

Interim Ministry Explained

Thomas M. Smith

As everyone at St. Martin's is aware our congregational community is in an interim period. What may be less clear is what *intentional interim ministry* is all about. Some twenty plus years ago I had formal interim ministry training. As some of you know, my wife is a (retired) Presbyterian pastor, and this was my career as well for twenty-four years before I transitioned to become a licensed clinical psychologist.

An intentional interim seeks to stir the pot by making changes to the system of a congregation. The goal of stirring the pot is to allow existing anxieties to surface so that they can be named and worked through. All such anxieties are related, on some level, to grief – we are all struggling with the change of our long-term rector leaving (in this case to retirement) and the knowledge that a new rector will be coming. The intentional interim minister seeks to facilitate or nurture this process of change.

Some churches or denominations do not have trained intentional interim ministers. We are fortunate to have such an individual in the Rev. Carren Sheldon. In those churches which undergo transitional periods without an intentional interim minister there is usually a pastor who functions as a 'placeholder' to keep things running smoothly, but otherwise that individual typically has little understanding into congregational systems or the upsides to intentional interim ministry.

Intentional interim ministers are engaged in five related developmental tasks: (1) Coming to terms with history – allowing the congregation to explore its history and deal with any conflicts, attitudes and prejudices that have affected the congregation in a negative way. (2) Discovering a new identity – the vision of new mission and ministry options may surface; we were especially helped by the willingness Father Mark to utilize the *Holy Cow* survey toward this kind of thinking. (3) Shifts of power – a change in pastoral leadership often affords persons the opportunity to leave or take up leadership positions in the church, and the intentional interim minister will usually make structural changes in how things work because she (in our case) can look at the way we do ministry with a fresh eye. (4) Rethink Linkages – we are linked to the diocese, to local missions, to international partnerships, and to one another in ways that might benefit from re-examination or renewal. (5) Commitment to new leadership and a new future – the previous developmental tasks, when accomplished properly, often lead to the visioning by the congregation of new directions and new emphases for ministry, and such thinking will likely guide the new rector search committee.

I want to emphasize that an intentional interim minister seeks to stir the pot and to raise anxieties. It is crucial that changes be made. It is critically important that existing patterns of behavior and various norms of conduct be named and examined. Grief must be let out – we must go through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression if we are to arrive at acceptance. Most congregations

have a considerable amount of restrained or contained 'toxicity' that needs to be flushed out and discussed, ideally with graciousness and love. The intentional interim minister thus seeks to make changes and get the system shook up so that these always-present dynamics can be brought forth.

You might reasonably ask, why? The answer is that any new rector will inevitably make changes and bring new vision to St. Martin's. If we want that new, yet unknown rector to succeed, we must prepare the way by examining all of these (systemic) dynamics. Successful interim ministry is intentional interim ministry. And a successful succeeding rector will be incredibly thankful for hard work of an intentional interim minister.

The pot gets stirred and anxieties rise up. The intentional interim minister is trained to expect these dynamics, and then trained to manage these same anxieties, to re-direct the grief into healing, to guide us to examine and re-think our old patterns. Not everything needs to be changed, but virtually everything will benefit by reflective re-examination.