

# Deciphering “Not My Circus, Not My Monkeys” Rev. Jack Damien

Are you a monkey, a ring master, or a ticket holder?

An oft-heard idiom of intention interim ministers, usually stated in the midst of congregational uproar, is the popular, “Not my circus, not my monkeys!”

Sources say the colorful phrase is of Polish origin. The original wording went something like “Not my cows and not my horses.” It meant that one farmer was not responsible for another farmer’s livestock. But when expanded to monkeys in a circus, it meant that a certain crisis or event was not under a person’s control, and it was not their responsibility to resolve it.

## **Let’s All Go to the Circus**

Intentional interims often use this mantra-like phrase to delineate themselves in the midst of a heated crisis or stage of growth in a church or synagogue. It’s a benchmark to express which things must be forcefully addressed by the interim and which ones should stay in the hands of the people to resolve. It’s a practice of good congregational health.

To help us gain clarity on when it is or when is not our time to enter an issue or conflict, let’s dissect this colorful phrase and then use the results to narrow down the times we could best choose to enter or exit conflict in a productive way.

Let’s consider three main characters to make our point, but let’s expand those characters to an extreme level to make our conclusions very clear. The three main characters under the circus tent are: a ring master, a monkey, and a ticket holder.

## **Carrying a Whip**

Let’s begin. First, imagine that you carry a whip into the next meeting of the council, elders, deacons, or board of directors! For some interims, that is a tantalizing prospect, at least in thought.

This first character you play is the Ring Master. This one wears a distinctive gold and red tailcoat, with a black top hat, and enters the tent with a flourish (imagine a festive robe, alb, or chasuble). They are the big top’s dominate player, and direct the audience’s attention to the monkey show.

This character, as an interim, has an underlying assumption that it is the primal nature of a “Trained Intentional Interim” to put the monkeys through some tough, and even

dangerous work, before the arrival of the called pastor. This may be transitional work that is long overdue because the congregation ignores its pain, denies its grief, or hides from critical issues. “Let’s not bring up that old stuff. Let’s just move ahead.” But the interim believes that the incoming called pastor will be grateful for their accomplishments if they dive into deep waters right away, so they enter congregational life to shake things up.

Some interims take this position from the moment they enter the pulpit. They scan the horizon for fault lines, pits of a current trauma, a fermenting crisis, or any pending disaster. They crack their whip, charge into the foray, and what happens, happens.

In other words, they believe that the poor monkeys need someone strong and bold to save them. Interims are the divine “fixer” who will set things right. The tragedy is that, while seeking to do good, they end up cutting off responsible collaboration with their lay leaders, alienating the flock, and making every issue or crisis a do-or-die battleground on which they must win.

That obsession to “fix” the church or synagogue leads interims to ignore paramount issues, such as function, covenants, empowerment, and boundaries. And when interims sense that the people don’t have the “good sense” to take their sound advice, they end up hurt, exasperated, or angry.

Then they crack the whip even harder.

### **Growing a Tail**

Another character option is that you grow a tail and become a monkey. Yes, go primate, which is actually a category of an intelligent and very sociable mammal. Totally enmesh yourself in the conflict of a congregation.

You hear the congregation howling in a pit of turmoil, and so you jump into the monkey pit with them and start howling. You align yourself so closely that you lose the distinction between interim and parishioner. Such an identity crisis impinges on your ability to be seen and understood as a transitional leader.

Some members whine and plead, or scream and rage, for you to pick up a weapon and aggressively join the fray. They lure you into the cage openly and overtly, demanding that you take a side. Other members may stroke you for being soft, pliable, and sympathetic. They gently lure you in with pleading eyes. But if you show hesitance, some members will be enraged, and distain you as cold and cowardly. They may raise a furor. They may belittle you openly in the congregation. They may purposely sow discord over your presence.

They make it hard to be a monkey.

## **Refuge in the Bleachers**

When we change gears and become the third character, a “ticket holder” who sees all the action from a safe distance in the grandstands, we can applaud or boo the congregation as we see fit, but always keep an eye out for the nearest “Exit” sign. In circus lingo, such folk are called “Rubes” or “Natives.”

The Barna Group, in a nation-wide survey, found that 38% of pastors in all denominations “thought about quitting full-time ministry” after the first year of the pandemic. Nearly half of pastors under age 45 said they were considering leaving their calling. That has not translated into an actual wholesale abandonment of ministry sites across denominations, but the pondering is still there.

Ticket-holder interims write dutiful sermons, serve their expected functions at worship, scripture studies, funerals, and such, but they keep a distance from the fire of the congregation’s soul. They’ve been hurt. They develop a “protective” shield around themselves. They are often leery. They succumb to exhaustion. They burn out. They run away.

