


I came across this chapter as I started doing my
Homework for Part 2 of the training for "The Art of Transitional Ministry."
It is the introductory chapter in a book called Transitional Ministry
Today, by Norman Bendroth, and provides one of the most cogent summaries of
current context for ministry in North America. I offer it for your consideration
and for our ongoing conversation about how best to lead in a new day.

Pastor Tim

OUR CURRENT CONTEXT

While interim ministry has served the church well since its inception, much has changed in the culture, the church, and its mission since Mead and his colleagues conceived of the ministry and IMN was launched. Since then the decline of mainline churches has proceeded at an alarming rate. Sharp divisions in our politics and public discourse have heightened incivility in our public life and this has spilled into churches. The rise of world religions in the United States is a new and growing phenomenon. Denominational loyalty is not much of a factor for people choosing a church. A new category of religious practice, "None," is in ascendancy, and increasingly people say they are "spiritual but not religious." Events, programs, banners, mailings, posters—tools used in the old "attractional" model of church growth—no longer bring in new members as they once did. Long past are the days when all churches had to do was open their doors and people would wander in. Christendom has passed.⁸

These changes impact not only transitional ministry, but all ministry, making all clergy, in a sense, transitional ministers. In short, the whole context of doing ministry of any kind has undergone a sea change. Many of our churches are already becoming condominiums, art galleries, or brewpubs, because they have been unwilling or unable to adapt to these changes. Unless congregations and pastors understand and take these phenomena seriously, the trend will continue.

While many clergy are aware of these trends, people of the pew are not. They are reeling from the changes they have seen in their congregation since its halcyon days and wonder what has happened. What follows is a primer

that tracks factors that have contributed to decline and how social theorists and observers of American church life interpret it. Knowing the causes of our situation will offer insight and understanding into the challenges and opportunities before us that will help us rethink what transitional ministry might look like in the years ahead.

A number of years ago General Motors tried to market Oldsmobile to a younger generation to boost its sagging sales and to overcome the perception that an Olds was an old man's car. After showing off the sporty new model, the background voice pronounced, "It's not your father's Oldsmobile." Unfortunately, the strategy didn't work, and the once stolid Oldsmobile was dropped from GM's line. The same is true of the mainline church today. Stalwart members can't understand why people don't want to come to their church anymore. They need to realize, "It's not your parents' church anymore."

I, for instance, was born in 1953, and my parents bought their first home in 1955. It was a little Cape Cod-style house on a cul-de-sac in a brand-new, postwar, baby boom neighborhood. New families and kids were in abundant supply. I walked to the nearby elementary school, and we all worshipped at the local United Methodist Church. It was a shiny new facility served by a handsome young minister with a wife and 2.5 kids. The place was packed with two Sunday morning services, Sunday school classes for all, and a huge youth group. Today the congregation is barely hanging on by its fingernails.

American Civil Religion

What happened? The postwar boom of mainline churches was actually an anomaly. The end of the war, a flourishing economy and rising middle class, the threat of godless communism, and a set of shared values that weren't necessarily Christian fueled the ascendancy of church. Social theorists call the melding of Christian and American values "American civil religion." The term "civil religion" was coined by sociologist Robert Bellah to describe the set of rituals, doctrines, and beliefs that develop around nations, which become the sacred myth that binds citizens in common allegiance.⁹ Daniel Marsh of Boston University has pointed out the similarities between biblical history and American history.¹⁰ America's book of Genesis is the Mayflower Compact. Its exodus is the Declaration of Independence. The book of the law is the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Its psalms include the "Star Spangled Banner" and "God Bless America." Lincoln's Second Inaugural address is its prophetic denouncement.

Rituals include saying the pledge of allegiance in our schools, singing "The Star Spangled Banner" at sporting events, having parades and ceremonies honoring the war dead, and invoking the blessing of some higher power at political events. The virtues of democracy, individual liberty, the right to

private property, family, free enterprise, and a commitment to faith are part of its doctrines. Faith in this system of thought is vague and undefined. It is best exemplified in President Eisenhower's statement, "This country was founded on faith and I don't care in what."

