

## **Integrative Learning Experience**

**The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue**  
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### **What I want to learn:**

I want to learn how the visioning/strategic planning process is different in congregations that are in transition between pastors.

### **The experience:**

This project is undertaken in preparation for my first interim assignment and, therefore, is not the actual experience of guiding the process. I started with the process I have developed and used as a pastor. Then, I examined the literature and presentations from the 3-day and 5-day IMN training. The book, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*, by Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, was especially helpful. I also interviewed several experienced interim pastors from my tradition to learn from their experience and observations. Insights gained from my research are woven into the process that emerged.

### **Observations:**

My past strategic planning experience has been in congregations where I was the settled pastor. In those settings, there was an organizational model and governance structure in place that was familiar to me. As I thought through the process, it occurred to me that as an interim pastor I would be attempting to plan within a variety of systems, some of which may need to reorganize after the process and some of which may not have much organization to begin with. In either case, the planning process will be revealing. Once you have determined what needs to be done, you have to figure out a delivery system that is appropriate to a particular community with its particular gifts, personalities, and mission field.

### **Learning:**

The planning process itself is largely the same in a church in transition. As Evelyn Hornaday pointed out, what is really different is the interim. I am approaching the process with more objectivity and less at stake than has been the case when I was the settled pastor. More of my focus is on helping the church to work through the process and make decisions that will not have any lasting impact on me because I will be “self-fired,” as George Martin expresses it. The other significant difference is that planning in a transitional setting needs to be for a shorter term in order to give the new pastor the fullest opportunity to get settled and then oversee a new planning process that will include the unique stamp of her or his ministry. I also have a new appreciation for the value of holy conversation as a spiritual practice and approach to strategic planning.

### **Theological Implications:**

David had planned to build a Temple for God. He was not permitted to do that. Instead, he prepared his son, Solomon, to succeed him in leading the people and to have the resources to build the Temple. Solomon was able to take the plans his father had laid and add those things that would be needed in order for him to fulfill the task. Saint Paul planned and taught and counseled, but he was wise enough to remember that he would be replaced by others who would carry on the work he had begun. He wrote, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” (I Cor. 3:6) Also, as I thought about my role as a planner or leader of planning, it dawned on me that what we are trying to do is to let God’s plan emerge through our discernment. So, although effective planning in a church in transition between pastors does involve a different approach than in a church with a settled pastor, the primary aim of finding God’s plan is the same.

### **Integrative Link:**

I believe thinking through this question has led me to a greater ability to self-differentiate myself in my ministry. That allows me more freedom to facilitate and engage in conversations with more attention to the interests of the other parties and the interests of God and less attention to my own needs, opinions, or wishes. I feel better equipped to help people communicate with each other and be opened to the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they attempt to envision the future God has in mind for them.