

## The Gift of Intentional Transition Ministry

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### **Introductory Foundation:**

This paper is an “opinion” piece. The purpose for writing this paper is to provide you with one person’s approach to this emerging time of opportunity in the life of “doing” church in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. As I have said throughout my ministry, as followers of Jesus Christ, the great transformer, we will be in for a fantastic journey of transformation in our churches of tomorrow.

### **Define: Intentional; Interim; Transition; Transformation**

*Intentional:* Done by design; intended.

*Interim:* An intervening time; between.

*Transition:* A passage from one state, stage, subject or place to another; change; a movement, development or evolution.

*Transform:* To change in composition or structure.

*Transformation:* An act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed.

*Transformational:* Concerned with transformation.<sup>[1]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.

## **My professional experience within churches at various levels of unrest, turmoil and conflict**

I have been in ordained ministry in the Congregational Church for nine years, along with an additional five years of church leadership roles and "field education" experiences during my seminary education. I have completed the courses offered from the Interim Ministry Network based in Baltimore, MD. Since 1994, I have been in eight churches which have been at some level of church unrest, turmoil, or what could be described as elevated conflict. My role has been in progressive positions ranging from lay leadership, student intern, licensed intern, associate minister, and senior pastor. The churches have ranged in size from one hundred to one thousand in membership.

## **Describe Post-Modern Church of 21<sup>st</sup> century**

If I were to fully describe the modernity and the post-modernity Church there would be two papers. For the sake of brevity and the need to provide the present reader with an overview of these two eras particularly for the purpose of this paper, I will elaborate only within the context of Intentional Transition Ministry.

The church of modernity occurred since the time of scientific emergence and proof of findings. I reference Dr. Steven Peay's paper in which he stated there are three central features to modernism: "The first feature is individualism, the assertion of the ultimate autonomy of

each person. Second, emphasis is placed upon rationalism, the conviction that the mind has the power to both investigate and understand/define reality. Factualism, the third feature, denotes the belief that the autonomous individual can, through the use of reason, arrive at objective truth." [2]

Post-modernity begins to emerge possibly as early as the 1940s. However, it becomes quite apparent as we leave the 20<sup>th</sup> century and enter a time where life assumptions cannot be proven. It reflects a time of great upheaval in the national and world arena. Distrust has emerged in our governmental systems ranging from the city, state, national, and international levels. An example of that lack of trust appears at the time of the Vietnam War, in which truth became "fuzzy" and trust in our governing system began to erode. The Watergate scandal was another incident of distrust, and then the terrorist attacks, along with the current war situation, has truly created confusion and fear in the hearts and minds of individuals.

Peay noted in his paper that "post-modernism moves from a stress upon individualism to one upon community."<sup>[3]</sup> I would agree, however, at this point in the emergence of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church, people are unable to pinpoint what that community concept

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[2] Steven A. Peay, *Heart to Heart: Congregationalism as Post-denominational Denomination*, Presented at the ICFTC Meeting, Nottingham, UK, Sept 2004, 2.

[3] Ibid.

encompasses. As a result of the post-modern movement, "spirituality" has begun to emerge as a buzzword among those who are unable to prove past religious or natural equations. We have moved into a time of not trusting past assumptions of any type. Since we cannot prove reasons for things happening as they do, I believe people now seek answers from some "higher" or "other" source. This is not necessarily the Hebrew God or what we in America have come to know as the God of American Christendom. It is my hope that post-modernity in the church will define community in light of a God present community. One of the questions which will emerge will be "Where is God in our community of faith?"