Civil religion and Christian religion can look deceptively similar, especially in the era I've described, so much so that it is easy to merge the two into one, like many American churches do on patriotic holidays. Many of us in ministry encountered this pressure to have the church be more patriotic in spades in the years after 9/11. Civil religion is not a state religion, but rather a set of practices and beliefs that makes sacred national values, national heroes, national history, and national ideals. It is not necessarily a bad thing; it is often the glue that holds societies together. However, to equate the kingdom of God with the United States of America is not only a pale comparison, it is bad theology. The commonwealth of God is a global community that transcends all nation-states and embraces all peoples. Rather than endorsing any national agenda, the Gospel calls all such pretensions to power into question. Churches today need to be distinctive from the dominant culture and to offer an alternative to its values.¹¹

From Homogeneous to Heterogeneous

Today the United States is a much more ethnically and religiously diverse society than it was in the era of thriving churches. In 1955 Will Herberg could write a sociology of religion describing America called *Protestant – Catholic – Jew*.¹² Forty-six years later Diana Eck of Harvard would write a book titled *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*.¹³ This demographic shift was due largely to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which followed in the wake of the civil rights movement, opening up the United States to a wave of new immigrants who were much more diverse than the European immigrants of past movements. After the Vietnam War many families from Southeast Asia arrived, bringing Hinduism, Buddhism, and animist religions with them.

As the twenty-first century begins, we are just starting to grasp the implications of these realities. My daughter, who is Amerasian, graduated from a large urban high school where thirty-two different language groups were represented. There are more practicing Muslims in the United States today than there are Episcopalians and United Church of Christ members combined. More people of African descent live in America than in any country except Nigeria, and more Cubans live in Miami than in Havana.

In the face of this religious diversity, American civil religion was and is ill equipped to help Christians answer a new set of questions, such as What do we believe? What is distinctive about our faith? What is the meaning

behind our rituals and traditions? How are we to participate in the public square? While wanting to be open and accepting of other faiths, what is the content of our own? Addressing these new questions is a task that churches in transition must take up.

Shifting Sources of Authority

Historians observe that the 1960s and 1970s were years of unprecedented tumult that shook us to our roots. The Vietnam War divided the nation as none before had. Partly as a consequence of the war, a new drug culture emerged. Three popular civic leaders—President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy—were assassinated. Watergate brought down a president and scandalized the nation. The divorce rate began rising to 50 percent. Contraceptives gave women unprecedented control of their lives, and abortion became more available. The civil rights movement and the women's movement challenged social arrangements that had been in place for generations. All of the institutions that had given us stability were coming unraveled, and a new generation jettisoned once shared moral norms. These shifts spilled into our churches, and there was divisive conflict over the war in Vietnam, the role of women, divorce, and the civil rights movement. There was a head-on battle between the values of civil religion and Christian faith.

Phyllis Tickle, founding editor of the religion department at *Publishers Weekly* and keen observer of Emergence Christianity, argues that whenever there is tumult in history, there is a concomitant questioning of authority. As an example, she notes that Luther's principle of *sola scriptura*, *scriptura sola* has eroded over time with the discovery that the world is not flat, that the universe is heliocentric, slavery is immoral, women have rights equal to those of men, and homosexuality is not a choice. In every one of these examples, truth that was thought to be unshakeable was shaken. While some reread their Bible through historical and cultural lenses, others reasserted biblical inerrancy as a dike against the rising tide of new awareness.¹⁴

American civil religion was not prepared to deal with these traumas. Since social institutions and trust had broken down and the traditional reliable authority of the family, church, and state seemed suddenly undependable, people were at sea and the church was not providing answers.

Shifting Beliefs

In addition, what Americans believe today is vastly different than what they believed in the 1950s through the 1970s. Surveys of religious belief in America in the 1960s consistently found that approximately 95 percent of Americans were certain that God existed. In 2008 the Pew Research Center conducted a substantial and comprehensive study called the Religious Land-

scape Survey (there has not been a subsequent study of this magnitude since then). The survey asked participants, "Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?" (The 1960 survey did not include "universal spirit.") This time around 71 percent said they were "certain" God or a universal spirit existed; 17 percent expressed doubts; 4 percent claimed a lot of doubts; 5 percent were sure no God existed; and 3 percent didn't know. What is noteworthy is a 26 percent drop in the certainty that God exists in twenty-eight years.¹⁵

