

Transitional Ministry: Future Ministry for an Evolving Church

Thank you Bishop Kevin.

Dear members of Synod and honoured guests, it is my privilege to speak to you about the ways God has been moving within my remit as your Canon Missioner.

As the Bishop noted, with much fanfare, at our last Synod - I have spent the past year working in the Heartland Group in Port Glasgow, Kilmacolm, and Bridge of Weir doing transitional ministry as we work towards hiring a new priest for that group of charges.

And, as all good things that happen within the context of the structures of Episcopal Church, it is taking longer than projected – yet not longer than I anticipated.

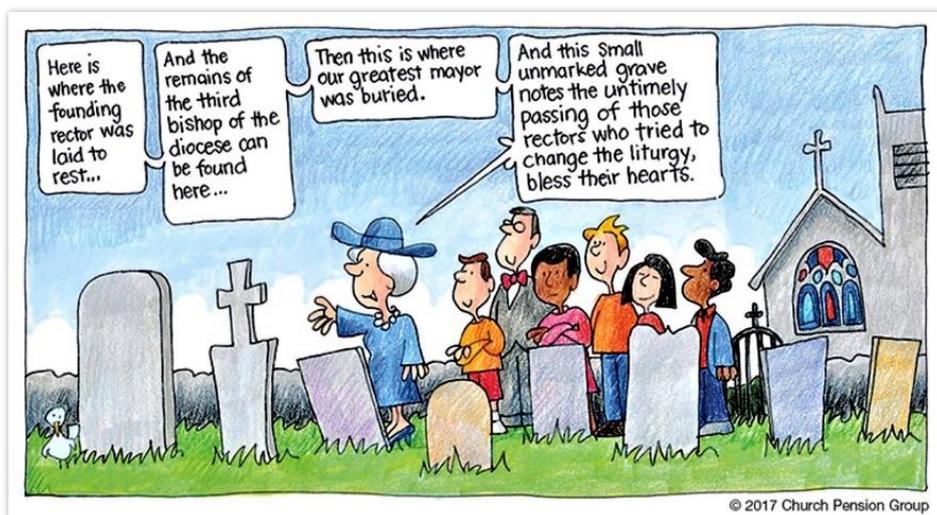
Why is it that the Holy Spirit doesn't punch a time clock? Or at least communicate her plans in a clear and concise dialogue so that we know what we can expect?

I'm not surprised that work is still ongoing in the Heartland group. I am, however, thrilled to tell you that the vestries of the three charges have made tremendous strides. They voted to remain linked, but as a missional linkage rather than merely a financial partnership.

As a result of this choice they made, the vestries then elected a team to work together to write a new Heartland Agreement which states their vision as a group and outlines how they will work together liturgically, missionally, and financially. The decision to link was theirs. The agreement they have written is theirs.

The work I am doing in the Heartland Group is deliberately led in a way that raises up voices from the church. It is not my job to tell them how to operate, it is my job to support them in following Christ as they hear the call.

They are now ready to begin working on their profiles.



Change is hard. We all know this. The past two years have thrown the church into change without any time for Transition. We have been forced to alter most aspects of both our personal lives and the ways we worship, out of necessity. As we enter our third pandemic Lent we are all tired and all hoping to do things the way we used to... but there are also questions about whether things will every go back and if they should.

We are all in need of transitional ministry support.



A couple of weeks ago, Canon Gordon Fyfe, Rev. Kirstin Freeman, and I attended the final stage of the inaugural Provincial Transitional Ministry training course up at Kinnoull. We spent a couple of days with colleagues from around the Province who have similarly been asked by their bishops to explore Transitional Ministries in their church contexts.

The individuals who gathered shared the common understanding that transitional ministry is needed in all church settings – not just those in interregnum.

From our diocese alone we had myself – a priest serving in an intentional interregnum period of transitional ministry, Canon Gordon a priest called into a new incumbency after the sudden departure of a beloved priest, and Rev. Kirstin who has been called as the incumbent to a historic consolidated charge and as the priest in charge at a neighbouring dependent, yet energetic church. There are transitional ministry needs in all of our settings, but the goals and projected outcomes are vastly different.