When we fail to care for ourselves, we capitulate to the rising anxiety within us as the church spirals into arguments and vicious faction fighting, or when personal tragedies lay bare the deepest terrors of church members. We recoil under the pain of our church family.

Their escalating pain spills into our own self-image and ability to assess ourselves clearly, and so we fall prey to distorted and exaggerated views of our limitations, faults, and failures. The congregation’s fermenting pain becomes too much for us to bear because of our own rising pain, and so we must flee, if only in our commitment to the congregation.

We may still hold the title of “interim” in the bulletin while we sit in worship, but in reality – we’ve already left the tent.

## **The Fourth Character**

In the final sense, all that you’ve read in this article has been pointing towards a new character, and to help us realize that healthy intentional interims are none of the three extreme examples – neither master, nor monkey, nor ticket holder.

Our ministry world is not a circus. Our parishioners are not monkeys. Maybe they howl and bare their teeth in a crisis, but they are humans in a world that is spinning out of control, and it’s easy to get swept away by prolonged anxiety and fear. And we are not mere ticket holders.

We are leaders/guides/companions who want to know when to venture into an issue with a congregation, and when to say “Pass.” We care for others, but we must also be a physician unto ourselves.

The ancient Polish expression can pertain directly to interim ministers. The positive core of this circus and monkey phrase in our line of ministry is:

1. Knowing how to be distinctive in yourself, while still attached to a congregation.
2. Identifying when to enter a church’s struggle or let them work it out.
3. Recognizing the signs of when people try to drag you into their conflicts.
4. Guiding congregations towards self-resolution and resiliency.

### **Drop the Whip**

In truth, a healthy interim does not go into the congregation to try to change them into something that the interim wants them to be, but to make sure that the congregation has the information and skills they need to make their own good decisions, according to the Reverend Pamela Griffith Pond, under synodical call by the Southwestern Washington Synod (ELCA) as an interim coach at Lutheran Church of Christ the King, in Tacoma, Washington.

“When we get sucked into trying to fix or save the congregation that we’re shepherding through a transition, it’s because we aren’t adequately self-differentiated,” Pond said. “That’s why a good education, like that offered by IMN, and continuing education, are essential, regardless of how long we’ve been doing this work.”

Self-differentiation is knowing who I am, and what I need to do, in a divisive congregational situation. That demands promoting both self-differentiation and “other” differentiation in our critical settings! Yes, the door swings both ways. There is both a “self” differentiation, and an “other” differentiation.

When we are fully engaged in self-differentiation as an interim, we open the door to the congregation to develop its own differentiation – the “other-differentiation” stance. We become a role-model of containment within ourselves, while still being able to relate effectively to the “others” in our congregation. We exhibit healthy ways of dealing with the trauma and anxiety of crisis, so others can watch us, take notes, forge their own ways of taking appropriate responsibility, and thereby apply differentiation to themselves.

In risky models, you determine what battles are yours, and what battles belong to another, and the congregation does the same.

“In a medical model,” Pond added, “a doctor assumes that something is wrong, and needs to fix it. But in midwifery, the purpose is to support and guide the process of

childbirth. We facilitate the birth. We don't force it. We're not the ones giving birth to the congregation's new future. They are."

Indeed, the healthiest and most transformative interims – those who lay down their whips – give the congregation the reins to their own future. They raise the eyesight of parishioners to envision their own destiny, and let the congregation bring it to fruition.

After all, the "future" is the congregation's child, not the interim's child.

### **Leave the Cage**

When faced with the invitation to dominate in a fierce cage fight, it's crucial to engage in clarifying roles, setting clear expectations of the interim and the congregation, and knowing your personal limits, according to the Reverend R. David Lowe, intentional interim minister at Grace Lutheran Church (ELCIC) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Congregational members need to covenant with the interim on maintaining their roles and boundaries.

"I do intentional interim work, period." Lowe said. "I don't come in at high noon and clean up everything. I don't get involved in the controversy of the participants. I have no axe to grind. I'm there to leave a legacy of the interim process."

A legacy-worthy interim process means being vigilant to maintain your true role as an interim. It's nails down your authentic identity. It establishes a healthy congregation. It helps the interim reveal that in a malicious congregational battle, not matter which side claims victory, everyone loses.

That legacy also sets boundaries.

Effective transitional work and relationships depend upon clear and respected boundaries. They reinforce our differentiation. They tell the people that you are not a ring master, monkey, or ticket holder. They help you remember that.

Effective boundaries, like a good fence, tell parishioners where you will go and what you will do in negotiating tough times. And it tells them what is not your turf to protect, manage, and care for. It also shows them what is their plot of land – their responsibility in congregational life to manage, maintain, and beautify.

A healthy boundary preserves us from role confusion. It helps us stay within our own property of responsibilities and actions. It keeps us out of the cage and helps us lay the whip down.