One of the more fascinating phenomena of shifting beliefs is the rise of those researchers call "Nones." In 1960 this group barely registered on the polls. By 2008, those self-identified as "nones" or "unaffiliated" rose to 16 percent.¹⁶ These are individuals, largely in their twenties and thirties, who say they have no religious affiliation. Five years later that number increased from just over 15 percent to just under 20 percent of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6 percent of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14 percent).¹⁷

There have also been great shifts in whether Americans call themselves "religious" or "spiritual." In 1999, a Gallup Poll asking whether respondents understood themselves as spiritual or religious, 30 percent said spiritual only; 54 percent, religious only; 6 percent, both spiritual and religious; and 9 percent, neither spiritual nor religious. Ten years later, Princeton Survey Research asked the same question and found these results: spiritual only, 30 percent; religious only, 9 percent; both spiritual and religious, 48 percent; and neither spiritual nor religious, 9 percent. Another survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted jointly with the PBS television program *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, found that 68 percent of the forty-six million adults who describe themselves as "unaffiliated" say they believe in God, 58 percent say they often feel a profound connection with nature, 37 percent classify themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious," and 21 percent say they pray every day.¹⁸

Their numbers include those raised as Catholic, mainline Christians, and evangelicals as well as those not raised in any particular religious tradition. Many "Nones" are repelled by popular depictions of the Christian faith as politically right wing, anti-science, homophobic, judgmental, insensitive, exclusive, and dull.¹⁹ Young adults appear to want a spirituality that grounds them and connects them to the transcendent but find traditional or organized religion unable or unwilling to meet that need.²⁰

A New World View

Since the heyday of mainline churches, there has been a global shift in how our culture makes sense of and interprets reality. We have moved from modernity to postmodernity. Modernity is the intellectual and cultural heri-

tage of the Enlightenment project, namely the rejection of traditional and religious sources of authority in favor of reason and knowledge as the road to human emancipation. The benchmarks of modernity, which mainliners embraced, included a trust in reason, progress, technology, individualism, personal autonomy, and tolerance. Postmodernity challenges the notion that there is anything such as universal truth or one story (called a "metanarrative")²¹ that can speak for all of humanity. While there may be "ultimate" or "universal truth," it is very hard to grasp. No one has a "God's eye" view of the world.²² Our geography, social class, gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, and so on radically shape how we perceive and understand the world. Hence, women's studies, African American studies, and gay studies have become academic disciplines. We have feminist Christians, ecumenical Christians, liberationist Christians, evangelical Christians, progressive Christians, Asian Christians, and African Christians.

Modernity operated under the assumption that the world was essentially linear. It functioned on the belief that human beings have the ability to plan, achieve progress, and solve problems using science and technology. If there was an effect, there must be a cause. If there is a problem, you find the cause and fix it. The world works mechanistically, like a machine with moving parts and predictable behavior. If a part is broken, you replace it. Postmodernity has a loss of faith in science and rationality as the only source of knowledge and truth, a loss of belief in progress, and increased skepticism about any theories that claim to be able to produce a better future. Postmodernity sees the world systemically with an interconnection of many pieces, influences, and forces. This is why the Internet is called the World Wide Web.

Postmodernity is the worldview that "Gen Xers," "Gen Yers," and "Millennialists," those born after 1964, grew up in. They have no binding story, as did previous generations. They lack confidence in the institutions that sustained previous generations and are suspicious of trite answers. The world of laptops, iPhones, Facebook, and reality TV informs their worldview, providing overwhelming choices and an exposure to a mountain of information. This creates a world that is in perpetual motion with no center of gravity. Sociologist Peter Berger calls this "the vertigo of relativity."²³

Mainline Decline

Not only has the culture changed in the past four decades; so have our churches. Mainline Protestant churches have been hurtling downhill for at least four decades. David T. Olson, director of the American Church Research Project, did a comprehensive study based on a national database of over two-hundred-thousand churches. The evidence shows that the overall United States population is growing exponentially faster than the church and that evangelical, mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic churches are all in

decline. To keep up with population growth, Olsen submits, 2,900 more churches would need to be started every year.²⁴

Statistically, every Sunday, somewhere in the United States seventy-one churches will celebrate their last Sunday service. Annually, some 3,700 churches end up closing their doors.²⁵ Researcher George Barna says that churches lose an estimated 2,765,000 attendees each year,²⁶ but others say these figures are difficult to claim with certainty.²⁷ The latest figures from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA)²⁸ shows the average loss for seven mainline churches (American Baptist Churches; Episcopal Church; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Presbyterian Church, USA; Reformed Church in America; United Church of Christ; and the United Methodist Church) between 1980 and 2010 was 26.3 percent.