### **Intentional Interim Transition Ministry**

Intentional Interim Transition ministry in the post-modern Christian community has evolved into a completely different type of guidance than the experiences of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No longer are our church doors bursting open and members spilling out on the sidewalks or rolling into the aisles as they did in the heyday of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. We, as Congregationalists, have to take some responsibility for buying into "the era of de facto American

Christendom in which the Protestant mainline churches had been the religious establishment of the culture.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Anthony Robinson describes the churches of the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as “civic faith” communities. The church and state were woven tightly together. Robinson states “The role of the church was to be one of civic institutions gathered . . . . It was there to preserve social order, morality, and decency. It was the conscience of the community, a source of aid to the least fortunate, and a center of community and family life. American Christendom was made up of the Protestant mainline churches that had formed the religious establishment of the culture. It could be described as the hallmark values of modernity – reason, self-sufficiency, progress, and optimism.”<sup>[5]</sup> Our Congregational churches were *the church* of the New England towns. We were gathered on the town square and in the center of American life. We carried this approach of being church and culture throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

When Congregational churches, as well as other Protestant mainline churches, were in need of a change of pastoral leadership, it was either for a “hidden” reason, not talked about publicly in the

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<sup>[4]</sup>Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003), 3.

<sup>[5]</sup> Robinson, 2-3.

congregation, or a move generated by professional, pastoral growth reasons or retirement. However, we must not overlook the possibilities of unrest, turmoil, or conflict. In the past, and presently, a congregation would usually find a recently retired minister to “help out” or find what I refer to as a “baby sitter” who would be there until another minister could be found. They acted as “chaplain” to the church community. Their primary role was to maintain status quo.

However, maintaining status quo is, from my observation, the modus vivendi which fostered unproductive as well as unhealthy church life. Pastoral change, for any reason, is an ideal time to look back and to vision into the future. This is the opportunity for a congregation to look for a leader who will guide this particular community into the wilderness and into the promised-land. A transition/transformational minister is truly looking to the example of the exodus story and the transitional Moses guide. As we all recall from the story, Moses had some “cantankerous” folks to deal with, and I know from my transition ministry experience, folks have not changed throughout the millenniums. I will speak in more depth about the time frame for Intentional Interim Transitional ministry later in the paper.

Anthony Haely writes “The world around the church is no longer the Christian society that has been the foundation of western

civilization since Emperor Constantine. That society has died...religious communities are being called to engage with people and society in new ways that are valuable and essential in this disordered postindustrial landscape."<sup>[6]</sup>

Anthony Robinson describes the church in the 1940s and well into the 1960s as the church of "sense of obligation."<sup>[7]</sup> From north to south and east to west, the people in the continental United States who attended church were active in church activities. One was baptized, married, and buried in the church, and Mom and Dad (or sometimes extended relatives) sent the children to Sunday school. Church was the bedrock of what it was to be an American. There were stories of people running for political positions in towns and cities who were obligated to belong to *a* church in order to be eligible to serve.<sup>[8]</sup>

During the mid-60s the Immigration and Naturalization Act was passed, and we were becoming, an ethnically and religiously a diverse society. These immigrants were bringing their religious traditions and their cultures into this country's religiously homogeneous Christian culture and evolving into "a religiously pluralistic society."<sup>[9]</sup>

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<sup>[6]</sup> Fundamentals of Transitional Ministry, *The Postindustrial Promise*, (Baltimore, MD: Interim Ministry Network 2005), i.

<sup>[7]</sup> Robinson, *Transforming*, 4.

<sup>[8]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[9]</sup> Ibid., 7.

Robinson also highlights that the 1960s and 1970s experienced tremendous upheaval in the national political arena.<sup>[10]</sup> (This upheaval was briefly noted in my introductory remarks.) The traumatic assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy, along with the unpopular war in Vietnam, contributed to this upheaval. The drug culture emerged, the middle class began to erode, infidelity and alcohol began to take center stage in our news broadcasts. Then the Watergate denial by a president, which the people had elected, stepped into the forefront. Trust was rapidly eroding. Those who we normally felt were reliable authorities were slowly disintegrating. During the years leading up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century “a new secular, religiously pluralistic, and postmodern culture was emerging.”<sup>[11]</sup> The American “Camelot” was coming to an end.

Within several decades American Christendom has morphed into something else. Wade Clark Roof and Bill McKinney called it “a generation of seekers.”<sup>[12]</sup> Obligation of earlier generations changed into motivation. “If people were motivated, if they found some meaning and value in an experience for them, they would be involved. If it was only a matter of fulfilling a societal obligation, the church was

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<sup>[10]</sup> Ibid.,5.

