

Canon Missioner's Presentation to Diocesan Synod: 31 July 2021



Transitional Ministry:

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven..."

Ecclesiastes 3:1

Thank you, Bishop Kevin.

Dear Members of Synod and Honored Guests, I am grateful to have the chance to address you today and to speak about the new missional initiative that has become the focus of my work in recent months.

As I was returning from maternity leave in the autumn, Bishop Kevin and I discussed missional priorities in the diocese. One of the main missional needs we identified was the ability to attract mission-minded clergy leaders into posts in the Diocese and for those clergy to feel called to remain in Diocese long term. We identified a pattern of new clergy arriving from outwith the Diocese and staying in post for about 3 years before moving on to a new call, outside of the diocese. This pattern is especially challenging for the congregations who invest spiritually and emotionally in building their vision for the Kingdom of God with clergy who, for a variety of reasons, do not feel able to stay in post, or in the Diocese, long term.

The Bishop and I discussed the fruits of the Mission Action Planning projects and the challenges inherent when churches are working hard to think and act missionally but are experiencing frequent and often prolonged vacancies. It is difficult to build momentum when changes in leadership happen frequently, and often, unexpectedly.

Before I came to Scotland 5 years ago, I received advanced training as an Intentional Interim Priest. That training was so I could serve as an intentional interim or transitional priest. Transitional Ministries in some parts of the communion include clergy who are specifically trained in leading congregations through transition serving as interim clergy or as transitional consultants to support congregations in the tasks of transition in order to prepare for a priest search and the eventual welcoming of a new priest into the community.

The Bishop has asked if I would be willing to explore Transitional Ministries in our Diocese with an aim towards creating a transitional process that could support all of our congregations during periods of clergy transition. The goal of this process would be to support congregations during clergy vacancies so they can use the time of the vacancy to experience spiritual renewal, increase congregational health, and define & focus their mission and vision BEFORE they begin their search for a new priest.

Change vs. Transition

Change

Change is the *external* situation or event, such as:

- A clergy person leaving
- A new service time/style
- Linking or unlinking congregations

Transition

Transition is the *internal*, psychological process one goes through in coping and coming to terms with the new scenario brought about through change.



The current Provincial vacancy procedures provide basic guidance for congregations in transition, but the focus is on a more “business model” of human resources hiring rather than on the work of the Holy Spirit in the Transition of our hearts, minds, souls, and church communities. The vacancy procedures focus on the nuts and bolts of CHANGE rather than the nuance and exploration of TRANSITION.

So what is the difference between change and transition?

Change is the external event or situation that takes place: a clergy person leaving, moving to a different service schedule, linking previously unlinked congregations – those are all examples of change. The church often focuses on the desired outcome that a change will produce, in response to external events. Change can happen very quickly.

Transition, on the other hand, is the inner psychological process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the new situation that the change brings about. Empathetic leaders recognize that change can put people in crisis. The starting point for dealing with transition is not the desired outcome (like the hiring of a new rector) but the endings that people have in leaving the old situation behind. Transition takes time.

Change will only be successful if leaders and congregations address the transition that people experience during change.¹

Supporting people through transition, rather than pushing forward, is essential if the change is to have a positive impact on the life of the congregation. Regardless of the impetus for change – whether it is the retirement of a beloved long-serving rector, the seemingly sudden departure of a new priest-in-charge, or a pandemic forcing all in-person worship to be suspended for an extended and undetermined length of time – focusing on supporting congregations through the transition so they can fully accept or even embrace the change is one of the keys to successful change management. There is no “going back to the way it was” – change requires that we move forward – willingly or not.

We are constantly growing and changing as individuals so it makes sense that our communities are also growing and changing. We learn new things, have new experiences, and gain more perspective with each passing day. Yet, the current vacancy procedure advises that congregations should avoid making any major changes in the interim period.