Sociologists of religion and observers of American church life have offered a host of reasons for the decline of mainline churches over the decades. In most instances decline is measured in loss of membership and worship attendance. Others speak of decline in terms of loss of influence.

In 1976, Dean Kelly asserted that conservative churches were growing in numbers because they had higher expectations and stricter standards of behavior and doctrine for their members. Mainline denominations lost members, he said, because they did not provide clear-cut, convincing answers to questions concerning the meaning of life, motivate commitment in their members for shared mission, require a strict code of conduct, and discipline their members for failure to live up to it.²⁹

Late sociologist and Catholic priest Andrew Greeley argued shrinking attendance and membership was due to the drop in births among mainliners with the advent of the birth control pill.³⁰ The next generation was not filling the pews because there were not as many of them.

Sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke asserted that historic churches lost their market share in the colonial era and never recovered because they did not provide sufficient motivation to remain faithful. They called this occurrence "stigma and sacrifice." The stigma came from not adhering to group practice (no drinking or smoking) and belief (creedal affirmation or speaking in tongues). By meeting these expectations of the group, members gain acceptance and affirmation of the group and distinguish themselves from surrounding society. Sacrifice consists of the investments required to gain and retain membership in the group. The high cost of commitment screens out members whose dedication and participation would be much less.³¹ This is really a newer version of Kelly, arguing that the decline of mainline churches is their own fault, as opposed to secularization theory, which sees decline as almost inevitable.

The secularization thesis is that as societies modernize, they become less religious. This process is both external (a gradual fading of the influence of religion from the public square) and internal (a gradual accommodation of

religion to the culture). As society considers science and rational thinking as the primary sources of truth, so religion loses its authority. A key component of the theory is that secularization and modernization go hand in hand. As societies modernize, religion will necessarily fade. Back in the 1980s a host of sociologists who adhered to this theory predicted that the rising tide of secularization would eventually displace religion in America. That has not proven to be the case.

José Casanova, a sociologist of religion at Georgetown University, sees secularization manifested in three ways: the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies; the privatization of religion and, hence, its diminishing influence in the public sphere; and the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science) from religion.³²

Proponents of secularization theory cite as evidence the widespread decline in worship attendance, the contraction of denominations, and the increasing absence of religion in the public square. Scholars such as Rodney Stark and Peter Berger have argued that levels of religiosity are not declining, while other scholars such as Mark Chaves³³ have countered by introducing the idea of neo-secularization, which broadens the definition of secularization to include the decline of religious authority and its ability to influence society, even if religious activity may not be declining in the United States.

There is truth in all of these theories. When churches have high expectations and raise the bar for membership, joining the community acquires more value and requires more commitment. Birthrates are declining among more affluent and educated couples, who tend to populate mainline churches. The previous generation is not being replaced. The growth of the economy and technology and the knowledge explosion have greatly impacted how people understand and experience religion. So, regardless of which theory is true, we still have a big challenge in front of us that will require a great deal of wisdom and energy to meet.

The Whole Story?

Do these stories and stark statistics tell the whole story of the demise of mainline Christianity? Is our current state just a bleak picture of mainline fecklessness or the inevitable decline of religion? Several significant historians of American religion think there is much of our heritage to be proud of and to recover that may contribute to how we rethink transitional ministry.

David Hollinger, an intellectual historian at Berkeley, wrote a significant essay called "After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity."³⁴ His thesis is that those who lament the demise of mainline Protestantism (he calls them "survivalists") have an incomplete picture about the impact their tradition has had on American culture. Hollinger prefers "ecumenical" to "mainline," "liberal," or

other labels to describe historic, old-line churches. "Mainline," he explains, "is too general and can cover most anything." "Liberal" can apply to culture and politics and not just to theology. "Ecumenical," he says, is a "commodious religious expanse." He contrasts "ecumenicals" with "evangelicals" and argues that the former have always had an activist, reforming bent, while the latter emphasized personal salvation.³⁵ Until the 1970s, ecumenicals were the public face of Christianity.