<sup>[11]</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>[12]</sup> Ibid., 4.



losing its hold on people."<sup>[13]</sup> We, the congregations, are now looking for meaning and value in this place we know as Church.

I happen to believe this is good. I also believe this is a wonderful open door for Congregationalists as we step into the new millennium. The Congregational Way has always believed in *bringing our hearts and minds* into church and our church life. Feeling and thinking return us to a living God. This God, did not just exist in the Old and New Testaments however this God lives today, within each of us and within our faith communities. Our motivation becomes freedom to explore, freedom to look beyond modernity (logic and reason), and delve deeper into who and what this search is for; something greater than and mystery beyond our understanding; something I refer to as Christian *Spirituality*.

Intentional Transition ministry is the key to unlock this future. I believe that churches who are, for various reasons, looking at clergy-change have been truly given a gift of grace and openness for transformation which lies in this intentional interim time for their particular congregation. Taking that concept of the key which unlocks further down the Main Streets of America, all Christian Churches are in transition/transformation because we are all followers of Jesus Christ, the great transformer - the great *Transitionalist!* I am taking the

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<sup>[13]</sup> Ibid., 4.

liberty to coin a new word to assist in my approach to Transition ministry, in this day and age.

Kirk Hadaway writes “We must be transformed into people whose eyes are open to the signs of God’s kingdom. Transformation is a magical process, but it does not happen all at once through the wave of a wand, a trip down an aisle, or the praying of a prayer. We move from insight to understanding to a new incarnation, as a new way of seeing becomes a new way of being. The process is continuous...The problem, of course, is that people don’t want to be transformed or don’t see the necessity. Whether the old system is working for us or not, it is our world, and from the inside we cannot see it for what it is. We must be jolted out of the old and into the new.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Anthony Robinson writes “Transformation often begins with provocation, disorientation, loss of control, and emptying.”<sup>[15]</sup> When I arrived at my present transition ministry call I could hear that disorientation and loss of control from the voices in the congregation. Then as I began to listen and ask questions, someone said; “What is a healthy congregation supposed to look like?” Initially, I was saddened because I thought, “Had this congregation gone through pain for so long, that even their memories were lost?” However, even in their not

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<sup>[14]</sup> Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 171.

<sup>[15]</sup> Anthony B. Robinson, *What’s Theology Got To Do With It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute. 2006). 172.

knowing whatever defined a healthy congregation, there was a spark of hope. I could hear them saying, maybe we can regain that health, join other healthy congregations, and be a vital faith community again.

That is why I believe Intentional Interim Transition ministry is so vital to our churches today. Looking at life through our physical and mental lenses we all want to be healthy. We want to be able to participate in our world with all our senses and gifts and contribute to the communities where we are presently living.

There is nothing different as we look at our congregational life. Just as in our personal lives we may need to seek professional counselors and paraprofessionals to assist us in becoming healthy, so we need to seek professionals to counsel and guide our congregations into healthy, vibrant, God-centered communities.

### **The Process of Intentional Transformation Ministry**

From this point on, I will discontinue using the word *Interim*. It is my belief that the word and understanding of *Interim* has come to mean, in our churches, a time in-between ministry. This is absolutely not the case. A church at the doorstep of ministerial, leadership change is living out the transformation process that Jesus has been teaching us to follow. Marvelous ministry is about to happen in the midst of this particular faith community. Comfortable? Not necessarily. Fear-filled moments are ahead. Disorganization will be a

way of life for some time. New insights will come out of chaos. Rev. Leslie Robinson, Jr., states “re-enchantment, re-identification, re-organization, and re-engagement”<sup>[16]</sup> will come out of the transition and transformation ministry that we embark upon.