Simply put, it shows us that there are times when we must maintain a slight distance from the combatants. There are times when we need to give them some sane counsel from the far sidelines. There are times when we need to walk out of the cage.

### **Stay the Course**

To endure as an interim who remains with the flock, we need to refrain from putting ourselves into a “small space,” thinking we are the ones who have to solve all the problems, when it’s actually the congregation who has to find the answers, according to the Reverend Lieve Van den Ameele, congregational consultant and settled pastor in the Evangelical Church of Hesse-Nassau, Bad Ems, Germany.

“I have to have self-resilience and self-differentiation,” Van den Ameele said. “It takes all your strength to keep up being self-differentiated and resilient. That takes energy. We are not machines, but even if we have to learn important tools as ministers, we are still human beings who need nourishing.”

Such nourishing self-care is vital to flourishing as an interim, Van den Ameele adds, especially when Jesus calls us to go, preach, and spread the word.

The pressures of this current pandemic era have compounded the self-destructive pain of living in a small box. But this pain can be the first step towards healing by awakening us to our vulnerabilities. It can help us admit our limitations. It can help us face mounting anxieties, which are like a plague infecting nearly every aspect of American societies today.

Rabbi and family therapist Edwin Friedman used the term “non-anxious” presence in promoting healthy leadership. But the reality is that a non-anxious presence is a face that is shown publicly, and most of us must admit that deep within is a measure of our own anxiety in tenuous times. It’s our human lot.

The “less-anxious” interim may sense that their hands are clenching or their blood pressure is rising when they step into an angst-filled meeting, but practice and training keep them calm and focused.

This can be a gift to a congregation when people are traumatized. You model how to acknowledge stress, yet you take steps to confine it. You are not a howling monkey shaking the bars of a cage. And hopefully, neither are some of the members of your congregation, because of your example.

When you are less anxious, it helps clear the mind of aberrant infiltrating accusations or demands that warp our perception of what is going on, and what needs to be done. It helps us contain our emotions, including such powerful ones as excessive fear, anxiety,

anger, or frustration, and helps us take “one step at a time” into dealing with the crisis or event. We tend to panic less. We act wisely more.

Aligning ourselves with those who have faced the trials of the circus world, and remained healthy and productive, can help us stay with a riotous flock. When we care for ourselves, we care for others. That may sound trite, but it’s at the core of healthy interim work. When we are stabilized within ourselves, we can set deeper roots in the congregation.

And we no longer are obsessed with finding the nearest “Exit” sign.

### **In Summation: Three Stances**

In the end, there are three general stances that we can learn from deciphering “Not my circus, not my monkeys.”

1. Some issues present a mystery to congregations. They’ve never quite dealt with them before, and they are inexperienced as how to best proceed into the situation. That’s when the intentional interim needs to step in with clear eyes and solid grounding to lead them to possible paths before them.
2. Some issues have been dealt with by the people before the interim’s arrival, but they were handled poorly. The congregation now needs the interim to walk by their side, as together they complete the journey to better health as they face an issue again.
3. Some issues are of such an intimate nature, or they open doors to opportunities for the congregation to master new skills, that the people need to pursue resolution on their own, without any major interim guidance. The congregation needs to go solo and learn their own lessons on sustaining a healthy journey so they can claim the resolution for their accomplishments and be strengthened in that for future journeys – without the interim.

The “Not my circus, not my monkeys” phrase can also reveal which of these three stances you can take as you examine through prayer, counsel, and discernment your own place in the scheme of things. Why are you in that particular church or synagogue right now? Who are you meant to be? Who are they? What is your identity when working as a team with others? What are the primary missions for the people during your time there?

Many intentional interim ministers enter the flock with compassionate hearts and a commitment to help others do well. We want to accomplish, and to leave a legacy of wholeness and the ability to navigate rough waters. We want to love. That is both our blessing and our burden, but hopefully not our curse.



When we navigate well, our congregation is not a circus. Instead, it's an arena of learning where the teacher becomes a student and the student becomes a teacher. Everyone grows together. We learn to handle anxiety, dissention, and a crisis as a congregation and minister/rabbi, where all can mature, and God is well satisfied.

**Questions to focus on your role in a crisis**

- What would happen if you became your congregation's ring master?
- What would that demand from you personally?
- And what would that deny the congregation?
- What triggers were pulled in you when you violated a boundary?
- When were you forced to take a healthy step back in your ministry?
- How do you move from seeing monkeys to seeing people?
- How can a congregation embrace its own solutions?
- What happens if they make their own healthy decisions – without you?

*Rev. Jack Damien, a rostered minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has been trained in intentional interim ministry by NALIP (now LuTMA) and IMN. He currently serves as pulpit supply to an ELCA congregation in Merced, California.*