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Transitions in the INSPIRE Research Project

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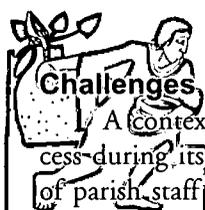
Challenges A contextual issue complicating the INSPIRE process during its seven-year tenure has been the frequency of parish staff transitions, especially those of pastors. Nearly every one of the forty-one parishes involved with INSPIRE has in some way struggled with parish leadership transitions of one nature or another. Most of these experiences of transition in the INSPIRE parishes were oriented to simple turnover, either the transfer of a pastor to a new parish or the voluntary resignation of leadership team members (usually those formally employed by the parish). Most reasons for transition remained unremarkable. One director of religious education (DRE) left her parish and took over a project for the Chicago Archdiocese. Another DRE retired. Transferred spouses resulted in the entire family moving. One of the staff members at a suburban parish lived far from the parish, so she left when the pastor was transferred. Associate pastors were not infrequently made pastor at a different parish. Perhaps most consequentially, pastors simply decided it was time to move on. As a suburban pastor remarked of his transition, "We were kind of going through lists of who's doing what and then as we looked forward, what needs to be done. As those things were being spoken, I realized that I can't do it. It's time for me to go . . . . I told them all that. Something freeing about it, but also it was painful."

Other transitions proved more difficult on account of the circumstances. Two parishes involved in INSPIRE had at one time had a priest removed because of alleged sexual misconduct. Another three had staff members depart because of accusations of financial misconduct. The latter included a parish where the former business manager is now serving a prison term for embezzlement of a large amount of money from the parish; the pas-

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tor there was removed as well. Not surprisingly, in these cases strong feelings of pain and betrayal emerged which did not disappear for some time. In several other cases, serious illness—either that of leadership team members or of their immediate family—figured in a transition. In a few cases, it was the death of a pastor or leadership team member.

In more than a quarter of INSPIRE parishes, a parish leadership team member was involuntarily dismissed during or around the time of the INSPIRE process. Nearly all those dismissed were parish employees rather than volunteers. In most cases, the pastor became convinced of the team member's incompetence or unwillingness to work with other team members. In a couple of cases, the termination seemed to result from interpersonal tensions between the pastor and an employee, both after a pastor transition. In one case, the pastor eliminated the positions of the entire pastoral staff. In all cases, the decision to dismiss belonged to the pastor alone, though in a few cases he conferred with the consultant and/or other staff members. In a few instances, the termination of more difficult team members resulted in a markedly more cohesive and effective pastoral leadership team.

All of the transitions were psychologically disruptive. The organizational development theorist William

> ## "The dominant assumption in the United States is that nature and the physical world should be controlled in the service of human beings."

Bridges distinguishes between the situational reality of change and the psychological process of *transition* affected by it.[1] In many INSPIRE parishes, people honed in on that process using emotionally laden words and phrases. Staff turnover at one parish was described as "major upheaval" that was "very difficult." One staff member said of her longtime pastor's departure: "He was so cemented into this community and had his fingers out in all these different directions from this point and to just be uprooted—I know it was just devastating [for him]." She called the experience "brutal" for him, "unfair," like a "forced divorce." It was a "stressful time" for the parish. Another pastor described his own departure as "painful." A team member at a restructured parish described the experience of having to attend a different church in disruptive terms: "The first time I went there, I was uncomfortable. I missed my pastor. I just didn't know if I was going to feel right there." Scandal-ridden transitions produced powerful disruption. "The rug has been pulled from under us," said the music director at such a parish. She spoke of shock and betrayal.

To describe the emotional experience of transition, people often turned to a language reminiscent of grief. A parish consultant narrated how first the pastoral team then members of the parish expressed anger and frustration at the departure of a pastor. A woman at a different parish said of her pastor, "There was sadness about him leaving." A pastor at a Hispanic parish said, "You lose one person and it affects the whole." Another pastor spoke of "laughing and crying at the same time" after leaving his old parish. On an INSPIRE application, a pastoral leadership team described the anger and "wounds" left behind when a pastor ran away with his housekeeper without a word to anyone. Another consultant wrote of one parish, "Their energy was consumed by the anger, hurt, pain and sadness of a difficult transition from one pastor to the new one."

At times, the language of grief turned extravagant. A very competent pastoral associate not only expressed anger at the departure of her lay colleagues but lamented, "Why were they all leaving me behind?" She described the changes in her pastoral team as a more difficult loss than the recent death of her ailing mother. When the dismissed principal at an urban parish subsequently died of a heart attack, parishioners even accused the pastor of killing her.