I preach over and over during these transition times, “We are not alone God is with us in our journey.” Yet, looking at stories in the scripture, I am drawn to the story of the rich young ruler. This ruler asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to give up his “stuff” and follow Him. The young ruler was unable to do that, and so he walked away. During church transition times, there will be people who cannot give up the past traditions and rituals and trust that God will be alongside. They will walk away. It is a life choice which each of us has to make as we come face to face with Jesus. I heard a marvelous explanation about tradition on National Public Radio, “tradition is not worshipping the ashes but carrying on the fire.” As Christians we are called to carry on the fire of Pentecost into our churches and the world.

When a church is at the place of seeking an Intentional Transition Minister, it is imperative that they go about the process with as much energy and gusto as they would if they were calling their settled minister. Basically, this spiritual leader will be embedded within this

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<sup>[16]</sup> Fundamentals of Transitional Ministry, Leslie Robinson (Baltimore, MD: Intentional Ministry Network, 2005), 19.

faith community with as much authority and leadership responsibility as any other minister. An Intentional Transition search committee must be appointed. They must be charged with the task of seeking the best qualified candidate. Someone they “like” should not be the first priority. Someone who will challenge and nudge them, will not always be someone “liked” all the time.

Transitional ministry is a highly specialized ministry. This is not a time for the church to think they can save money, pay less, or only require part-time ministry. The church is searching for a candidate who has had additional training, and they will have to pay for that skill. There is a ministerial covenant/agreement about which the church needs to speak with the candidate in great depth. There are five developmental tasks through which a transitional minister needs to take the church. There is a list of responsibilities upon which the church will need to agree to covenant together in order to actively engage in the transformational journey. These developmental tasks are:

1. Come to terms with your history.
2. Become clear about your identity.
3. Allow shifts in leadership.
4. Rethink linkage to denomination and church at large.
5. Make a commitment to new leadership and a new future.

Seven additional developmental issues which need to be woven into the developmental tasks are:

1. The necessity to rebuild the congregational “infrastructure.”  
These include the administrative structures, processes, procedures and “know how” efficiency.
2. Evaluation of and removal of staff members if necessary.
3. Financial/stewardship issues. Basic stewardship education and fresh efforts to secure financial commitment to the church.
4. Conflicts over issues or congregational agenda. Time for transition minister to be more objective and less personally vested in the outcome of such conflicts and help to facilitate some decision making processes.
5. Interpersonal or inter-group conflicts. Transition minister should be an objective third party mediator.
6. Getting closure with the previous pastor. Weaning a congregation from the previous or several pastoral leaders.
7. Communication improvement. Prime time to enhance communication processes.<sup>[17]</sup>

Now that I have highlighted the developmental tasks and developmental issues, you will note that some are quite complex and they will need sufficient time to be addressed during transition

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<sup>[17]</sup> Fundamentals of Transitional Ministry (Baltimore, MD: Interim Ministry Network, 2005). 79,89.

ministry. The question of how long should an agreement be with a minister comes to the forefront? The Interim Ministry Network advocates someplace in the range of two years. Many churches are so anxious to get their "real" minister that they rush the process, and ultimately this intentional transition ministry time is not properly utilized. Basically, in my opinion, the church has "hired" a maintenance minister and the next "real" minister will spend the first few years functioning in the role of "Unintentional Interim Minister." Unfortunately, I am unable to provide accurate statistics on this particular ministerial role. However, the statistics are quite high that the person will be gone from that position within in a short time. I speak from personal experience, several times over. At that point in the church's life, a settled minister is not able to do the proper work of transition and transformation because the congregation does not have a clear understanding of this process. Again, that is why I think every time a church finds itself without a minister is the ideal time to look at the time as transformational.