This assumes that the congregational identity was being met by the status quo and if it wasn't, the new cleric should be the one to address it whenever she or he arrives. Further, the procedure literally states that the vestry, in consultation with the Dean and/or Bishop will ascertain whether a “like for like” replacement is the way to go or if a different kind of priest would be better.

¹ William Bridges has done a lot of work in the area of organizational transition which is very useful when looking at church transitions. A basic primer on this work can be found here: <https://wmbridges.com/about/what-is-transition/>

How can we expect communities made up of beloved children of God who are constantly evolving to stand still for what could be 18 months or more while waiting for new clergy leadership?

We are a people that believe that God is constantly at work in the world today – God does not stand still.

The Myth of “Like for Like”



A focus on Transitional Ministry acknowledges the truth that we are constant in transition and that change without transition is a recipe for failure. Developing a supported Transitional Ministry Process for congregations will put supports in place to allow congregations to continue to evolve as the Spirit calls throughout the course of a vacancy.

Further, what does it even mean to ask if we should be looking for a “like for like” clergy replacement?

If you look at the image on the slide you’ll see two red apples. But if my four-year-old asks for an apple and you give her the apple on the left, she will unequivocally tell you that is NOT THE RIGHT APPLE! ...

yes, there are priests with similar skill sets, and hiring a “similar” priest might make us feel initially comfortable, but that is just another way to avoid facing the reality of change and the work of transition.

What are the Tasks of Transition?

Exploring & Coming to Terms with History	Leadership Support & Development	Connecting with Systems of Support	Discerning Identity	Committing to the Vision
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So what is the Work of Transition?

Exploring and Coming to terms with Congregational History

Congregations need to take the time to look back at where they have come from before any other work can be done. What were the fruitful periods? Were there difficult times? What were the strengths and challenges of worshipping and serving with the previous clergy person(s)? Are there feelings about past events or relationships that need to be openly aired so that we can move forward? --- Until congregations have acknowledged and come to terms with their past they cannot begin to take steps towards the future.

Leadership Support and Development

Once the congregation has explored their past it is time to take stock of the present strengths and assets available. They must explore how leadership is shared and focus on *sustainable systems of mutual ministry*. Many

churches suffer from the problem of a few people who do most of the volunteer roles. As we all know, this can lead to frustration and burn out. It's during this second stage of transition that programs and ministries are evaluated, priorities are listed, and strengths and gifts from members of the congregation are identified. If we use the gardening metaphor, we must prune the bushes in order to encourage new growth. More is not necessarily better, more is just... more.....

Connecting with Systems of Support (local, regional, diocesan, and Provincial links)

One of the blessings of being part of the Scottish Episcopal Church, is that we are connected to so many other amazing communities simply by the organizational structure of our denomination. Our churches are never in it alone because we are all part of the Diocese, the Province, and even the Anglican Communion! It's these sources of connection that brought me here to be with you. One of the things I love most about being an Episcopalian is that regardless of where I travel in the world, I can find a church where prayers that are as familiar as those written on my heart since childhood are being raised by people who want to love God with their whole heart, mind, and soul. I have found comfort in Episcopal or Anglican churches as far away as Myanmar, Honduras, Thailand, Mexico, Haiti, the United States, and yes, here in Scotland.

One of the things I've noted since coming to serve in this diocese, is that there is some trepidation about naming and claiming our Diocesan and denominational identity...

Now, that is for a variety of reasons – but the more our congregations participate in and contribute to the life of the Diocese, the more the Diocese will feel like a representation of all of us rather than an “other.” There can be no Diocese without all of us, working and worshipping and serving together. Helping churches to identify both how the Diocese can support them, AND what they have to offer the Diocese is a big part of the transitional ministry period.

Discerning Identity

Once all of this preliminary work is done, it comes time to ask the deep questions about where God is calling a church as they move forward. It is important to recognize that a historic identity does not necessarily dictate the current and future direction of a church!

Committing to the Vision

Once the congregation has done all of the work, it is time to move forward – to walk the walk... To create a profile that embraces the vision compiled from all of the prayer, soul searching, healing, etc... seeking the priest who is called to walk with the congregation into this new horizon.



