

Transition

Understanding the difference between change and transition will help you:

- Recognize individual and group dynamics in times of change, and
- Respond accordingly.



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Transition - 1

Fresh Start

Talking Points

The God of creation is constantly working; therefore change is a normal part of life. Life itself is a journey, with many endings and beginnings. Our task is to help the community listen to the Spirit and help bring about the change that God is calling forth, leading them along the journey in ways that are respectful of where they are as well. The Exodus story serves as a great illustration of both the work of the people to listen to the call of God and of the leadership skills needed to bring the people through the wilderness.

What struck you about the passages we just read?

Probe for guidance and presence of the Lord; the grumbling of the people. Remind them of how long it took to get into the Promised Land.

The Israelites were in the middle of a big change – and their story of the wilderness is one of transition. The grumbling, the desire to return to Egypt, and in a part we did not read, the building of the Golden Calf (an uncharacteristic behavior at the least) are all signs of the emotional work of transition.

Change and Transition: *What's the Difference?*

- Change: “the act or instance of making or becoming different”
- Transition: “a passing ... from one place, state, condition, etc. to another”

Revised & Updated Illustrated Oxford Dictionary
New York, NY; DK Publishing, 1998

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Talking Points

Change, while understood as a normal and ongoing reality of life, still evokes some anxiety. But change itself is limited in time: a certain event at a certain point in time. Response to change – transition – on the other hand is an on-going, psychological process without a definite timeframe.

William Bridges, organizational consultant and author, has popularized this important distinction: change and transition are not the same. **Change is the “outward and visible” event that happens.**

There are many changes that occur in the calling of a new clergyperson. Clergy leave a prior ministry (and maybe a Diocese or home) and arrive at a new place. Congregations end a relationship with a former pastor, greet a transition or interim rector, once again say good-bye, and then welcome the newly called clergyperson. Each of these changes takes place on a date certain.

Transition, however, is on-going throughout, and the transition in response to any one of those changes overlaps with the transition of the next. Transition is one's emotional, psychological, mental and spiritual responses to change.

These responses are invisible – we might say the “inward and spiritual” responses (though they may have outward manifestations).

Change is an event while transition is a process.

Change Is Like A Move to a New Location

I. Begin Here



II. End Here

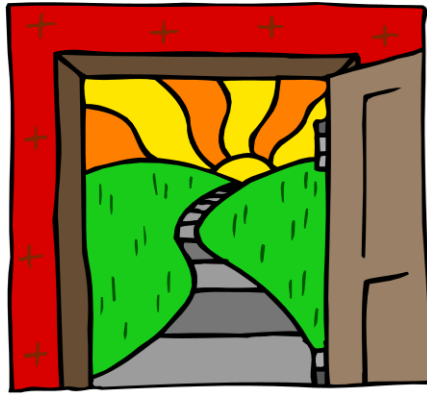
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Talking Points

To put it another way, change is like a move to a new place. There may be some intermediate steps, but one day you are in your old house and on another day you are living somewhere else. If the change is something that can be anticipated (like a move or calling a new rector), then it can be planned. Sometimes change is unanticipated (e.g., the death of a family member) – planning doesn't occur, but you are definitely in a new place.

Transition is More Like a Journey: *When Does the New Place Feel Like Home?*



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Talking Points

Transition, on the other hand, is like the journey you take that makes the new place feel like home.

William Bridges cites three phases in a transition: endings, the “neutral zone” (the wilderness of the Biblical story), and beginnings.

You cannot move to the new location without leaving the old location and crossing the physical distance in between. And you cannot begin to feel “at home” in the new place until you let go of whatever is holding you to the past. Transition can be long or short – it is where most anxiety is experienced by an individual or a system dealing with change and, because the old ways are past and the new not yet fully incorporated, it also presents a significant growth opportunity for a person or a group.

When Have You Experienced Transition?

- A time of significant change – what was it?
- What ended?
- When did things seem “normal” again?
- What were the signs?
- What helped?

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Talking Points

Think about a time of significant change in your life (OTHER than the one you are currently in) – for example, graduating from college, getting married, moving to a new city – and with a partner:

- Briefly describe the change
- Talk about what “ended”
- Describe when the new situation felt “normal” and what were the signs that this was so
- What did you do to help things become “normal” again? What did others do?