Again, the question arises. "How long?" Looking back on my experience, I would say it all depends on the individual church community, the individuals, and how they work in *koinonia* with each other. When I use the word *koinonia*, I am referring to a deep personal connection. May I be so bold as to say, in most of our

American Christendom, "civic faith" communities we have not developed that extensive *koinonia* experience. With reference to my introductory remarks, this is the post-modernity expression of community for which we are all searching in our churches. There are only epiphany moments of this depth of understanding of *koinonia* present in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So we come full circle. How long should we be engaged in intentional transition, and transformational ministry? I have seen some of my colleagues who have been in the journey with a church truly dedicated to transition ministry for three, four, and even six years. I think it is vital that during the process, the church and minister are in at least yearly evaluation and continually asking the questions "Where are we both getting bogged down in focusing on future steps? and "Are we engaging God in our discerning process?" If we can truly say that it is a Spirit-lead process, then specific months or years are not the point. When we all see, feel, and know in our hearts that we have been lead through the wilderness as the children of Israel had been led by Moses and were about to go into the promised land with another leader that will be the time for the next transformational journey to commence in the church community.



## More specifics of the Transformation Journey

Recently I have been learning about an approach to church transformation in light of "Appreciative Inquiry." I attended a workshop lead by Rev. Robert J. Voyle. He states in his writing, ". . . transformation occurs when we become experts on the root causes of success rather than the root causes of failure." He emphasizes that using the appreciative approach fosters a creative and deliberate way which gives life. The congregation learns how to grow in "life-giving realities." [18]

Mark Lau Branson states; "the goal of 'Appreciative Inquiry' is to change the conversation - to stimulate the thinking and the imagination of congregations - through a process that focuses upon the honorable, the pure, the pleasing, the commendable." [19]

That is the entirety of transformation, moving the Congregation's thinking toward healthy change. Intentional ministers need to focus with more intent upon what's working because that will provide a tiny window into the strengths already innate within the community.

Intentional ministry tends to look back to problem-solving techniques popular in traditional organizational development consulting. However, in the mid-1980's David Cooperrider, at Case

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[18] Robert J. Voyle, *Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry* (Hillsboro, OF: Clergy Leadership Institute. 2003-2008). 7.

[19] Branson, Mark Lau, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004). ix.

Western Reserve University, began to turn the thought process around, and began to ask different questions. It was, and is today, “common to conduct an assessment of the organization to determine a diagnosis or description of ‘what’s wrong’ with the organization/church. Once this diagnosis had been achieved then ‘treatment’ could be applied to the causes of the problem. This approach was based on the assumption that development occurs through the continual solving of problems.” Cooperrider took a more positive and innovative view. He began to move away from the question “What’s wrong?” to “What’s working?”<sup>[20]</sup>

Voyle states: “When these problem-solving approaches are applied to human behavior and systems, attention often excessively focuses on the nature and causes of problems. This frequently leads to cycles of blame and defensiveness in which people react protectively rather than compassionately engaging in creative change.”<sup>[21]</sup>

I have experienced that attitude or thought process often in a church environment where someone or a committee has consulted with a church and presented a long list of problems which are the cause of the “unhealthy” Church situation. Unfortunately, an equal amount of time was not spent in the report about the good things

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<sup>[20]</sup> Voyle, 6.

<sup>[21]</sup> Ibid., 7.

which are happening or have happened in the past with that particular church. It is my opinion that if there were not some positive happenings going on in the church group, the church would not even attempt to seek out a transition minister, they would merely disband. Now, let me note at this point that the continuation of a congregation does not necessarily mean it will be healthy and positive in the future.

I resonate with Tom White's statement: "We often concentrate enormous resources on correcting problems. But when used continually over a long time, this approach leads to a negative culture...or a slip into a paralyzing sense of hopelessness. Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating mindless happy talk . . . . We can't ignore problems - we just need to approach them from the other side."<sup>[22]</sup>

When the church has come to the place in their life that they know they are not where they need to be as a community of the body of Christ, it is time to as Voyle says: "Discover and appreciate what is valuable about where you are and use that as the foundational resource to create your desired future."<sup>[23]</sup>

So, if the church wants to move from where they are, they will need to mine the question "What resources do we need to reach the future?" Voyle believes new tools for exploring people's "passions" in

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<sup>[22]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[23]</sup> Ibid., 11.

life will be a good start. It happens to be another approach to the spiritual gift inventories which have been so prevalent in recent years. We are basically looking at Paul's concept of the body of Christ with each part of the body performing a specific and vital role for the faith community (1 Cor. 12).