But that all changed in the decades after World War II. During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, mainline Protestant leaders, says Hollinger, were "giving themselves hell."³⁶ They recognized the complicity of their institutions and churches in the ethnocentrism and sectarianism of the United States. Whereas evangelicals resisted diversity and embraced the notion of a "Christian America," ecumenicals actively promoted a multicultural Christianity and questioned whether American values and Christian values were consonant with one another.

The 1960s proved to be a watershed moment as ecumenical leaders, heavily involved in the civil rights movement, feminism, changing sexual mores, and the Vietnam War, received severe pushback from pew-sitters back home, many of whom embraced the "God and Country" values of most middle-class Americans. Those in leadership were not prepared for this revolt. Mainline churches prospered most when they were closely aligned to other major American institutions, such as government and business, but lost numbers when their leaders took positions that distanced them from popular notions of the "American way of life." Evangelicals gladly espoused the values of American civil religion, which eventually led to their ascendancy as the dominant religious voice in the public square, but mainline churchgoers did not flock to those churches, if at all.

Ecumenical leaders were thoroughly countercultural and rooted their convictions in scripture and theology but failed in communicating these persuasions to local churches in a convincing way. Relative to evangelicals and much of middle-class America, Hollinger says, ecumenists have been "more accepting of religious diversity, more sympathetic to anti-racist legislation and judicial rulings, more skeptical of American foreign policy, more supportive of abortion rights, more concerned with civil liberties issues, more tolerant of non-marital cohabitation, and more accepting of same-sex relationships."³⁷ These values, which many Americans now embrace as normative, are in no small part due to ecumenical leaders' efforts to engage local congregations, expose them to ideas they might have otherwise missed, and enable communities of faith to be a halfway house between conservative Christianity and outright secularism.³⁸ As sociologist N. J. Demarath III has argued, ecumenical leaders may have lost American Protestantism, but they won the United States.³⁹

The demise of Protestant establishment churches occurred, Hollinger contends, because the children raised in that tradition, where they had learned the values of acceptance of diversity and tolerance of difference, did not see the indispensable need for communities of faith or theology to sustain and advance those values. Christianity was only one of many useful vehicles to promote the ideals they learned there. Religion became a personal choice instead of a vital necessity.⁴⁰

What this suggests is that instead of being "Chicken Littles" about the death throes of mainline religion in America, we need to take pride in the accomplishments of our forebears. The tradition has much more depth and resiliency than we might think. Mainline Protestants need to continue in the tradition that takes both theology *and* social action seriously; that appreciates the social sciences, the critical study of scripture, *and* practicing the presence of God made known in Jesus Christ; that appreciates tradition (not to be confused with convention) *and* new ways of expressing the faith; that values the gifts of culture *and* remains countercultural and distinctively Christian.⁴¹

Navigating the New Landscape

The previous pages tell the story of many mainline churches. Once mainline Protestant churches were the custodians of the dominant American culture; now we are sidelined. Once theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich graced the covers of *Time* and *Life* magazines; now Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and Tony Perkins, leaders of evangelical megachurches and ministries, are featured. Once we were the only show in town; now we have to share the public square with many religions and worldviews. Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood called the faith of the postwar years "cut flower Christianity"; it had all the foliage and flowers of Christian faith, but no roots.

What are some broad principles that we can glean from the foregoing observations to help us navigate these choppy waters? First, transitional ministers need to educate congregations about these new realities. Having leaders or the congregation read one of the books cited in this chapter would be eye opening. Keeping the contrasts between "now" and "then" in the pulpit, newsletter, and board meetings is a way to help folks reframe their current context. With one foot in the life of the congregation as the pastor and the other outside as a consultant and coach, the transitional minister can offer a bird's-eye view of congregational norms and habits. For instance, "I notice that you spend your publicity budget on ads in the religion section in local newspapers. Did you know that no one under forty would ever look at a newspaper to find a church?" Or, "I observe that you only spend 17 percent of your budget on programs. The largest portion is spent on salaries, the building, and utilities. If we want to minister to the hurts and hopes outside of our four walls, what might have to change?"

