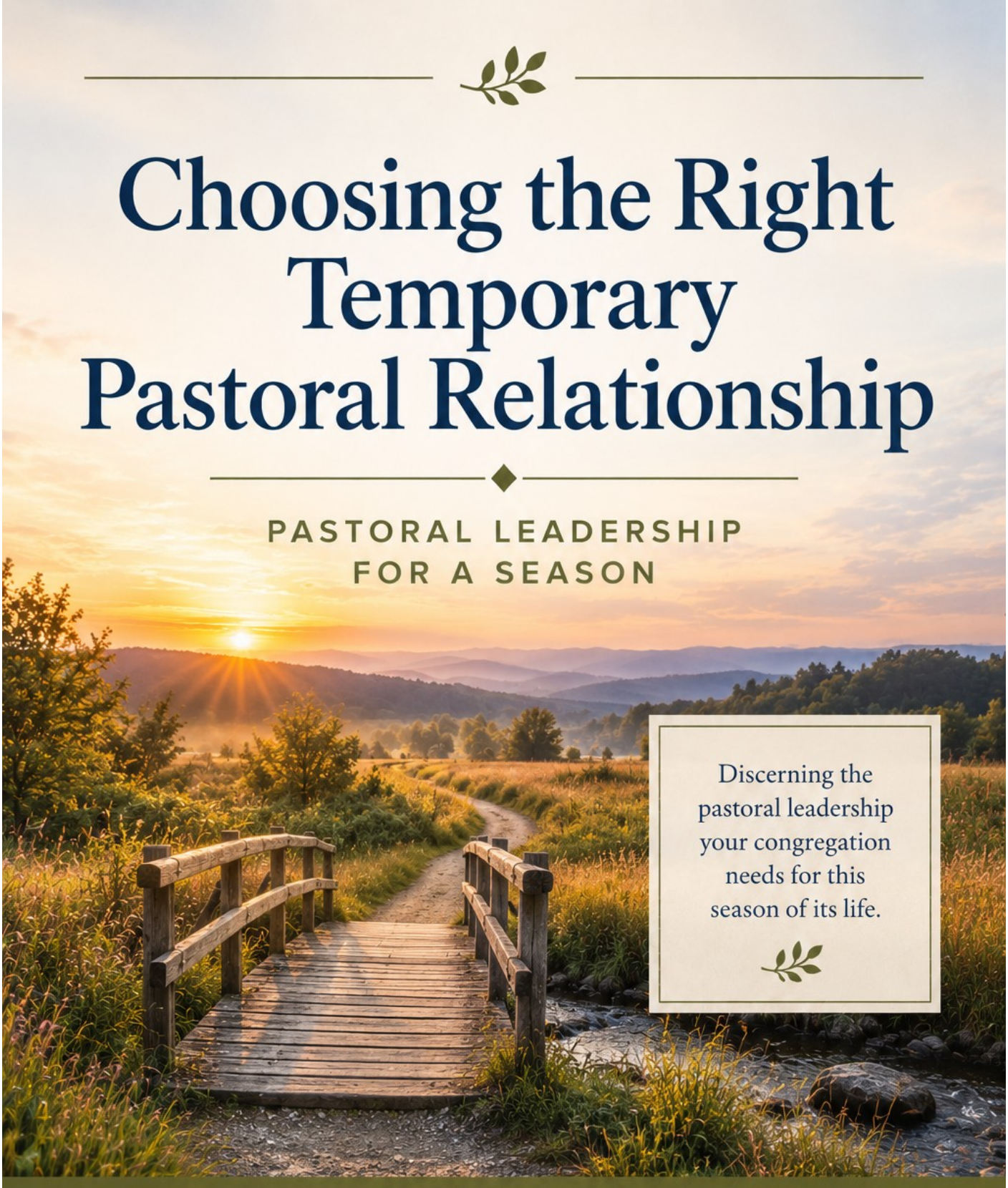
Choosing the Right Temporary Pastoral Relationship

PASTORAL LEADERSHIP FOR A SEASON



Discerning the pastoral leadership your congregation needs for this season of its life.

A FIELD GUIDE SERIES

VOLUME 2

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Choosing the Right Temporary Pastoral Leadership

Pastoral Leadership for a Season

When a pastoral relationship ends, one of the first questions a congregation naturally asks is:

Who will be our pastor now?