Distribute Handout 1 and give participants a few minutes to jot down their responses. Have them share these responses with a partner or small group OR use the questions to facilitate a large group discussion. If discussion occurs in partners or small groups, hold a large group discussion afterward to share observations across groups. Capture the responses about signs of returning to “normal” and what helped that to happen on a flip chart.

Does the distinction between change and transition ring true? Do you have any questions? Let’s look a little more at the concept of transition.

Transition Is a Time of Unfreezing ...

People say it feels like:

- “Walking on Jell-o”
- “Herding cats”
- “Pushing string”
- “Standing in quicksand”
- “Running in place”



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Talking Points

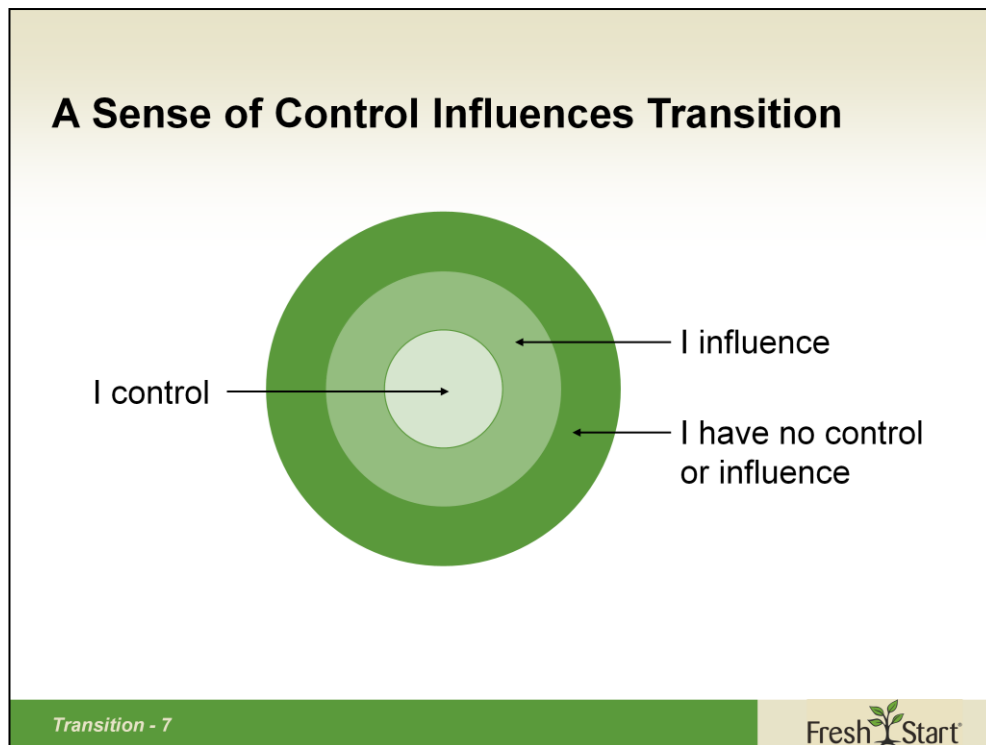
Kurt Lewin, one of the early theorists in the field of social and organizational psychology, said that only when the current state of things becomes “unfrozen” can change occur – and that window of opportunity is relatively small because systems (and people) try to stabilize their environment and “refreeze” into new patterns. So the “unfrozen” time of transition can feel very uncomfortable indeed, but it is also the time of greatest opportunity. Without the wilderness the Israelites could not have forged a new covenant with God or a new system of governance for themselves – they would still have been stuck in slavery.

You may want to ask participants to describe their experience of change with a metaphor. Capture the metaphors on a flip chart.

Finish the following sentence:

Clergy: “My recent move to a new congregation is like.....”

Lay Leaders: “Our recent change in clergy leadership is like....”



Talking Points

How easily people move through a transition depends on a variety of factors. One is a sense of control: You are more likely to have an easy transition if the change is one over which you have control or at least influence.

Transition Is Also Influenced By:



- Whether the change is a happy one
- Whether the change is a choice
- Individual temperament

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Talking Points

Other things influence the ease of a transition. For example, transitions are easier if the change is something we elect and look forward to (e.g., getting married, graduating from school), or is one in which we had a choice (e.g., getting used to a new job that you sought out is likely to be easier than getting used to a position into which you were forced).

Everyone goes through transitions at their own pace – some people are simply more adaptable than others and sail more easily through transitions. Because there are so many variables, responding appropriately to people in the midst of transition is a complex matter.