Also, as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler have noted, grief tends to reanimate previous grief.[2] The INSPIRE director referred to one INSPIRE parish experiencing transition, "There's a sister . . . who's been there for years and has a lot of anger in her about all the problems of the past."

Perhaps a surprising aspect of INSPIRE transitions is how remarkable parish team members found them, as if they had not ever expected such a thing could happen. Yet transition is the normal state of human life. People leave jobs, especially in a society as mobile as ours. Death happens to everyone. As developmental psychology tells us, our lives are characterized by constant transition. The very word for emotion in psychology—*affect*—implies that our environment *affects* us, resulting in emotional responses.[3] The philosopher Martin Heidegger described human life itself as the condition of being *thrown* or *abandoned* into a particular and vulnerable world; we live our lives largely as a response to that condition.[4]

William Bridges observes that people generally resist awareness of transition and especially the potential good in it.[5] This may simply result from the considerable distress involved. One priest thought it had to do with exaggerated expectations about peace and security in our lives: "I thought when I was fifty-five or sixty [that] I would be secure and everything would be fine. And now that I'm there, I'm angry." A pastoral associate drew attention to the common sense of vision and family-feeling on her team before it turned over. She felt a great sense of loss.

A point made earlier remains relevant. Parish ministry in INSPIRE parishes was frequently viewed through the lens of *task orientation*. Tasks orientation focuses attention on what people accomplish, but it tends to direct attention away from human experience. A task is what you must complete, but your response to it matters little. Because of the impact of excessive task orientation in businesses, social scientists and management experts still find it relevant to report on the early twentieth century studies of the Hawthorne Plant of the Western Electric Company, where social relations were found to have a greater impact on productivity than

physical conditions.[6] Task orientation minimizes those elements of our lives associated with our social and emotional life. It narrows our focus to control of the environment. Stewart and Bennett write, "The dominant assumption in the United States is that nature and the physical world should be controlled in the service of human beings."[7] A focus on controlling the environment obfuscates a more holistic perspective on life. Transitions become yet another task to complete, another part of the social environment to keep under control. Attending to the emotional disruption seems at best an addendum to and a distraction from more concrete and practical matters.

Yet the emotional disruption has serious consequences for parish leadership teams. At INSPIRE parishes, personnel transitions reduced people's experience of trust within their team. Naturally, this was most prominent in parishes with more dramatic experiences of transition. When a new pastor was installed after a financial scandal, a parish consultant spoke about the slow renewal of trust among the traumatized team. An INSPIRE application for a parish with high pastor turnover, death and illness mentioned the "abuse, neglect, and uncertainty which led to various degrees of mistrust after each transition." Yet even relatively stable parishes experienced a break in trust. Regarding a suburban parish that lost its longtime pastor, a consultant said, "In the beginning of the INSPIRE process, two of the persons were very new to being part of any parish leadership team, and it took some time before they each felt 'safe' and comfortable . . . It was a time of transition for each of the new team members, a time to find how they 'fit' in the parish and on the team." Indicative of the point, a team blanched when a new pastor made rapid changes. The trust level had not yet recovered.

The fact that, in most cases, Roman Catholic pastors are mostly assigned and not chosen also had an impact in some parishes. People feared who might come. One man working at a parish in transition noted, "Like the president [of the United States], we voted him in. [But] we had no idea of who we were going to get or if we were going to get a priest at all. I think it was kind of thrown at us." His colleague said, "We had a lot of fears about who we were going to get."

A related issue is how transitions tend to stall the work of parish leadership teams. One parish stopped having regular meetings while the pastor and associate pastor worked out their differences. A suburban parish found themselves unable to address goals their consultant helped them put together. Another could not work

on their INSPIRE team learning plan. A consultant said that, after their pastor's transfer, one parish staff member stopped feeling like a team on account of grief. INSPIRE personnel described them as "getting stopped and stuck and then getting started again." A suburban lay ecclesial minister said about her old team's INSPIRE-taught skills: "I think a lot of what we did together is kind of lost now, and that makes me sad in a way, because I think they were good skills."

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Details got lost in transitions. When a business manager resigned, one parish team lost track of crucial meeting minutes. In another, rules had to be explained again. More often, however, the stall has to do with adapting to new people with their different personalities and styles of leadership. One battered team, having lost their dominating pastor, hesitated over every decision they made. They kept asking the new pastor, "Are we doing this right?" When a personnel crisis at another parish was brought to the fore by transition, the pastor ceased working on INSPIRE. "[I] put the entire INSPIRE program on hold. . . . You don't really do team building when you know you are moving one of your team members out." A consultant said, "Sometimes it's like starting from scratch." On an application, one parish wrote, "Many of the members of the team have changed and have brought with them new ways of doing things. Long-term staff members and volunteers are resistant to change." Of course, such stalling is not necessarily a bad thing. In some parishes, older staff members took take time away from their usual ministry work to welcome new members or to initiate them into the INSPIRE process. While this slowed things down, it was effective in promoting interdependent work in the long term.

