or that you are abandoning your flock. Even in the most painful situations it simply says that you were the next link in the holy line of witnesses that have served the gospel since Jesus sent out the disciples two-by-two.

I have always appreciated phone calls from the pastors I followed as interim. These conversations usually provide insights into the congregation and its people in ways that months of my own interviews and listening never could do. In the same way, our conversations often provide some solace and closure for the former pastor. I can relay news about people of concern, both the joys and the sorrows. I can compliment the pastor on the strengths of the congregation. Once, I heard a pastor's heartfelt confession about his ministry failures and frustrations, and spoke the words of absolution to him in the name of our Savior. It was a holy moment for both of us.

The interim pastor is not there to clean up your mess, demean your ministry, or to make apologies for you. You may look at the interim pastor as your friend, who will care for the people you cared for and who will strengthen the congregation you loved and served.

We are in this together, friend.

Your colleague in ministry,
Tom

Thomas S. Hanson is an ordained pastor of the ELCA. He has served for ten years as interim pastor in six Minnesota congregations and two congregations in the Florida-Bahamas Synod. He currently serves as interim pastor at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Jacksonville, Fla. Before stumbling into interim ministry, he served for twelve years at Augsburg Fortress Publishers (AFP) as an editor for high school and adult curriculum, and then became a manager in Information Technology for publishing support, leading the initial iterations of AFP's Web site and online store. He and his wife Sue live in Jacksonville; their two grown children and two grandsons live in the Twin Cities.

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