The question is understandable.

Sunday is coming. Someone needs to preach. People will need pastoral care. Session needs a moderator. Funerals, weddings, baptisms, and the Lord's Supper will not wait while the congregation completes a lengthy discernment process.

But the urgency of those needs can cause a congregation to answer another question too quickly:

What kind of pastoral leadership do we need during this season?

Those are not the same question.

A congregation emerging from a twenty-year pastorate may need something very different from one whose pastor has served for four years.

A church struggling with organizational confusion may need different leadership from one whose organization is healthy but whose sense of mission has grown stale.

A congregation that knows where it is going but needs stable pastoral leadership while it searches may not need the same kind of transition as one that cannot yet say what God is calling it to become.

A small congregation that can no longer sustain a traditional full-time pastoral relationship may need to stop asking how to reproduce the pastorate it once had and begin asking what pastoral leadership fits the ministry it has now.

And sometimes a congregation discovers that the question is larger than its own vacancy. Its future may be connected to neighboring congregations, community organizations, ruling elders whose gifts have not yet been called forth, or forms of ministry no one imagined when the vacancy began.

A pastoral transition is more than the interval between one pastor and another.

It is a season in the life of the church.

Different seasons may require different forms of leadership.

Begin with Ministry, Not the Title

Presbyterians have developed a number of pastoral relationships for seasons when a congregation does not have an installed pastor. The names can become confusing: Interim Pastor, Transitional Pastor, Bridge Pastor, Designated Pastor, Stated Supply, Commissioned Ruling Elder, Authorized Ruling Elder, Pulpit Supply, Parish Associate.

The temptation is to begin with the list.

Which one can we get?

Which one can we afford?

Which one does the presbytery usually recommend?

Which one looks most like the pastor we just had?

This guide begins somewhere else.

Before choosing a title, ask what ministry this season requires.

What has happened in the life of the congregation?

What needs attention before another installed pastoral relationship begins?

Is there grief that needs to be acknowledged?

Are organizational patterns keeping the congregation from moving forward?

Is the congregation functioning well but uncertain about its vocation?

Does it need time simply to breathe?

Is its mission reasonably clear, so that what it needs most is continuity?

Have financial, demographic, or community changes made the former pastoral model unsustainable?

Are there gifts already present among ruling elders and other members that have not yet been recognized?

What is changing in the community around the church?

Where is God already at work?

What form of pastoral leadership will help the congregation participate faithfully in that work?

These questions shift discernment from filling a vacancy to understanding a season of ministry.

That does not mean every congregation needs a lengthy transitional process. Sometimes the most faithful choice is remarkably simple.

Sometimes it is not.

The purpose of this guide is to help congregations and Sessions recognize the difference.

The Many Forms of Temporary Pastoral Leadership

The descriptions that follow are intentionally brief.

They are not substitutes for the Book of Order, presbytery policy, or consultation with the Commission on Ministry. Nor are they job descriptions.

Think of them as a first map.

The stories that follow will show how congregations might discern among these relationships.

Interim Pastor

An **Interim Pastor** provides pastoral leadership during a period when a congregation needs intentional work between installed pastors.

The Interim Pastor may preach, provide pastoral care, moderate Session, administer the sacraments as authorized, and carry many of the ordinary responsibilities of pastoral ministry. But the relationship has a particular transitional purpose.

A congregation may need to understand the effects of a long pastorate, grieve a significant departure, clarify authority and responsibility, address organizational patterns, strengthen leadership, or prepare itself to enter a new installed pastoral relationship without simply reproducing the one that ended.

The Interim Pastor is therefore not merely keeping the church functioning until the next pastor arrives.

The interim season itself has work to do.

Transitional Pastor

A **Transitional Pastor** also provides ongoing pastoral leadership during a transition, but the relationship may be especially appropriate when the central challenge is vocational or adaptive rather than primarily organizational.

The congregation may function reasonably well. Its leaders may know how to lead. There may be no major conflict to resolve and no long pastorate from which the organization needs to disentangle itself.

But the congregation may no longer know what God is calling it to become.

Its neighborhood may have changed. Its membership may have changed. Ministries that once gave life may no longer connect with the community. New opportunities may be emerging that the congregation has not learned to see.

A Transitional Pastor accompanies the congregation as it listens, experiments, learns, and discerns what faithful ministry might look like in its next season.