A Word on the “Elephants”

None of our churches are perfect.... *I know! Shocking to hear.* But oftentimes we try to avoid addressing the elephants in the church, especially during a vacancy, but we constantly assume that with time or the right leadership it will just go away. It's easier to just ignore conflicts and challenges rather than facing them head on.

One of the major challenges, and benefits of Transitional Ministry is that we strive to not only acknowledge but to address the “Elephants in the Church” so that a new priest coming in is welcomed into a healthy church that is experiencing renewal – spiritually, relationally, organizationally, and operationally.

If we continually welcome new clergy leadership into congregations without addressing known challenges prior to their arrival, we are effectively hiring clergy to be transitional priests who are, by the very definition, **TEMPORARY!**

It is a rare thing to welcome a new employee into a system that is stuck and to have them both break through the blockage and then move forward with the system into a new phase of prosperity. If clergy are hired into situations that claim to be one thing on paper only to discover a whole different scenario when they arrive, it is exceedingly difficult to expect them to feel the same call to the reality as they may have felt to the narrative that had been presented.

Open and honest Transitional Ministry is hard work – it requires looking into a mirror and deciding if we accept what we see, or if there is work we want to do to change the appearance before going out to face the world.

Transitional Ministry Pilot



Small, Community Focused, Dependent Congregation



Small, Fellowship Focused, Self-supporting Congregation



Mid-sized, Mission Focused Partial-supporting Congregation



The Bishop asked me to spend the next year focusing on building a transitional ministry process that could be used by the whole diocese. As a result, in March I began ministry with the former Heartland Group of churches in Bridge of Weir, Kilmacolm, and Port Glasgow. The reason he chose this group for this ministry is because the three congregations represent different types of churches which are representative of a variety of places around the diocese. If we are to be successful in building a process, we need to build one that is scalable and can be used regardless of size, geographical location, financial resources, etc...

As a denomination we do not have the resources to allocate a full-time Transitional Priest to every vacancy – so part of this pilot is to explore a variety of different methods for supporting congregations in transition. Some may need a dedicated transitional priest while others may need a trained transitional consultant and still others may need something different.

I don't have the ability to see into the future to determine what the best process will be, what I do know is that it needs to take into consideration the unique makeup of the diocese as a whole.

It is important to also note that the Province is reviewing vacancy procedures and is also exploring what Transitional Ministry could look like on a larger scale. I am participating in a panel convened by Bishop Andrew exploring best practices.



How is Focus on Transitional Ministry Related to Mission?



In order to successfully engage in mission we need to attract and welcome missional leaders, both clergy and lay, who feel called and equipped to bring us forward into the new era of hybrid church in a post-Christendom, post-pandemic world.....

We need to raise up those missional leaders who are already here doing the good work of God in Christ. We need to support clergy who are leading change in their congregations as incumbents and provide support, training, and resources to those congregations as they go through the stages of transition in following the call of the Spirit with the guidance of their prayerful leaders.

While the current pilot is focused on congregations in vacancy, Transitional Ministry is an area of ministry that can and should incorporate a focus on all types of changes and transition we experience as Disciples in our walks of faith. Starting with work in vacancies will, over time, allow us to expand the focus of Transitional Ministry to support everyone around the Diocese.

Supporting congregations as they walk through periods of vacancy addressing the crucial questions of history, identity, and calling will enable us to conduct thoughtful and collaborative search processes that depend on the Holy Spirit's wisdom and guidance.

I honestly believe the clergy person who IS CALLED to each of the vacant charges in our Diocese is out there just waiting to hear the gentle stirrings of the Holy Spirit pointing them in our direction. But those calls will only be heard if, with the help of God, we engage in a TRANSFORMATIONAL process of Transitional Ministry.

Thank you.

The Rev. Canon Audrey O'Brien Stewart
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 Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway
 31 July 2021