

An Interim Ministry Primer (Part 1)

- *Ronald D. Pogue*

We have been together now for three months. This time has given me opportunities to become acquainted with so many of the wonderful people, fascinating stories, and remarkable resources of Christ Church Cranbrook. I'm beginning to "connect the dots."

As we enter a new year, it is now time for us to enter a new and more intentional time of transitional work. In the weeks ahead, I will be inviting members of the parish and the community to join me in some holy conversations. Before I do that, I thought it might be helpful to go into more detail about interim ministry and the work we are called to do together.

Many Christians in North America have heard of the Alban Institute.

The Alban Institute was founded in 1974 as a major resource for American congregations facing the challenges of a changing society. While today's challenges are even more pressing than they were three decades ago, the opportunities have never been clearer for congregations to be vital communities of faith, health, and leadership. Alban stands at the forefront of knowledge and experience regarding congregational vitality and positive trends across denominations and faith traditions. Our work is helping shape the strong congregations of tomorrow.

(Alban Institute website)

Fewer people know that the founder of the Alban Institute was an Episcopal Priest named Loren B. Mead. And even fewer people know what Loren Mead was doing in the five years leading up to the founding of the Alban Institute.

From 1969 until the end of 1974, Loren Mead managed an experiment in the Episcopal Church named "Project Test Pattern." The unusual name of the project was inspired by the test patterns that television stations used to run on the screen prior to start of the daily programs. In that test pattern, Mead thought, there was a kind of hopefulness and anticipation about what was about to happen.

The project, in the words of Presiding Bishop John Hines, who recruited Loren Mead for its leadership, was "to make parishes grow and get better." In his book, *A Change of Pastors*, Dr. Mead describes three very important results of the program:

- They concluded that in *every* congregation they worked with, the relationship between the clergyperson and the lay leadership team was the critical relationship in the congregation. Dr. Mead said the stories people told defined the eras of congregational life "as if it occurred in terms of dynasties" and the "dynasties" were named for the pastors. They described the quality of a period of time in their church's story by identifying the characteristics, both positive and negative, they attached to particular pastoral leaders.
- They discovered that when the congregation went through a change of the leading member of the clergy, there was a rare moment at which change could happen. In Dr. Mead's words, "We learned that that was when change would happen, powerfully, not matter what - and that the change could go either toward health or toward dysfunction."

- They learned that people remember that when there is a change in pastoral leaders, all the other things changed as well. "In people's memories," writes Mead, "times of changing pastors remind them of the times when 'everything' changed. It may just be a trick of memory, but that's what happens. As people look back at their congregation's story, it was when the pastor left and another came that one kind of story ended and another began."

(Loren B. Mead, *A Change of Pastors: and how it affects change in the congregation*, The Alban Institute, 2005)

"Project Test Pattern" was the beginning of the crucial learning about how a change in pastoral leadership prompts "a particularly critical change point in the dynamics of a congregation." That research was further developed in the Alban Institute and eventually led to the founding of the Interim Ministry Network, which trains clergy to lead congregations through those transitions.

That continuing research led to the discovery that approximately sixty percent of all churches suffer from serious difficulties involving change and the time of transition that could affect their congregational health. For that reason, interim clergy are trained to help congregations explore how they are dealing with change, particularly in five critical areas of congregational life. Those five areas are related to the five most common difficulties congregations have in responding to change during transitions in senior clergy:

- They are disconnected from their history
- They have not developed an identity that fits their current circumstances
- There is a need for some shifts in church leadership
- Their links to their denomination have been weakened
- They have not made a commitment to a new future or redefined purpose

Because of these five areas of difficulty, one or more of which are frequently discovered during transitions, the Five Developmental Tasks emerged. These five tasks are the intentional and necessary work of the congregation during transition between senior clergy. The work is often difficult, sometimes painful, and always requires time. However, when the work is intentionally and prayerfully done, the results provide the context for a healthy and fruitful new era of mission with a new spiritual leader. They are:

1. Coming to Terms with History

It is necessary for congregations to know their history so that they can appreciate their heritage and to be aware of issues and concerns that need to be resolved in order to move into the future.

2. Discovering a New Identity

Identity is the task of understanding "who we are now in our present context and what it is we understand God is calling us to be." It is the prayerful work of discerning the vision God has for the congregation.

3. Managing Changes in Power/Leadership

In most congregations over a period of time the leadership begins to take on much of the style and values of previous clergy. When a rector leaves, there is often a time when those who have been in leadership rethink their commitment and determine whether or not they want to continue

in those leadership roles. Others often find the interim time an opportunity to accept leadership. This provides an opportunity to welcome leadership gifts from all parts of the congregation.

4. Strengthening Denominational Relations

Congregations often are not aware of the support and resources they receive from the diocese and the wider Church. That relationship becomes more visible while the structures of the church beyond the congregation are working with the congregation during the transition period and seeking to find the right leader to call. The transition time helps raise the awareness of a congregation to its denominational heritage, ministries, and resources.

5. Committing to New Leadership and to a New Future

When a congregation has developed a shared vision of its future and has sought to call a rector to help lead it into that future, there needs to be a commitment both to the new leader and to that new future.

I appreciate your taking the time to read this material and pray that it will give you a broader perspective on the work we will be doing together in this time of transition. I also hope you will participate as fully as possible in the opportunities we will have to explore the great potential of this time in the life and mission of Christ Church Cranbrook.