The distinction between Interim Pastor and Transitional Pastor is not always sharply drawn in presbytery practice, although interim and transitional training have different emphases. In this guide, the distinction is useful because it helps congregations identify the particular work their transition requires.

Bridge Pastor

Sometimes a congregation has done much of its transitional work already.

Its organization is functioning. Its mission is reasonably clear. Its leaders are carrying appropriate responsibility.

The congregation may simply need stable pastoral leadership while a search continues or while it waits for the next installed pastor to arrive.

A **Bridge Pastor** provides that continuity.

The Bridge Pastor still listens to the congregation's history and recognizes the grief that accompanies pastoral change. But the primary task is not to create another transitional agenda simply because the church is between pastors.

The bridge helps the congregation continue faithfully across the space between one pastoral relationship and another.

Designated Pastor

A **Designated Pastor** is an installed Minister of Word and Sacrament called through a special search process authorized and guided by the presbytery.

Unlike temporary pastoral relationships contracted by the Session, a Designated Pastor is nominated by a Pastor Nominating Committee and called by the congregation. The presbytery, through its Commission on Ministry or equivalent body, plays a significant role in determining when the Designated Pastor process is appropriate and in identifying or approving candidates who may be considered.

Because the Designated Pastor is called and installed, this relationship should not be confused with Stated Supply, Interim, Transitional, or Bridge pastoral service.

The particular search procedures are governed by the policies of the presbytery. Because this is a specialized relationship used in particular circumstances, this guide defines it here but does not devote a separate story to it.

Stated Supply

A **Stated Supply** provides pastoral leadership through a temporary contractual relationship approved according to presbytery policy.

The arrangement may be full-time or part-time and may include preaching, pastoral care, Session leadership, administration, and other responsibilities appropriate to the particular relationship.

Stated Supply can serve more than one circumstance.

An installed MWS position may remain authorized but vacant while the congregation continues discerning its future and retains the possibility of eventually seeking another installed pastor. In another congregation, changing finances, membership, mission, or ministry needs may lead to a longer-term renewable temporary relationship.

The important question is not merely whether the congregation can "afford a pastor." It is what pastoral leadership the congregation's ministry actually requires.

Commissioned Ruling Elder

A **Commissioned Ruling Elder**, or CRE, is a ruling elder prepared, examined, and commissioned by the presbytery for particular pastoral service.

CRE ministry should not be understood simply as a less expensive substitute for a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

It begins with vocation and mission.

The church recognizes gifts for pastoral leadership in ruling elders, prepares those leaders, and commissions them for ministry where the presbytery's strategy for mission calls for their service.

The commission defines the ministry and the responsibilities the CRE is authorized to exercise. The CRE serves within the oversight and accountability established by the presbytery and in relationship with an MWS mentor or supervisor.

Authorized Ruling Elder

An **Authorized Ruling Elder**, or ARE, remains a ruling elder but receives preparation and authorization from the presbytery for particular worship and sacramental responsibilities.

In the Presbytery of Florida, ruling elders may be trained and authorized to preach and to preside at the Lord's Supper under provisions established by the presbytery.

An ARE is not the same as a CRE. The authorization is more limited and does not create the broader commissioned pastoral relationship of a Commissioned Ruling Elder.

For some congregations—particularly those where geography, size, or the availability of pastoral leadership makes regular MWS leadership difficult—an ARE can become an important part of sustaining worship and congregational life.

Pulpit Supply

Pulpit Supply provides worship leadership without creating an ongoing pastoral relationship.

A congregation may rely on one or several Ministers of Word and Sacrament or other appropriately authorized leaders to preach while separate arrangements are made for moderation, pastoral care, sacraments, funerals, and the other needs of congregational life.

Someone who arrives to preach on Sunday does not thereby become the congregation's pastor.

That limitation can sometimes be useful. Pulpit Supply can give a congregation enough stability to worship faithfully without forcing it to decide prematurely what its next pastoral relationship should be.

Parish Associate

A **Parish Associate** is a Minister of Word and Sacrament whose primary call or ministry lies elsewhere but who enters a defined relationship with a congregation, its installed pastor, and Session.

The relationship is supplemental.

A Parish Associate may bring specialized experience or gifts that strengthen a particular ministry without becoming another installed pastor or generalist pastoral presence.

