

Restoration and Transition at Fountain Street Church: *What, exactly, is “interim” ministry?*

When church folks talk about “worship” they often use the word *liturgy*. Liturgy describes the art and ritual, the movements and sensations, the sacred mysteries, and the holy actions that are incorporated into any given church service. But “liturgy” is simply a combination of two Greek words: *leitōs* (“people” or “the public”) and *ergon* (“labor” or “service”). Liturgy is *the work of the people*.

We will spend the next two years working together - and I could not be more honored and humbled to join you in the deeply holy work that is created at Fountain Street Church.

Our collective *liturgy* will involve all of the regular, beloved, sacred activities that make FSC your shared home and holy ground. Celebrating and learning, deepening our relationships, practicing justice, eating together, singing, laughing, dancing, mourning, and growing. I will give you my very best from the pulpit to the bedside, in worship and in the classroom, empowering your leaders, providing administration, and adhering to the best practices and established policies of your historic organization. These are the “regular activities of congregational ministry.”

We also have some additional work ahead of us - above and beyond the daily practices of church life. We have before us a charge and an opportunity. The “interim time” is a season in the life of a church where there is an *added, sacred mission*: to intentionally and creatively prepare Fountain Street Church for the next season of its mission in Grand Rapids. It goes by many names in different contexts. In some contexts the work is focused on *interim pastors*; elsewhere it may be more appropriate to focus on *interim churches*. “Transitional” and “developmental” pastors are titles that are gaining currency, as well. By whatever name it is known - at the root of this *time-limited labor* is a careful and intentional focus on liminal spaces.

Hopefully, this will be a season for the good people of Fountain Street Church to review your history and current situation, take an inventory of your gifts and strengths, and discuss together the future you feel called to pursue.

Imagine the days leading up to an extended vacation in a distant land. How do you prepare for this adventure?

Imagine a great sailing ship in dry-dock, being fitted for the next voyage. What needs repairing?

Imagine a team of brilliant NASA engineers, preparing for an innovative spaceflight. What questions need to be addressed?

This work is an outward expression of *liminality* in the life of a particular community. It is utterly distinct in every context, but it shows up in countless ways in the human experience. In Jungian analysis, a period of liminality often immediately precedes exciting moments of individuation and discovery. French theorist Luce Irigaray describes these indeterminate, “in-between” spaces as potentially rich and meaningful loci for pleasure and fulfillment. In the Shinto tradition, the *mikoshi*/神輿 is a temporary, portable shrine that is used to transport a deity from one place to another during a time of holy transition - and the festive presence of a *mikoshi* is an opportunity for celebration and joy. And in our own secular, western traditions, New Year’s Eve is often a day that is set aside for celebration, forgiveness, hope, and anticipation. We open our hearts to the possible within the pause.

What will this look like at Fountain Street Church?

“Interim Ministry” is an endlessly fraught topic of conversation in church leadership for a constellation of reasons - and these difficult conversations are experiencing something of a renaissance following the profound disruptions brought on by the recent pandemic and political conflicts here in the United States. I will try to cover a great deal of ground as concisely as possible but please reach out to me directly with your own experiences or questions.

My own professional background involves some intensive, formal training about how churches can best execute the *interim tasks*. These are the “five steps” that *most* professional leadership programs embrace as the standards of transitional ministry. (In some settings they are pared down to four steps, in one particular setting they are expanded to six steps.) My formation and experience was developed in churches within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ, and shaped by my education with the Interim Ministry Network and the Alban Institute. However - I also often incorporate the wisdom and best practices from a number of other traditions including the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Methodist Church.

Loren Mead’s 1986 text, “Critical Moment of Ministry,” is widely considered one of the foundational texts for contemporary interim work. Mead defines the five developmental tasks as follows:

1. Coming to terms with history.
2. Discovering a new identity.
3. Allowing needed leadership to emerge.
4. Renewing denominational linkages.
5. Committing to new directions in ministry.

You might be shaking your head and thinking to yourself, “well, *that’s* not going to work at Fountain Street!” In 1998, the Alban Institute released “Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry.” It contains a slightly more nuanced, updated version of the five developmental steps:

1. Claim and honor our past and heal our grief and conflict.
2. Illuminate the congregation’s unique identity, its strengths, its needs, and its challenges.
3. Clarify the multiple dimensions of leadership, both ordained and lay, and navigate the shifts in leadership that accompany times of transition.
4. Renew connections with available resources within and beyond the denomination.
5. Enable the congregation to renew its vision, strengthen its stewardship, prepare for new professional leadership, and engage its future with anticipation and zest.