Some theorists have analyzed the process involved in transitions. Influenced by the work of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, William Bridges talks about transitions as initiating people into a *neutral*

zone where "the critical psychological realignments and repatternings take place."[8] Turner's work itself describes the way ritual alters people and communities through an interim period ("liminality") where the social structure is upended. He did not apply his theories outside of ritual, and he felt this interim period was only partial in postindustrial societies.[9] Turner's focus on this dynamic of social change has, nevertheless, inspired analysis of religious communities.[10]

> # The most common effective practice to navigate transitions was developing a common awareness of the emotional disruption associated with transition.

Certainly INSPIRE parishes in transition found themselves in periods of uncertainty where old patterns and practices no longer worked for them. One participant spoke of "not knowing what the future holds." A few parishes had to carry on without pastors for a while. Temporary priest administrators carried on for months or years without being appointed the official pastor, often without knowing when it might happen. When one pastor left the priesthood at an urban parish, the archdiocese told the team that remained not to take on anything new. People wondered about new relationships with new colleagues, and the thought of new pastors brought worry and anxiety about what they would be like. People found themselves confused about roles and responsibilities. A pastor said, "There has been a lot of change in this staff, and it has caused some confusion about who is responsible for what." In a couple of urban parishes, the pastor and the staff had trouble adjusting to one another for a long period of time. Divisions erupted in a number of places after a transition, sometimes without a clear resolution.

Some uncertainty, for better or for worse, came to an end through the efforts of team members. In five cases, a leadership vacuum in a parish resulted in a pastoral associate, an associate pastor or even the parish council taking over effective leadership of the parish. Even when a leadership vacuum did not occur, the stable presence of a strong and respected team member

often facilitated a better transition.

Though people found transitions disruptive and difficult, in many cases they substantially improved the team situation. "Certainly the staff was splintered in the past," said one pastor, "but the change in personnel and [the work of] INSPIRE have healed things. Everyone feels more positive about the staff, its interaction, and [the] ability to work more effectively." In one case, the parish consultant actually helped a new pastor remove a difficult staff member. In another, a pastor persuaded a chronically negative team member to resign, and only he had to listen to the man's complaints after that. In four cases, the new pastor proved more willing to work interdependently with the parish staff. Transition, nevertheless, did not always bring good things. In one parish, the new pastor gradually did away with staff members' jobs and pulled out of INSPIRE.

Practices for Transition

Certain practices on leadership teams helped them successfully navigate transitions. Some of these have already been mentioned, such as a team member's filling a leadership vacuum. Some have made implicit appearance already as well—such as strong lay leadership in the parish. In three parishes, a strong sense of ownership of the parish and its ministry by parishioners moderated anxiety about the future; in two of those cases, the new pastor was actually recruited for the position.

The most crucial practices, nevertheless, were more basic. The most common effective practice to navigate transitions was developing a common awareness of the emotional disruption associated with transition. It is necessary to develop this awareness because task orientation draws attention away from people's emotional responses. INSPIRE in this case helped people to see what they otherwise could not, especially through the urging of consultants who saw the emotional dynamics parish teams wanted to deny. As a departing pastor put it, "I think that was the biggest learning [from INSPIRE]—to name it. This is a transition. Then . . . we were able to help one another." He went on, "[I] probably would have had these feelings and this resentment and whatever, but I never would have acknowledged it had we not done that as a team." His pastoral associate said, "We identified areas that we knew would be affected and owned the process rather than being led by [it]. This meeting empowered us to take charge of the situation. It got us in touch with our own feelings in order to ease the parish through these changes. Comfort and trust in the consultant made this process possible and

easier." A consultant said, "I think understanding [transition] and knowing it helps them to deal with it." An urban Hispanic parish team member explained how, at the consultant's recommendation, they had read William Bridges' book on transition. "It helped explain some of the feelings that I felt and what I observed happening with the parish staff."

The conscious process of transitioning in one parish drew attention to the lack of it elsewhere. A new pastor reflected on how his successor at his previous parish never came to visit, did not want to know anything about the people and was focused on the arrival of his new car at the moment when the previous pastor handed over the keys. As he put it, "The INSPIRE program is genius because it deals with transition—nobody else is doing it. There should be a mandatory session [on it]." Indeed, at another INSPIRE parish, a new pastor refused to accept the reality of his staff's emotional disruption, and it caused tension and problems.