The value of the relationship lies partly in its boundaries. Those boundaries should be clearly defined, periodically reviewed, and understood by the pastor, Session, Parish Associate, and congregation.

Choosing Among Them

The titles matter because different relationships carry different responsibilities, authority, expectations, and forms of accountability.

But the titles should not make the decision for the congregation.

Two congregations of similar size may need entirely different forms of temporary pastoral leadership. A small church may need a CRE; another may need regular Pulpit Supply and an Authorized Ruling Elder. A congregation with a healthy organization may need substantial vocational discernment. Another may already know where it is going and need only a Bridge Pastor while it searches.

Discernment therefore moves in this direction:

Season → Ministry → Gifts Needed → Pastoral Relationship

rather than:

Vacancy → Available Person → Job Description

The stories that follow put flesh on those distinctions.

They are not templates. The congregations are fictional, although their circumstances will be familiar to anyone who has accompanied churches through pastoral transitions.

Each asks the same underlying question from a different direction:

What does this congregation need from this season of its life?

Stories of Pastoral Leadership for a Season

Story 1 — Interim Pastor:
When the Congregation Needs to Reorganize for Its Future

First Presbyterian Church had known one pastor for twenty-three years.

During those years, the congregation had grown, built an education wing, added staff, survived several difficult conflicts, and developed ministries people valued deeply.

Its pastor had been there through all of it.

When he announced his retirement, people were genuinely grateful.

They were also more unsettled than they expected.

For twenty-three years, members had known whom to call. Staff members knew how decisions got made. Committee chairs knew when to check with the pastor. The Session had capable elders, but the pastor carried an enormous amount of institutional memory.

Some of that had happened intentionally.

Much of it had simply happened over time.

When he left, the congregation did not fall apart.

But it began discovering how thoroughly its life had grown around one pastoral relationship.

The Session initially thought the transition would be straightforward. They would find someone to preach, form a Pastor Nominating Committee, and begin looking for the next pastor.

Their COM liaison encouraged them not to move quite so quickly.

“What would happen,” she asked, “if your next pastor arrived six months from now?”

The elders looked at one another.

Someone laughed.

“We’d probably hand her the keys and ask her what we’re supposed to do.”

That answer opened a larger conversation.

Who actually made decisions at First Presbyterian?

Which responsibilities belonged to Session?

Which belonged to staff?

Which had migrated to the pastor simply because he was there?

What had the congregation learned during twenty-three years?

What needed to be grieved?

What should be carried forward?

What needed to change before another pastor entered the system?

The Session began to understand that the congregation did not simply have a vacancy.

It had a transition to make.

With the COM, it began looking for an **Interim Pastor**.

The person they eventually called did not arrive with a plan to reinvent the church.

She began by listening.

She listened to the stories people loved to tell—and for the stories people avoided.

She asked about the congregation before the retiring pastor arrived. She asked what had changed during his ministry. She asked staff members how decisions were made. She asked elders what responsibilities they believed belonged to Session.

Sometimes the answers did not match.

That was useful.

Over the next year, the congregation began seeing patterns it had stopped noticing.

A committee that technically had authority to make certain decisions had routinely waited for the pastor's approval. Staff members had developed informal ways of working around one another. Session meetings had become places where elders received information rather than places where they exercised spiritual leadership together.

None of this made the previous pastor a bad pastor.

Nor did it mean the congregation had been badly led.

Twenty-three years of shared ministry had simply created habits.

Some were life-giving.

Others no longer served the congregation well.

The Interim Pastor helped them tell the difference.

She also helped them grieve.

People had lost more than a pastor. They had lost a familiar way of being church.

Some members wanted the next pastor to restore that familiarity. Others wanted someone completely different.

The Interim Pastor kept reminding them that the next call was not a referendum on the previous one.

It was a new pastoral relationship.

Gradually, responsibility began moving.

Staff roles became clearer. Committees reclaimed work that belonged to them. Session spent more time discerning and less time receiving reports. Elders became more comfortable making decisions without wondering what the pastor would have decided.

The congregation also began looking outward.

The community had changed considerably during those twenty-three years.

The church had changed too.

By the time the Pastor Nominating Committee began its work, First Presbyterian could describe not only the pastor it had loved but the congregation it was becoming.

The Interim Pastor had not prepared the congregation to find someone who could replace its former pastor.