An Intentional Transition minister needs to coach the congregation through several needs assessments and then get into the journey with them. Branson notes there are "four action steps in the Appreciative Inquiry:

1. **Initiate** a congregational process that focuses upon the positive, shaped by gratefulness to God and to each other.
2. **Inquire** into the stories of life-giving forces within the history and experience of congregational members. Share times when they felt most alive, motivated and excited as a congregation.
3. **Imagine** the shape of a preferred future by developing 'provocative proposals.'
4. **Innovate** new and creative ways to manifest the imaginative futures within the ministry of the church."<sup>[24]</sup>

I look to the approach of Jesus with his disciples. Jesus lived life with them, eating, teaching, preaching, interacting with strangers, and teaching again when the disciples just didn't get it. All during these

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<sup>[24]</sup> Branson, xi.

times Jesus encouraged, enlightened, and highlighted their work together. When Jesus was preparing them for the time he would not be with them, he told them that he would not leave them orphaned. Jesus also knew that the disciples would experience situations which Jesus never talked about with them. Matter of fact, in the farewell discourse in the Gospel of John, Jesus told them that there were things which he had not taught them and they would learn more. As Intentional Transition ministers we need to give churches the comfort and reassurance that they are ready to move on in their transformation, and that they will continue to learn as the years unfold into the future.

As followers of Jesus Christ, the great transformer-*transitionalist*, we must continue to move toward transformation. As the body of Christ in a solid foundation of spiritual faith is set in place, each congregation will change their inward focus and focus on transforming toward their purpose as a faith community and beyond the walls of their meeting house.

Throughout this paper on the intentional transition ministry process I have been referencing the biblical stories as examples of change. It is imperative that the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century return to the central reason for being church. Robinson states "Church without an ecclesiology formed and informed by scripture and tradition, clergy

and congregations can find themselves seriously misled and confused about their identity and purpose.”<sup>[25]</sup> “The sense of the church as the body of Christ is lost. Identity of the church comes to the forefront. The church belongs to and owes its existence to God and not to us. God has created and claimed the church for God’s purpose. The church is not simply whatever we want it to be or what we choose to make of it. The church exists prior to its members or participants. Charry says: ‘Theologically speaking, the church is an institution given a peculiarly honorable identity and high calling by virtue of her owner who sets the corporate culture into which members are acculturated.’ The owner is God. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.” Psalm 100.<sup>[26]</sup>

I contend, churches that do not truly deal with who God intends them to be are not ready to call a settled pastor. It will be necessary for the call to weave prayer, passion, vision and the covenant into the charge for the search committee to ultimately perform its task of searching for the next settled pastor.

The church and the transition minister need to explore ways to vision outward. A process of recovering the church’s purpose will be necessary. So our congregations now are faced with the question “Why are we here?” Matthew 28:19, provides us with our purpose “Go

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<sup>[25]</sup> Robinson, *Theology*, 158.

<sup>[26]</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

therefore and make disciples . . . .” If you look at the stories about Jesus making disciples, you see people whose lives were drastically changed. It says to me that our congregations are on the precipice of great change in their lives as well as the lives of the community.

I return to the question “How long should an intentional minister stay? If Appreciative Inquiry is fully enveloped, this search is not a short term fix. “If you try to motivate people by lighting a fire under them, all you will get is burnt butts. A much more enlightened way to motivate people is to find the fire within them and fan it.”<sup>[27]</sup> This approach will take time for trust within individuals and trust within the community. Honesty and trust will be necessary for people to look deep within themselves, to seek out and trust God to lead their particular church community into the promised land.

Intentional Transition ministry requires patience and dedication and lots and lots of energy on the part of the transition minister and the entire congregation. I speak from experience. We will all be in for a fantastic journey of transformation not only in our churches but also in the lives of all individuals within and throughout the churches of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>[27]</sup> Voyle, 5.

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