Perhaps this feels a *bit* closer to “what we need from this season of life.” Yet, there are obviously areas in the life of Fountain Street Church where the needs outstrip these expectations - and other areas where the church is *already* succeeding! This is why I am going to spend the next three months carrying out a very focused listening campaign - interviewing current staff, church leadership, members, and community partners. I have *many, many questions*. You have many answers.

Humbly, and relying on your grace and the generous feedback I've already received from your church's interim search team and Governing Board - I might frame the five developmental steps for Fountain Street Church as follows:

1. Discover, share, and celebrate the *full history* of Fountain Street Church. Working together - lift up and study the past two centuries of labor and hope that have led to this moment in time.

- Much of this hard work has been done before - and recently. There already exist numerous histories of FSC, including a brilliant effort initiated six years ago culminating in your 150th anniversary celebration.
- The *objective* of this task is straightforward: every member of the church should have full access to the story of the organization, and every member should be able to articulate this story in their own words.

Consider this parable:

Imagine you're at a party with a new group of friends and everyone is singing a lovely song together. Much to your dismay, it seems *everyone but you knows the lyrics by heart!* "Could I get a song-sheet or a copy of the words?" you ask. Your friends look at you and say, "oh, everyone knows this old song! I don't think we have a copy of the lyrics."

Some folks *don't know the words to the song.* And, in any case, as more and more people join the party, it will be important that the current attendees can teach the newcomers the words to the songs.

By sharing the story of the journey "so far," we invite everyone to begin from a common source.

2. Describe (in detail) the current identity and operations of Fountain Street Church. Not "who we could be if we did XYZ," and not "who we claim to be in our bylaws and vision statements," and not "who we were fifty years ago." (Hopefully, we already did the latter during step one.) We're looking for a clear and forthright description of the facts on the ground.

- This will include accurate data about everything from finances and attendance/participation to staff/leadership expectations. This information isn't intended for public review and it is emphatically not intended to be a performance review of the church! Nor is this an open invitation for scrutiny or judgment. It is the work of gaining *clarity* about the current internal systems within your organization.

Consider this parable:

Imagine you're ready to begin a two-day hike along the Manistee River section of the North Country Trail. You're an experienced through-hiker and you've done your best to prepare for the journey. You have your laminated maps in hand and you've reached the trailhead and parked your vehicle and it's out-and-back time. Here we go! As you approach the treeline you cross paths with an outbound hiker returning to their vehicle. They look a bit *frazzled*. You wave and they call out to you: "watch out for the washes along the river. There was a huge storm last month and some of the blaze is missing. Also the third and fourth campsites are completely underwater!"

What do you do with this new information? If you're like me, you'll pull out a marker and your map and ask your new friend to share as many details as they can recall. *The map is not the territory - and we can do our best to get an accurate description of the current situation on the ground.*

3. Clarify what we mean when we talk about "leadership" in the unique context of Fountain Street Church. Who are our "leaders?" What are their assigned responsibilities? What strategies can we adopt to better recruit, prepare, sustain, and retain our leaders?

- This means getting clarity around the unique responsibilities of clergy and lay staff. Which members of our professional church staff are “called” and which are “hired?”
- How do we sustain intergenerational leadership among the membership? What practices can we adopt to encourage and facilitate *mentoring* new leadership?
- What are some strategies for *retaining* our staff and lay leaders, preventing burnout, and honoring and celebrating their gifts?

Consider this parable:

You’re an active volunteer at your child’s elementary school and regularly participate in the school’s PTO group. After several months of intense deliberation and fundraising it’s finally time to build a beautiful new natural playground to share with the whole neighborhood. You’ve held community charrettes, drawn up some designs, and settled on a budget. Together, you interview and hire a local contractor to execute the vision. The following Monday you arrive on site, ready to get to work!

You see a group of people standing around in a circle near the basketball courts, chatting together and looking over each other’s shoulders at clipboards. As you approach, you hear voices beginning to grow elevated.

It seems the contractor you’ve hired is pouring cold water on some of the designs. “There’s no way we can install a water feature this close to the driveway,” they say. “Oh, nonsense,” says one of the PTO members. “I’ve dug ditches around my property for the past twenty years, it’ll just take a little more effort.” Suddenly another voice calls out, “well, if we install plumbing in this area we can’t plant willow trees. The city will probably end up removing them after a few years.” Another contractor says, “you could save a great deal of money if you scrapped the water feature and went with xeriscaping, instead.” The project is already becoming tense and complicated. Finally it reaches a breaking point and a PTO member says, exasperating: “we didn’t hire you to worry about the cost. It’s *our* money, your job is to deliver the product we requested!”

Conflict isn’t necessarily bad - and it shouldn’t always be avoided. But unnecessary conflict is often a result of a lack of clarity around responsibilities and expectations. At the beginning of a project it’s helpful to be transparent around expectations and responsibilities.