She had helped it become a congregation capable of entering a new pastoral relationship without asking the next pastor to inhabit the old one.

The interim season had done its work.

Story 2 — Transitional Pastor: When the Question Is What Comes Next

Grace Presbyterian Church was not in trouble.

That was part of the problem.

Its finances were reasonably healthy. Its Session functioned well. Staff members understood their responsibilities. The congregation worshiped faithfully and cared for one another.

Its pastor of eight years accepted another call, and the departure was healthy.

There was grief, but no rupture.

There was no long pastorate around which the congregation had become organized. No significant organizational repair appeared necessary.

Yet Grace had been slowly shrinking.

The decline was not dramatic enough to create a crisis.

It was simply persistent.

Fewer children.

Fewer young adults.

Fewer people participating in programs that had once been central to congregational life.

Meanwhile, the community around the church was changing.

New housing had been built. Families were moving into neighborhoods that had not existed fifteen years earlier. A growing immigrant community was reshaping several nearby schools. The downtown area was being redeveloped.

Grace could see all of that.

It simply did not know what any of it meant for its ministry.

At the first meeting with its COM liaison, an elder said:

“We’re healthy enough. We just don’t know what we’re healthy for.”

That sentence stayed with them.

The congregation could have hired someone to maintain its ministries while it searched for another installed pastor.

But the Session began to wonder whether doing so would allow Grace to avoid the question it most needed to answer.

What is God calling us to become in this place now?

They began considering a **Transitional Pastor**.

The pastor they eventually called did not begin by asking what programs Grace should add.

He began by helping the congregation pay attention.

Members studied the community. They met people they had previously known only as demographic categories. They talked with school leaders, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood associations, business owners, and other churches.

They examined their own history.

Which ministries had emerged because Grace had once recognized something happening around it?

Which had become traditions long after the circumstances that created them disappeared?

The Transitional Pastor kept returning to questions rather than solutions.

Where do you see life?

Where do you see pain?

What is changing?

What gifts does this congregation possess?

Where might those gifts meet what God is already doing around you?

Grace experimented.

Some experiments failed.

That was new.

The congregation had become so accustomed to maintaining established ministries that trying something that might not work felt irresponsible.

The Transitional Pastor helped them see experimentation differently.

Not every faithful attempt had to become a permanent program.

Sometimes the purpose was to learn.

One experiment created a relationship with a nearby school. Another brought members into conversation with residents of a new apartment complex. A third produced almost nothing and quietly ended.

The congregation learned from all three.

Over time, Grace's conversations changed.

Members stopped asking primarily:

"How do we get more people to come here?"

They began asking:

"Where are relationships already forming, and how might we participate?"

Growth began to mean more than increasing worship attendance.

It included growth in relationships, congregational capacity, leadership, understanding of the community, willingness to take faithful risks, and participation in God's work beyond the church's property.

Eventually, a clearer sense of vocation began to emerge.

Grace did not receive a strategic plan from its Transitional Pastor.

It developed the capacity to discern.

By the time the congregation began describing the pastoral gifts it would seek in its next installed relationship, those descriptions grew from what Grace had learned about its mission.

The transition had not primarily repaired the organization.

It had helped the congregation discover what it was becoming.

Story 3 — Bridge Pastor: When the Work Is Already Underway

Covenant Presbyterian Church had been through a demanding transition.

Its former pastor had left after a difficult period. The congregation had spent more than a year working with skilled transitional leadership.

Members had told hard truths.

The Session had clarified responsibilities.

Longstanding conflicts had been addressed.

The congregation had listened carefully to its community and made significant decisions about its future.

By the time the Transitional Pastor's contract was ending, Covenant was tired.

But it was not lost.

The congregation knew what it was trying to do. Its leaders were functioning. Its Pastor Nominating Committee was well into its search.

Then the PNC learned that the process was going to take longer than expected.

Several promising conversations ended without a call.

Months passed.

Someone suggested hiring another Transitional Pastor.

When the COM liaison met with the Session, he asked the elders what they were working on.

Not what they thought another pastor should start.

What **they** were already working on.

The answers came quickly.

The Session was implementing decisions the congregation had already made. A new community partnership was underway. The deacons were reorganizing congregational care. The PNC was conducting its search. A leadership-development effort had begun.

The congregation did not need another person to arrive with a new transitional agenda.

