

Protagonist Corner

Interim Ministry

O. Benjamin Sparks
Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia

Last summer, I encountered a friend on the island of Iona, where my life and ministry were transformed in 1965. We had a conversation about interim ministry. He has retired and is “doing interims” in the Church of Scotland. The conversation was provoked by my less than positive reaction to his admission, so he was quick to inform me that in Scotland “We don’t do interims like ‘you lot’ in the states. We use interims only for troubled churches. We don’t assume that healthy ones need an interim to set the wind back in their sails.” How refreshing, and how unlike our current practice. While I know a number of people who are doing interims and doing this ministry well, I have some grave reservations about the use of interims and the ways this ministerial function has developed over the last few decades. So I want to be a “*Protagonist*” on this matter in the hopes of provoking some serious conversation about the present use of interims in many of the old mainline Protestant churches.

I confess that I’ve been writing this ever since John Harvey, former leader of the Iona Community, and I sat outside his house in the sunshine and wind of an August afternoon. What he said crystallized my longstanding suspicion that interim ministry as currently practiced and understood in a number of denominations may do more harm than good. Further, I believe too many interim ministries are based on a discredited therapeutic model. A friend, who left a strong, thriving, and faithful congregation, commented that the “interim is there now ‘trying to leach out all the poison I left behind.’” Of course he left behind little poison. We all leave some. Fortunately the church is strong enough to survive the interim. Why does a congregation that is thriving need an interim?

Is our practice of interim ministry making work for people who are not ready to retire but cannot get or do not want a full time call? Is interim ministry a way to make work (at what cost to church revenues, local, regional, and national?) for ineffective pastors who cannot receive a call to another congregation? These are hard questions, and I don’t mean to be harsh, but they are questions that need asking. Another healthy, thriving congregation called an interim whose name was given them without references by the General Presbyter. They were too trusting, and the interim, by action of the Session, was gone in a month. He kept trying, through preaching, teaching, and pastoral care, to tell them “how sick they were.” Since they were not troubled, or sick, they had the good sense to show him the door before he did too much damage.

Further, when the interim minister is an excellent preacher and is gifted pastorally, a church may drag its feet as long as it can before calling its next pastor. The result in more than one congregation has been disaster, turning otherwise healthy and strong congregations into cauldrons of conflict, with members choosing up sides and making victims of themselves, or of the “other faction,” who side with the new pastor, following a popular interim. In one instance I know of, the interim, in place for almost three years, keeps up contact with church members and comments on his successor’s adequacies (or the lack thereof). Thus the interim, who was to prepare the way for the installed pastor, now undermines that pastor’s work. Presbyteries and other ecclesiastical authorities that require interim ministry (or assume such arrangements) often sit on their hands and do nothing. Thus the work of decades goes for naught. Disgruntled members can leave the church and a vulnerable congregation is made ripe for a takeover by ideologues (with outside help) of right and left.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m all for interim ministry where it is needed. But I believe that churches need to experiment with other transition strategies—based upon the (currently out of favor) notion that in every church, momentum needs to be maintained and the new pastor found as quickly as possible. And if interims are not yet honorably retired, why are they not serving as installed pastors—where the risks, rewards, and responsibilities are consonant with the gospel? Interim ministry, except where needed for a troubled congregation, is a dated system that is not serving the church well.

Further, any sort of “therapy” offered by an interim that purports to “cleanse” the system of the past minister is foolish on the face of it. Systems are more powerful than ministers, even long tenured ministers. And when the system is healthy and “not broke,” why in the world are we trying to “fix” it?

These thoughts were also inspired by something George Herbert, the seventeenth century English religious poet, wrote about preaching:

The country parson preacheth constantly. The pulpit is his joy and his throne. If he at any time intermit [is absent], it is either for want of health; or against some festival, that he may better celebrate it; or for the variety of the hearers, that he may be heard at his return more effectively. When he intermits, he is very well supplied by some able man; who treads in his steps, *and will not throw down what he hath built*; whom also he entreats to press some point that he himself hath often urged with no great success, that “so in the mouth of two or three witnesses the truth may be more established.”¹

“[W]ho treads in [her] steps, and will not throw down what [she] hath built.” Is that still possible among us? Can we not provide for transitions that build up and strengthen the church, rather than lacerate and confuse it? By all means, interim ministry for troubled congregations—but as for the rest, we surely need a commitment to building upon what has been faithfully, often arduously, established. We need a new vision and a new paradigm to replace our present interim system.

Note

1. *The Temple and the Country Parson*, quoted in Richard Lischer, *Theories of Preaching, Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition* (Durham, N.C.: The Labyrinth Press, 1987), 51-2, emphasis mine.