

# When Bridges Collapse

Rev. Jack Damien

There is a painful epiphany when attempts at a healthy transition collapse. The collapse, like the crumbling of a bridge, magnifies the systemic strain on the church or synagogue. It compounds the injury to the people and leadership. It eventually sours into defamation and accusations aimed at the parent denomination, diocese, synod, or convention.

The bridge was envisioned to connect the “vacant” congregational period with the installation of a new “called” minister or rabbi, where everyone was left smiling, blessed, and content. But the bridge fractured.

When an interim ministry period fails to produce major healthy results, there are usually one or more suspects to choose from:

1. Overall unawareness by all parties of the complexity of an intentional interim process.
2. Ministers tossed into the mix who lack a solid grip on enacting transformation.
3. Churches lacking the courageous will to see a transition through to a successful end.
4. Judicatories wrestling with implementing effective transformation in a time of scarcity.

## **Bones of the Skeleton**

Overall, the “skeletal framework” that formerly guided many denominations in defining and implementing transformation has now become antiquated in meeting evolving needs. The intriguing creature we called a “faith community” decades ago is now expanding into a new life form that is far more complex, and the bones of the old skeleton just don’t offer enough support anymore.

Take the pulse of the key players in times of transformation, and see where they are strained.

Denominations - clearly admitting that the time stretch for getting a congregation a called pastor, rabbi or deacon is increasing. Fewer ministers are coming out of seminary or alternate training venues aiming for parish work. More ministers are retiring earlier. More faith communities are on the verge of anticipated partnerships, mergers, or closure.

Bishops and judicatory staff - just plain exhausted. Their resources are stretched thin. An increasing percentage of congregations are in a time of transition, yet they lack finances to afford full-time interims. The judicatory support staff has only so many players to fill the vacant slots of ministry. Bishops scramble to meet needs, and some are just beginning to learn about the full nature, depth and scope of trained intentional interim ministry, and its value to congregations needing serious intervention.

Congregations - balking at the demands of an intentional phase of transitional ministry. They would rather “just get on with it,” take the shortcut to the stage of voting on a candidate, and then get back to having a regular minister/priest in the pulpit, more members returning to the pews, and an adjacent spike in financial giving.

Clergy - lacking the training needed to fully grasp the complexity of establishing insightful developmental tasks, focus areas, and transition teams. They have limited experience in dealing with grief work, conflict management, or setting visions. Sometimes, they take the position that any congregation awaiting a called minister should resign themselves to taking any minister available, especially when choices are limited in a tight market.

### **Tough Truths**

It's hard for many religious leaders to admit that transitional efforts are collapsing, or never even got off the ground. Many others loudly lament the bind they are in to strategize successful transitional ministry.

The global pandemic is in its third year, despite varying opinions on its current intensity, and that has tempted many congregational members to lower their expectations for a dynamic church outlook and expanded community services. They expect little, and they get little.

Local leaders of many congregations now endure a curtailed vision and imagination, especially when their congregations are panicking and trying to keep their community in a sustainable mode, where simply being able to pay the light bill and keep the doors open are now paramount goals. They don't want major transformation. They're just trying to keep what they've already got.

Such congregations can make it difficult to be a productive and effective intentional interim today, according to the Rev. Dr. Alicia Alexis, interim rector at St. Titus' Episcopal Church in Durham, NC, and vice president of the board of directors of the Interim Ministries in the Episcopal Church (IMEC).

"There are times when the congregational system will not allow the intentional interim to do the needed work, or to implement the kind of work that involves essential changes to the system," Alexis said. "There are times when the church's system is broken, but the members are not open to new possibilities. They want to battle with the interim, and say, 'Don't touch things. Don't change things,' even if it would improve the health and vitality of their congregation."

The implications of all those truths put together are chilling.

### **We Are Transitioning During a Time of Transition**

Faith communities need to take a longer look at what can be accomplished today in times of transition. But we need to use new lenses to do that, because we've never seen such times as these.

Our overarching new "normal" is that we are now transitioning in a time of transition.

The scale is epic, both globally, and among US churches. It's a wheel within a wheel. It makes intentional interim ministry far more complicated and risky today, since the stakes are getting higher, and the ground rules of the game are shifting.

### **Opening Our Eyes**

To carry off a healthy transition, we must open new road maps. We have to scout out the lay of the land that we have never walked on before. That is often frustrating work. Where is the compass to

point to exactly which direction we should take? Where are the landmarks to inspire us that we are on the right path? Where are the signposts that confirm that others have successfully made the trek, and found their new homes?

Interims will often need to throttle back on any “pre-packaged” grand visions they have for what will be accomplished at their ministry site. These times are so uncertain, the national news is so volatile, generational identifications with religion and faith are in such flux, and the financial ground beneath faith communities is so tentative, that flexibility is demanded more than ever.

