



Rev. Dr. Laura Reason with her heart, Bible, preaching stole and backpack. They are constant reminders of the transitional nature of ministry and life.

Holding on and letting go

Coming, going, and living life as an interim pastor—Rev. Dr. Laura Reason shares from her 25 years of service to 20 churches.

Rev. Dr. Laura Reason carries a black and blue backpack to the pulpit. In it are a red glass heart, a preaching stole, and the Bible she was given by First Presbyterian Church of Urbana, Ill. when she was nine-years old. She pulls the three items out; they are props she often uses in her sermon the first Sunday at a new church. As she begins her message, she declares that she will center her teaching on the Word that's found in her precious childhood gift. She acknowledges that she knows that their hearts and hers are fragile, so she covenants with the congregation that they will treat

each other with respect, kindness, and compassion. And, she vows to be their pastor only for a season, and in that season, she will pray for the wisdom and guidance needed to shepherd them well as they transition from what was, to what is and on to what will be.

Rev. Dr. Laura Reason is an interim pastor. Over the past 25 years, she has worked with 20 congregations, most often during the interim phase of their transitional journeys. Currently transitional teaching elder for the United Presbyterian Church of Peoria, Ill., Rev. Reason also has held six pastorates in Illinois and Indiana and has served the larger Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as an educational consultant, workshop leader for regional educational events, and a field site supervisor for student pastors from McCormick. For 15 years, she was preaching faculty for the Synod of Lincoln Trails Commissioned Lay Pastor Training and Continuing Education programs and moderator of the Synod School Task Force. A former trustee on McCormick's board and a former member of the Alumni Council, she works on behalf of various presbyteries' Committee on Ministry (COM), often moderating the sessions of vacant churches and serving as the COM liaison for the interim time.

“Every pastor is an interim pastor,” began Rev. Reason, (M.Div. '92, D. Min. '04). “even those who are installed and stay for 15 to 20 years will one day leave. I believe if we serve with an intentional understanding that we will one day move on, we would serve in parish ministry very differently.”

Rev. Reason didn't start out in ministry with any intentionality about being an interim pastor. Like so much of the mysterious journey called walking with God, it was a gift she had to open and explore.

“I was in my second called position,” she remembered. “It was an experimental three-year associate pastor role that had been created to help that church develop a second service in a different style. That position had a very

specific task and a timeline in which it needed to be accomplished. That's basically the charge any interim pastor has."

The interim call

After finishing that assignment, Rev. Reason began to focus on finding other interim assignments. One was found at a church in Olney, Ill. and while there, she finished writing her thesis on the pastor as teacher during interim times. In it she wrote, "An interim pastor who adopts the role of teacher can most effectively encourage the congregation's active engagement with the five tasks that are most needed during a time of transition."

Those five tasks, she noted, are engaging a congregation to come to terms with its history, discovering a new identity, allowing leadership changes, renewing denominational linkages, and committing to new directions in ministry. In this process, Rev. Reason noted, churches learn the strengths they have to build on, the dysfunction that needs to be fixed, and their mission for the next few years.

"The natural tendency of individuals and congregations is towards homeostasis," said Rev. Reason. "The natural urge of God is towards growth and transformation. The interim pastor sides with God's perspective and views every moment of life within the congregation as an occasion for education, asking the tough theological questions and trusting that the congregation will respond in kind. For some time now, I've had this thought that our greatest transgression is wanting to stay the same so much so that we work against the purposes God has for our lives through growth and change."

That thought often guides her ministry which she calls "jostling people out of places they love to settle."

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Time for change

"I once served as an interim pastor at a church that was formed in 1833 in a Chicago suburb," recalled Rev. Reason. "Many people there could trace their ancestry to founding members of that congregation."

Those founding members had had a strong missional focus and had sent missionaries to Cameroon in Africa more than 150 years before. And, then, in the early 2000s, seeds from that ministry began to sprout in that church. Immigrants from Cameroon who had attended Presbyterian churches and schools established more than a century earlier were now starting to settle near the church.

"Our members from Cameroon were wonderful, spirit-filled people and we were Presbyterians," laughed Rev. Reason. "People talked a lot about cultural differences, but there also was the need to address issues of racial discrimination. There were long-standing members in that church who had not even taken the time to learn the names of their fellow Cameroonian parishioners, who by the time I had arrived, had been worshipping with them for 10 years."

Meeting and talking and holding workshops helped the congregation lean into the need for authentic relationship, but the tipping point for relationship building came one Easter season.

"Many of our Cameroonian members were part of a women's fellowship from the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon that met once a month to worship, fellowship, study, and plan events," Rev. Reason explained. "On the third Sunday of the month, these women met at our church and their gift to us on that Sunday was to sing with our Cameroonian choir, the Douala Gospel Choir, and could they sing! It happened one year that Easter would be the third Sunday of the month. There had been some noise rising in the church about whether this combined choir should sing on an Easter Sunday. One of the choir members came to me and asked if they would be singing. I looked her right in the eye and said, 'why wouldn't you be singing? Why wouldn't you

bring joy to the most celebratory day on the Church calendar?” Our Cameroon members were a wonderful reaping of this church’s founding ministry that I couldn’t allow that to be lost.”

Honesty leads to growth

“One of the benefits of being an interim pastor,” Rev. Reason said, “is that parishioners often share information with you that they would probably never share with an installed pastor. There’s a freedom and honesty that’s needed and necessary for the growth of the church. Conversations—like the ones that came about because of the choir—helped me understand the dynamics within the church, what their norms are, and how I might best help a congregation develop behaviors that would aid authentic ministry for their future. If an interim pastor can help a congregation live out Matthew 18:15-20, and Ephesians 4:1-16, she will have done a lot. As we hold our lives and circumstances up to the light of Scripture, we find ways to communicate, serve, and worship together.”

Growing up in Urbana, Ill. to a mother who taught at a university and a father who was a doctor, Rev. Reason recalled her life being one of privilege, and also one that respected and welcomed all into her home. “My parents had eclectic friendships,” she said. “Our dinner table was often extended to allow people from every tribe and nation and social status to eat with us...we’d get to know them, and they’d get to know us. Foreign students were adopted into our family while they studied at the university.”

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When Rev. Reason celebrated her 25 years in ministry this past April, the Douala Gospel Choir, women from the Cameroon fellowship, and others from that suburban Chicago church were there to celebrate with her. There was singing in the aisles as they entered and recessed from the sanctuary. Though Rev. Reason had packed her backpack and left their congregation three years earlier, they had held on to what’s precious in the eyes of God—love for one another.