Second, transitional ministers need to be adaptive leaders. Leadership is not about problem solving, but about bringing about a change in perspective. Ron Heifetz, leadership guru at Harvard Business School, has made the shrewd observation that all human organizations, including churches, have to adapt or die.⁴² We witness the same pattern in the biological world: when the environment changes, species need to learn to adapt or they go extinct. Most institutions are used to solving technical problems, that is, when you see a problem, you brainstorm about solutions, and you apply them to the problem. So, for instance, if you have a sinus infection, you go to a doctor, she asks your symptoms and prescribes an antibiotic, and within a week to ten days the infection is gone.

An adaptive problem is one that requires us to change our values, attitudes, or habits of behavior. When you have a rare form of cancer for which there is no known cure, you try different treatments and protocols, which are often trial and error. You might combine that with homeopathic therapy, diet, exercise, and meditation. You're kind of making it up as you go along. This is where many of our churches find themselves.

For a local church a technical problem is "Where do we find another room for our sixth grade Sunday school class?" An adaptive problem is "Given the competition we have with athletics, the crazy schedules of families, and the cyberworld, what might a ministry that reaches and forms middle school students look like?"

Adaptive leaders help congregations answer three questions: "What are your values?" "What is your purpose?" and "What is the process?" Or, in other words, "Do you behave as you say you believe?" Adaptive leadership helps congregations move through change that enables the capacity to thrive.

Third, transitional ministers need to be harbingers of hope and not prophets of doom. To be sure, many congregations might be overwhelmed and extremely discouraged when they hear the news of what they're up against. But one of the jobs of the transitional minister is to move congregations beyond the "survivalist" mode to a "possibilities" mode. They should not give into the narrative of their own demise. Transitional ministers can also educate congregations about the powerful legacy they stand within.

In a *New York Times* op-ed column on the decline of mainline churches, conservative columnist Ross Douthat hopes "that liberal Christianity recovers a religious reason for its own existence," citing the significant and continuing impact the tradition has had on American society.⁴³ He quotes Gary Dorrien, Reinhold Niebuhr professor of Christian Ethics at Union Seminary, who reminds us that the Christianity that animated causes such as the Social Gospel and the civil rights movement was much more orthodox than present-day liberal faith. Its leaders had a "deep grounding in Bible study, family devotions, personal prayer and worship." They argued for progressive reform

in the context of “a personal transcendent God . . . the divinity of Christ, the need of personal redemption and the importance of Christian missions.”⁴⁴

The “takeaway” in Douthat’s article is that the mainline church thrived when it had a deep grounding in theology and Christian practice, coupled with social service and action. Consequently, the faith we share and communicate must be *transformational*. The Christian faith does not offer good advice, but good news. Our lives and our world can be transformed by the grace, mercy, and power of the Living God. Evangelicals often call this transformation conversion, imploring us to be “born again.” What ecumenical Christians advocate is a different sort of transformation—that we must be “born again and again and again.” Christianity is an expedition with many turning points, peak experiences, and corrections.

Today when people are hungry for meaning or an experience of the divine and explore becoming part of a religious community, they do so not out of a sense of duty, but out of an internal yearning, a crisis in their life, or a relationship with a church member. Churches in the ecumenical tradition are at their best when they help people find and make meaning of their lives, relationships, and world events in the light of the Christian story told in preaching and implanted within by providing opportunities for scripture study, Christian formation, and practicing the classical spiritual disciplines.

This is the challenge and the goal of all churches today, to be the church of Jesus Christ that engages culture and feeds human hearts and minds with the Gospel. It is my contention that all churches are in transition, whether they have a settled pastor or an interim pastor, whether they are small or tall-steeple churches. The powerful changes that I have outlined above impact us and set the context for this book. The chapters that follow address in practical terms how we might travel this new landscape before us.

REFLECTING AND DOING

The authors of the chapters ahead are drawn from a wide range of experiences, from different denominations, from all around the country. Some, like myself, have been practitioners of transitional ministry for many years. Others have served on seminary faculties and have actively promoted interim ministry and written on it. Still others are seasoned pastors who now coach, consult, or have specialized ministries. Some are big believers in interim ministry and others are skeptics. We don’t necessarily speak with one voice in these pages.

The book is divided into two sections: “Transitional Ministry for a New Day,” focusing on theory, and “New Models and Methods,” dealing with practice. The first section offers fresh thinking about a theology of transitional ministry. Drawing upon wisdom literature, David Sawyer, a Presbyterian