

INTERIM LEADERSHIP & RESTORATIVE PRACTICE: SORTING THROUGH THE PAST, DESCRIBING THE PRESENT, AND PREPARING FOR A NEW MINISTER

By Bill Bickle

If you've stepped into Interim Minister positions, you'll likely have experienced faith communities that get stuck in the past, either because they want to return to the glory years, or because they can't get past an unresolved conflict. You're likely also to have witnessed churches that won't, or can't, deal with their issues and just roll on through to creating their plan – "we need a really good preacher and someone who can attract young families, and ideally create a Sunday School with a hundred kids in it".

Restorative Practice (RP) balances the past, present and future. It is designed to deal with conflict that may exist, gain a sense of where the congregation finds itself, and make decisions about how to move forward well together. A healthy, restorative community can name and deal with its issues deliberately and safely, and then articulate a shared sense of how to move forward. It increases the probability that faith communities will avoid getting mired down in rehashing the past over and over again. It also minimizes the risk of jumping too quickly to the "fix", or moving past the hurt and pain of past issues before people are ready to move on.

FaithCARE has found while working with congregations and Interim Ministers during interim periods, that the ability to deal with the past, or tell the congregation's story is fundamental to moving forward in healthy ways. We've also found that developing a plan for how to move forward is enhanced by using Restorative Practice to:

- frame the community's discernment process
- choose a shared sense of forward direction
- articulate what kind of minister would be a good fit.

In other words, by gaining a good sense of the faith community's story and direction, they are in a better position to describe who they are, where they're headed, and what skills & attributes an incoming leader would need to work well with them.

This concept of working 'with' is another foundational element of Restorative Practice: a 'with' leader has high challenge or expectations and provides plenty of support for meeting the expectations. Describing the gifts and attributes of the congregation and casting a sense of vision can go a long way to detailing the kind of leader the church feels would be a good fit. Even recognizing that "fit" is preferable to "the ideal candidate" can help shape realistic expectations.

Another key element in Restorative Practice is Fair Process in Decision Making. This means that people feel they've been heard, everyone knows how a decision has been reached, and the way forward as a result of the decision has been communicated. Even if people don't get their desired outcome they feel they've been heard and their voice has been valued. Then, and only then can they understand how the decision was made and how to go forward. The result is that they are more likely to engage and buy in.

Dealing with a conflict or harm may be a critical blockage that needs work before a faith community can start moving forward. Some groups may wish to tell their story with warts and all, figure out their shared sense of mission & ministry, and plot a way forward together.

An Interim Minister using Restorative Practice skills and tools with a congregation will find this work fits the role of guiding the congregation through the transition from one minister to the next. It will bring structure to the needed conversations, deal with past hurts and issues, and move the group ahead so it doesn't get stuck in the past. Too frequently congregations get bogged down in current or unresolved conflicts, enter into power struggles, and find it difficult – or nearly impossible – to gain consensus about how to move forward together. Unhealthy situations are characterized by competing factions, people taking sides, people coming back from long absences to re-insert themselves, and arguments over just about everything.

Regardless of the faith community's relational health, it can be enhanced. Restorative Practice is all about relationships, restoring them, and helping them not break down during times of anxiousness or conflict. There is a growing sense that it is during these unsettled periods that good work can be done in the soul searching and discernment. While an interim period may not be viewed as a time for growth or development, it may be just the time to stop, take stock, assess what has been fruitful ministry, and gain a potentially new sense of direction. This work takes time and shouldn't be rushed; leaping from one minister to another can negate the potential for this important work together.

Faith communities regularly find the competing voices and competing priorities can overwhelm the planning process. The loudest or most persistent person can win the day, and prioritizing can be lost in folklore and unrealistic dreams.

As an example, FaithCARE has worked with two historically large churches over the last two years to work through conflict and come to a new way of being, a new way of being together (or 'with' one another). At the end of every meeting, from the very first information session through listening circles to the deep conflict facilitations, every single meeting has ended with the following two questions:

- 1) What do you need to move forward?
- 2) What are you willing to do to move the church forward?

Note the shift from needs to accountability. Following months of gathering the answers to these questions, the leadership had a sense of what people need and were willing (able) to accomplish, or contribute. Synthesizing the list down into a series of three or four strategic areas helped the congregations see a course start to emerge and they know the pathway has come from their work together, not from the consultant or the Interim Minister. This integrated ownership is a good starting place for an action plan because it has come from the people in restorative conversations, and they've had ample opportunity to speak into the process. And in a safe environment where trust has been growing over the months.

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