Transitional Ministry is not a niche form of ministry only for select charges who have specific needs during a clergy vacancy. Transitional Ministry is a form of training that helps leaders, both lay and ordained, to navigate change in church communities.

The Province is planning another cohort for an upcoming transitional ministry course. Bishop Andrew attended the final night at Kinnoull to hear from us about our experiences in the course and in transitional ministry so that the Province can learn how best to support those working in transitional ministry and how we can equip leaders to deploy into churches to assist with transitions in faithful ways.



One of the main learnings we are experiencing on a diocesan level is that we need to find ways of sharing the insights from Transitional Ministry trainings and concepts with all leaders in our diocese so we may respond to the external and inevitable changes we are constantly facing following the example of Christ on the boat during the storm.

While the long term goal is to share the learnings of Transitional Ministry across the board, I remain mindful that Bishop Kevin has charged me with a specific focus on Transitional Ministry within the context of interregnum periods.

As the bishop noted in his charge to Synod, the Dean and bishop have developed a process for supporting vestries through the process of writing their profiles, creating their video profiles, and interviewing candidates. My remit with Transitional Ministry in the context of churches in interregnum is the work that comes both before that stage and, potentially, in preparation for the arrival of a new priest.

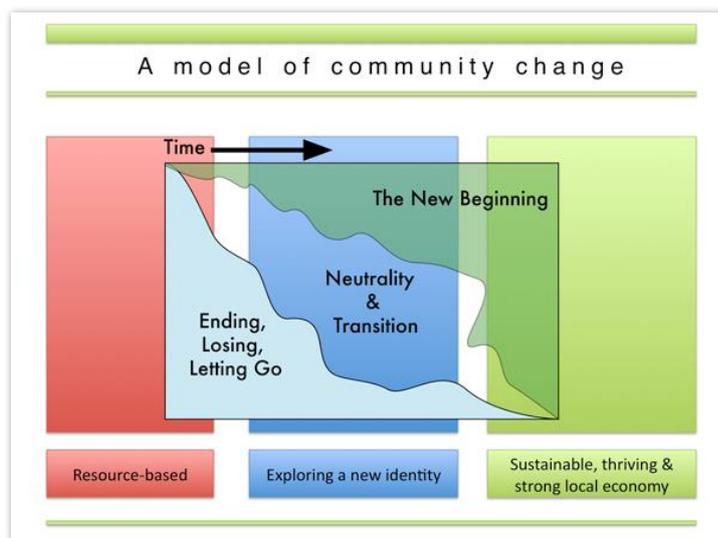
What the past year of intentional Transitional Ministry in the Heartland Group has solidified in my mind thus far is that we cannot put together a "one size fits all" transition road map for all charges. We need to create a process that allows interregnum periods to become supported periods for brave conversations, visioning, and discernment. We need to move away from the preference to quickly move towards advertising without taking time to absorb the endings and imagine the new beginnings.

When communities or individuals facing change rush forward without taking time to explore how the change affects them, not only what the change takes away but also what opportunities it might create – the community is more likely to remain in a static posture. Trying to find a leader who will allow them to continue on their path without challenging assumptions or striving to make waves.

While we might like to pretend that interregnum periods would be faster if we just pushed forward, the truth of the matter is – pre-pandemic the average vacancy for a charge was 18 months. That's the average – some were shorter and some were (and are) considerably longer.

Transitional ministry doesn't extend a vacancy unnecessarily.

Transitional ministry supports congregations in using their vacancy to listen deeply for the future towards which God is calling the church.



identity in a way that enables them to share Christ in their community as their authentic selves.

Change for the sake of change is not a good thing. Nor is stagnation for the sake of comfort or consistency.

Transitional Ministry isn't about turning communities into something they are not.