4. How do we strengthen our relationship with the organizations and networks in our community (both large and small) that share our values?

This is going to be a challenging conversation at Fountain Street Church. In most American church settings the “fourth step” in the interim process is one of the easiest. “Reforge and reignite denominational connections” is straightforward when you belong to a well-defined, institutional denomination. Chartering a bus to take the youth group to the regional synod gathering, hosting luncheons and Q&A sessions with the area presbyters or the bishop, or utilizing a sermon series to review the history and polity of the denomination could represent pathways toward meeting this developmental goal.

For some very important reasons (that will hopefully become abundantly clear during step one) FSC is a non-denominational church.

This must be handled carefully and with discernment and intention.

FSC is blessed by an abundance of fellow travelers. Organizations like Planned Parenthood of Michigan, various regional arts ensembles, GR Pride, GRCC, the GR Climate Coalition and Together West Michigan have all benefited from being in relationship with FSC. How do we deepen these connections

in ways that are mutually beneficial?

FSC has, historically, been a hub for ecumenical and interfaith celebrations - welcoming other communities of faith to enter the sanctuary and find common ground. Who are our sibling churches, today?

This can also be an opportune time for discovering new networks - regionally, nationally, and globally - that could help amplify the values of FSC and share hope, love, and justice far beyond our immediate community.

Consider this parable:

A young person returns to their hometown in Michigan after a decade spent living and working on the East Coast. During their time away they met their spouse and created a family together. They discovered their professional identity. They departed with a backpack and returned with a moving truck!

Despite these many changes they still feel “at home” driving the old farm roads and highways that criss-cross the landscape. They even spot a few familiar faces at the local farmer’s market. But things have *changed*. The people have changed! How do they find their way in this new/old place?

Ursula K. Le Guin cautions us in her work, *The Dispossessed*: “You can go home again... so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been.”

Reforging connections and sharing our new mission with the community around us creates new opportunities for joy and celebration - and it reawakens slumbering passions that have lain dormant during our sojourn.

5. Finally, it will be time to review, renew, and celebrate the vision of Fountain Street Church in the future season of life that is appearing on the horizon. How can we take everything we’ve learned and apply it to the congregation’s Mission, Vision, and Values?

This is the moment we have been working toward!

It is a time for empowering a search committee for pastoral leadership, articulating the needs of the congregation for professional staff and new ministry leaders, and setting sail with renewed energy, a clear direction, and a solid understanding of shared identity. Those joining in this moment will find a congregation well-equipped to serve, celebrate, and advocate. Newly called clergy will find a church that is *fully prepared* to empower and sustain new ministries.

Old anxieties will be allowed to finally rest in the past and new visions will find purchase in good soil.

It’s time to set sail - again - on a journey that has been well provisioned.

Consider this parable:

You are a life-long gardener with a green thumb and a great, abiding sense of curiosity. Recently, you moved into a village that has set aside a parcel of land to create a community garden. As the neighborhood readies the landscape and recruits volunteers, you enroll and apply yourself toward completing your local university’s 14 week “Master Gardener Certification.”

You already possessed a natural gift for growing healthy and vibrant plants.

Now, having completed this important class, you are ready for anything!

When volunteers arrive with packets of seeds and young plants, you are ready to help them understand how these plants can thrive together.

You’ve studied countless creative ways of laying out a garden, analyzed the costs and benefits of raised beds and irrigation systems, and you have a more scientific and nuanced understanding of your area's

climate and growing zone.

You bring this knowledge as a gift to the neighborhood - and in doing so you help your community members thrive and grow and share fresh food with one another.

When the time arrives to launch a new program, call a new pastor, or open wide the doors to new members and friends, the church is prepared to see visions become reality.

There will be classes and seminars, timelines and analysis, tours and festivals. There will be many, many round-table conversations. And there will be times set aside for silence and deep meditation.

Partially-healed wounds may be carefully treated and lovingly healed. Names of the saints in light will be lifted up - their stories shared and celebrated. And the story of Fountain Street Church will be told, and re-told, until it comes as naturally to the voice as a first language. All of this will conspire to lay bare the hoped-for possibilities of a new, energized season of life together.

Because - in the end - Fountain Street Church is *too sacred for anything less*.

A home for the spiritually curious, unfettered by dogma and rude fundamentalism, wide-eyed and hopeful... perhaps at no time in our shared history has such a place been more necessary for the people of Grand Rapids.

And in everything, in every moment, we will find joy and abundance in great measure.

Thank you for inviting me into this journey - and I covenant to this: I will honor your home with sacred trust - together we will witness *miracles*.

Sincerely,

Rev. Nathan Dannison

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