In addition, the new clergyperson may be in one place in terms of transition; the congregation in quite another. Paying attention to these dynamics and being intentional about using the lens of transition to think about the situation can help ease the entrance of the new clergyperson into the congregation.

How Long Do Congregational Transitions Typically Last?



From the time of the announced departure

To

12-18 months after the new clergyperson has arrived

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Talking Points

The Alban Institute's research is very clear that for congregations **the transition actually starts from the time the clergyperson announces that he/she is leaving to at least one year after the new clergyperson has begun his/her ministry with that congregation.** Those involved in Fresh Start think the transition lasts possibly 18 months into the new call. This length of time allows for doing some things "the second time around," which will tell you whether things are starting to settle into a "normal" pattern.

Thus, when a clergyperson announces she/he is leaving on March 1st, that congregation starts to say goodbye and begins a transition process immediately. If the new clergy person does not arrive until June 1st of the following year, that congregation will have already been in transition for 15 months when the new clergyperson arrives – with another 12 to 18 months of transition yet to come. This also applies to clergy entering assistant positions, especially where there was a previous incumbent.

For clergy, the transition begins when they accept the new call and inform their previous congregation. So their transition time may be somewhat shorter. When entering a new congregation, clergy need to be aware that the laity have already experienced a significant time of transition. And both clergy and laity may be surprised that the arrival of the clergy person on the scene does NOT complete the transition process. Indeed, in some ways transition is just beginning.

It is important for everyone to realize the impact of this "transition process" on all parties.

One More Thing about Transition. . .

Transition time can be so chaotic or painful that it is tempting to go back to the old status quo or engage in uncharacteristic behaviors.



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Talking Points

Because the present isn't what it used to be in times of change, people sometimes want to go back to the way things were (remember the Israelites in the wilderness yearning for Egypt?) or they engage in uncharacteristic behaviors (the Golden Calf). Where have you seen this happen?

Transition Feels like the Time between Trapezes

- Where are you in transition?
- Where is the congregation?



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Talking Points

Transition has also been described as the “time between trapezes,” when the old has gone but the new is not yet firmly established. Now let’s use the lens of “transition” to think about ourselves and our congregations.

Self in Transition

- Let go of what?
- What will make things feel “normal” again?
- What trips you up?
- Where are you on a scale of 1 (*still looking back*) to 10 (*firmly into the new relationship*)?
- What would ease your transition?

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Talking Points

First let's look at ourselves. Read the questions in Handout 2 and jot down your responses. When you have finished, move into a small group with the other members of your congregation and share your responses.

Note: if there are participants who did not come with a team from their congregation, divide them into small groups of roughly equal size and ask them to share their experiences with each other.

Distribute Handout 2. Give individuals time to jot down their responses, then move them into parish or other small groups to share their responses with each other. Afterwards lead a conversation to let the groups share what they have discovered. On a flip chart capture ideas about what would help people with their transition.

Congregation in Transition

- Let go of what?
- Signs of wanting to return to the past or uncharacteristic behaviors?
- Where are people in transition? How do you know?
- On a scale from 1 (*letting go*) to 10 (*beginning a new relationship*), where is the congregation as a whole?
- What would ease the transition?

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Fresh  Start

Talking Points

Now let's look at your congregation. Read the questions in Handout 3 and jot down your responses. When you have finished, move into your small group and share your responses.

Distribute Handout 3. Give individuals time to jot down their responses, then move them into the small groups to share their responses with each other. Afterwards lead a conversation to let the groups share what they have discovered. On a flip chart capture where on the scale the congregations fall and ideas about what would help people with their transition.

Transition



Ever-present God ...

Open our hearts to your
guidance so that our journey
to this

Unknown place continues as
a journey of trust.

The Rev. Canon Kristi Philip

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

At its heart, transition is about trust – trust that the new relationship between clergy and laity in a congregation will lead to an ever-greater fulfillment of God’s call. Paying attention to where people are in transition – what is ending, what is beginning, and how scary it is to be between “trapezes” can promote that sense of trust and smooth the way into a common future. And as the people of Israel found in the desert, God is ever-present with us on the journey.

You may wish to end the session with the playing or reading of “The Parable of the Trapeze” and use the closing prayer by Sandra C. Kolb or resay the opening prayer by Canon Philip (see Resource Section).