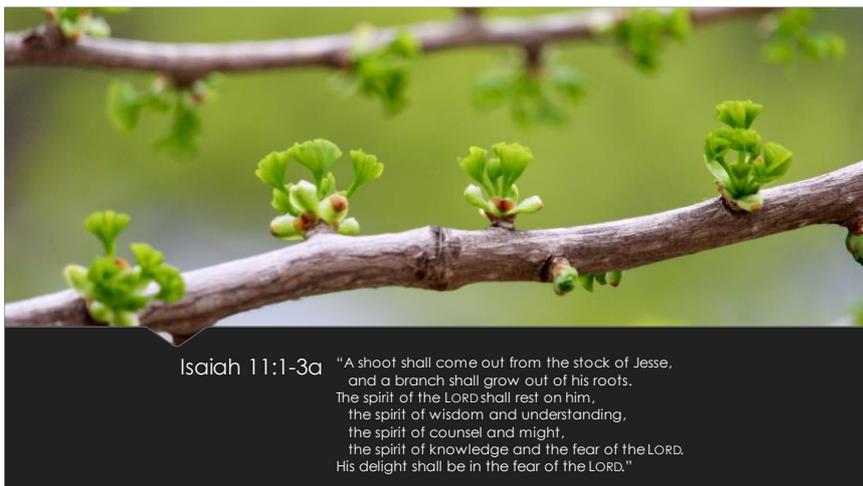
Transitional Ministry is about helping communities explore their identity in a way that honours the past and looks towards the future. It is about helping communities to own their God-given

There are numerous models of transitional ministry that I am exploring as I prepare to move from this intensive period of work in the Heartland Group into a phase of working with Diocesan leadership to design a supportive process for interregnums throughout the diocese. We are at an exciting transitional period as a Diocese.

I love this time of year. Earlier this week I spent some time in my garden cleaning away the dropped leaves and dead branches to make room for the growth that comes in Spring. The most exciting thing I discovered is that I might not have killed my cherry tree!

Last summer, in a fit of problem solving, I quickly grabbed a shovel and dug my beloved cherry tree up and replanted it in a different location in our garden. You see, our neighbours on the other side of our fence pointed out that the tree that was barely a sapling when I planted it 6 years ago, was now casting a shadow across their deck.

A few weeks after my rash moment of agricultural ... my tree looked very sad. It was dropping miscoloured leaves and generally looking quite sad.



Only then did I google search the best conditions in which to transplant a cherry tree:

- I discovered that cherry trees like good drainage (that is probably why it was thriving planted at the top of our sloped garden on top of the drainage ditch.)
- I learned that Cherry Trees should only be transplanted when they are dormant. (I completed this replanting in the height of summer.)
- I learned that cherry trees need to be dug to a depth twice as deep as the tree is high.... So my 6 foot tree was probably less than impressed with the 18 inch root ball I provided...

You get the picture. I moved my cherry tree in the wrong season, to the wrong soil, with no preparation and expected it to thrive.

I changed everything about my tree's environment with no work to ensure it was ready to make the transition successfully. I wish I could say this irony were merely a good illustration for this presentation... but that would be a lie.

It is an honest to God miracle that there are tiny buds on my tree's bare branches. I don't know if it will make it in the long run, but I resisted the urge to dig it up and find a better spot; instead allowing it to adjust to the big change it has already weathered.

Our Church and our Province are working to be better stewards of our transitions than I am with the plant life in my garden. The entire Province is focusing on how we support congregations in Transition as they listen for the still small voice of God while simultaneously making space to adjust to the inevitable changes experienced in the day to day lives of vibrant communities of faith.

I am proud of the missional focus Bishop Kevin has set before us and grateful to everyone who has been so generous with their participation in the Heartland Transitional Ministry Pilot – especially the members of the congregations at St. Mary's Bridge of Weir, St. Fillan's Kilmacolm, and St. Mary's Port Glasgow.

The work we are doing today is going to shape the future for all of our congregations.

Making space to hear the call of the Holy Spirit is at the core of our identity as Christians and it is at the heart of the work of Transitional Ministry.

I remain grateful that God has called me to serve as your Canon Missioner and that this call has resulted in the opportunity to engage in this prayerful and complex work, together.

Thank you.