When people did take a conscious approach to transition, good things happened. In two cases the consultant brought in speakers on transition that gave comfort not only to the team but to parishioners as well. At a suburban Anglo parish, a pastor became aware of the need to communicate the corporate culture of the parish to new associate pastors. He said, chuckling:

> You have to kind of bring them up to speed, so that they don't get upset or their feathers ruffled because somebody cuts them off in mid-sentence and says, "You and the youth minister need to talk about that outside this meeting. I don't need to hear this." And sometimes it's as blunt as that. The rest of us aren't offended at it, but somebody new coming in, who's never been exposed to that before, might take offense at it. So that's where I smooth their feathers out after the meeting.

The INSPIRE process led team members at a multicultural suburban parish to consciously welcome a new receptionist and help her adapt to their vision of the parish. In several cases, awareness of a pastor or staff member's transition led to a greater awareness of transitions in other parts of people's lives—such as a death or job loss in the family.

One small parish in the suburbs built their entire participation in INSPIRE around the pastor transition process. With little professional staff, the chosen volunteer leaders spent much of their energy on understand-

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ing how transitions affect people. They read a book on pastor transition. They worked hard at welcoming the new pastor, who had been recruited by the previous longtime pastor. One team member described the new pastor as the previous pastor's "gift of love to us." The team became a kind of cabinet or support team for the new pastor. "I have become close to our team members, and as such, have felt a certain comfort and safety with the parish during this time of transition," said the new pastor. "They have become the eyes and ears, the heart and soul of the parish; it's in their bones." At the same time, the old pastor talked freely about the need to welcome the new leader. The two of them went over the books together. They became friends and demonstrated their mutual respect to the parish. The new pastor referred to himself as Timothy to the old pastor's St. Paul. All this persuaded even those team members who had organized a petition drive to cancel the departure of the old pastor to appreciate the new pastor.

Earlier, we talked about how personnel changes required adaptation to new persons and their different leadership styles. As one staff member put it, a new staff brings an entirely new interpersonal dynamic. Because of this, one of the more successful practices regarding transition was providing time and opportunities for people to get to know one another. Some of this was satisfied by informal outings and social time. Sharing food made a difference, especially but not exclusively in Hispanic parishes. Team retreats constituted another effective means. "The team retreats helped us understand how he operates," said a staff member at an urban parish with a new pastor. One of the consultants made frequent use of the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory (MBPI), and not a few people found this helpful for understanding the leadership style and personality of new team members.

Roman Catholicism is a tradition of sacrament and symbol. In Roman Catholic parishes, priests serve not

only as functional ministers, they also serve as powerful living symbols. They wear unique clothes, do not marry, and publicly preside at major ceremonies. One pastor told of how his previous parishioners invited everyone he had ever baptized to honor guard his farewell liturgy. Priests have an image associating them with sacred things, celebrated and parodied in the media. The theologian Kenan Osborne reflects on priests and bishops, "In marketing terms, this image is an extremely successful branding of the two most visible officials of the church, to the extent that even those who exemplify the brand and betray it reinforce the ideal in their very failure to live up to the positive image."[11] The sociologist Richard Schoenherr and his colleagues, in their critical study of the declining numbers of priests in the United States, write: "By and large...the scope and domain of what was considered most essential and important to organized Catholic ministry has always been circumscribed by those tasks and responsibilities performed by priests." Even in more progressive and lay-oriented Catholic settings, the priesthood has great symbolic import. The pastoral associate at a progressive parish said of his departing pastor, "Well, in a sense we lost the person who symbolized for us, oddly enough, lay empowerment."

Ritualizing the departure of the pastor makes a difference to all involved—the pastor, the leadership team and to the parish in general. The INSPIRE director did a session at the urban Hispanic parish mentioned above. A staff member reported, "In a very prayerful way, [the director] helped us to affirm, bless, and say farewell to our pastor who had made the decision to leave our parish community and the priesthood." The new pastor at the progressive parish talked about his departure from the old parish. Parishioners surprised him on the day he was driving away, taking final pictures and saying goodbye.

Though other priests and lay staff members may not have the same symbolic import as the pastor, ritualizing their departure has also had a positive impact on parish teams: "The farewell dinner after the staff day to say goodbye to our music director was an incredible experience for all of us. It was not only a time to be together but to say goodbye to an old friend. It was a healing experience for all of us. The mass and reception we had for him was also a memorable event in the transition process."

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Endnotes

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