We don't walk on concrete today, as much as we walk on sand.

That means the interim will acknowledge that mistakes will be made. That's just par for the course of advancing to something new. That means congregants will need to rely more than ever on the training, experience, and instincts of the interim minister. That means that the final destination may actually not be the place that the congregation first set out to reach.

### **Enduring the Pain**

We have to steel ourselves in these times. What was a fairly straight-forward enterprise decades ago in interim ministry, is now an extraordinarily complex model, with many new layers of issues to deal with, amidst a society that is generally turning to self-justification, single-issue decision making, and virulent defensiveness when one's position is perceived as attacked. It hurts to be a minister today. It costs.

The Barna Group, in a 2022 survey of US ministers considering leaving full-time work, said the top two causes were increasingly high levels of stress, and a haunting sense of isolation. It was not the salary, vacation time, or full medical coverage that were the breaking points. It was an “internal” battle in the clergy.

Our strength, identity and persistence need to come from within – from balanced emotions, lucid reasoning, and a solid faith. From our wholeness as human beings, we can help to bring wholeness to others.

Then we can model to the congregation a consecration to the sacred transitional task, Rev. Dr. Alexis added.

“An interim can go in with the mindset that they alone can accomplish this work,” she said. “They play the game of ‘Father knows best’ or ‘Mother knows best.’ But don't go only on your own strength. Lean on the work of the Spirit. Nourish your heart. Model to the people what is the ‘Good News.’ Worship the Creator. Everything should be steeped in prayer. Model that for the people.”

Moses modeled such intensity of dedication as an “interim” leader. He was refined in the fire of a pilgrimage to a new land, leading a dysfunctional and grumbling community. He raised the tabernacle of worship. He was steeped in prayer. He stumbled, but got back up again. He left Egypt, then never looked back. He set his eyes on his people. He set his eyes on the Lord. He set his eyes on their future. He endured.

## **Dealing With the Fallout**

When a bridge collapses, interim ministers, congregational leaders, and synod staff need to clarify their role in the collapse. Such events are rarely a single-source incident.

Interims need to be honest enough to name deficiencies in their commitment to resolving thorny issues, working with difficult people, analyzing a congregation's family dynamics, and other such vital tasks. This is not an exercise in self-condemnation, but a simple admission that they are human, and everyone grows in stages.

Transparency will be needed. That involves vulnerability. It fosters accountability and self-actualization. When people sense that you are being clear with them, it strengthens their resolve to be clear with you. When they conclude that you are hiding essential truths, they feel excluded, and are tempted to fill in the blanks with their own suppositions and rumors. Unchecked, that can spiral into hostility, mistrust, and disdain, which ultimately propels the collapse of the bridge.

Dave Miles, in an article in VitalChurch Ministry, [vitalchurchministry.org](http://vitalchurchministry.org), says that in the midst of the current world-wide uproar, the interim minister needs to emphasize honesty.

"Tell the truth...period!" Miles said. "Don't lie. And don't pretend you know what is going on, when you really don't know what's going on. Leaders who regularly lie, fudge on the truth, or mislead out of ignorance, will find it increasingly difficult to lead in times of crisis. When crisis hits, the line between civility and barbarity is thinner than most of us think."

Interims will need to resist being ensnared in the laments and accusations of the congregation when things start falling apart. They need to maintain adequate boundaries that define where their responsibility ended, and what was the congregation's responsibility to work through. This means having a solid foundation of self-awareness, and having a clear set of guidelines, hopefully spelled out in a written contract on mutual expectations, before the interim ministry was launched.

Judicatory should be clearly informed of the flow of events, and their outcome. That means working with the staff as a team, and keeping them in the loop on major events, both positive, or detrimental. That builds trust on all sides. It helps them to better prepare the appropriate slate of candidates they send to the congregation, and to alert the candidates to issues still brewing at the site.

Embattled and scared interims will especially need to covenant with other interims as they reach closure of their ministry. They can't make it alone. They never could.

## **Accepting the Collapse**

When the bridge-building efforts of an intentional interim ministry crash into the waters, there is no pretense or denial that will make all things right again. A collapse is a collapse.

It means the congregation will likely stagger into a cloudy tomorrow, angry at its past, anxious about its future, and frustrated that things did not go smoothly.

It means the incoming “called” pastor will have to do some clean-up work, and will need to clearly assess their role in the continuing saga of congregational life.

It means there will be no congregational vote that will magically make all things better, no enlightened interim insights that will erase the people’s grief, and no easy way to end this article so the reader can finally say, with elevated expectation, “You had us worried. Now – give us a happy ending.”

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