It needed someone to help it keep moving.

That led them toward a **Bridge Pastor**.

The Bridge Pastor understood the assignment.

He learned Covenant's history because history matters. He listened to the grief people still carried because pastoral transitions involve loss.

But he respected the work the congregation had already done.

At his first Session meeting, he asked the elders to tell him what they were working on.

Then he asked:

"How can I help you keep doing it?"

That question established the relationship.

He preached. He provided pastoral care. He moderated Session. He worked with staff. He supported the PNC without inserting himself into its work.

When congregational leaders brought him decisions that properly belonged to them, he returned the responsibility.

When they needed pastoral leadership, he provided it.

When they needed encouragement, he offered it.

When they simply needed room to do their work, he stayed out of the way.

The Bridge Pastor was not passive.

Continuity requires leadership.

But leadership does not always mean initiating something new.

Sometimes it means protecting the space in which work already begun can mature.

Months later, Covenant called its next installed pastor.

The Bridge Pastor left without needing to leave a program behind.

He had not been called to redirect the congregation.

He had helped it cross the space between one season of leadership and another without losing the direction it had already discerned.

Story 4 — Stated Supply: When Temporary Does Not Mean Merely Short-Term

Hope Presbyterian Church had fewer members than it once did.

Years earlier, it had comfortably supported a full-time installed Minister of Word and Sacrament.

Now the numbers were different.

So were the finances.

The installed pastoral position still existed, but after the pastor left, the Session knew that immediately launching a search for another full-time MWS would be unwise.

The congregation was not ready to eliminate the position either.

Hope's leaders could imagine several futures.

The church might continue declining.

It might stabilize.

New ministries developing in the community might bring new energy.

Its finances might improve.

Several younger families had recently become involved.

The Session did not know enough yet to make a permanent structural decision.

It needed pastoral leadership while it learned.

A **Stated Supply** relationship gave Hope room to do that.

The congregation contracted with an experienced MWS for part-time pastoral service.

The arrangement was clear.

She preached regularly, provided pastoral care, moderated Session as authorized, and helped the church maintain a stable worshiping and pastoral life.

But the contract did not pretend to settle Hope's long-term future.

That mattered.

The Stated Supply was filling pastoral space while the congregation discerned what that space might eventually become.

The Session also resisted an easy mistake.

Part-time pastoral leadership did not mean compressing the old full-time pastor's job description into fewer hours.

They had to decide what work actually required pastoral leadership.

Some responsibilities moved to elders.

Some ministries ended.

Others were redesigned.

Members discovered that work they had assumed belonged to "the pastor" had never required an MWS at all.

Over several years, Hope became more stable.

Its finances improved modestly. A community ministry brought new relationships into the life of the congregation.

The church was not suddenly large.

But the Session could now imagine that an installed pastoral relationship might again become appropriate.

Because the MWS position had remained open rather than being eliminated, the congregation could work with the presbytery to consider ending the Stated Supply arrangement and requesting permission to begin a search through a PNC.

Another congregation might have reached a different conclusion.

For Hope, Stated Supply created something the congregation badly needed:

Pastoral leadership without requiring it to make a long-term decision before it was ready to make one.

Story 5 — Commissioned Ruling Elder: Calling Forth Gifts for Pastoral Ministry

New Hope Presbyterian Church had spent years assuming that its future depended upon finding the right pastor.

The congregation was small enough that calling a full-time Minister of Word and Sacrament was no longer realistic. Part-time MWS candidates were difficult to find.

The Session had used Stated Supply and Pulpit Supply at different times. Those arrangements kept worship going.

But the congregation wanted something more relational and consistent.

During a conversation with the COM liaison, someone mentioned Rebecca.

Rebecca had been a ruling elder for years.

She taught well. She had a gift for pastoral care. When she led worship, people listened. She knew the community.

She was already doing much of the relational work that held the congregation together.

Someone finally said what others had been thinking.

“Rebecca would make a good pastor.”

The liaison did not respond by offering Rebecca a job.

Instead, the comment opened a conversation about vocation.

Did Rebecca sense a call to pastoral leadership?

Had the congregation recognized gifts that deserved deeper preparation?

Would commissioning a ruling elder fit the presbytery’s strategy for mission in this place?

Rebecca was surprised when she was approached.

She had never imagined herself becoming a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

That was not what anyone was asking.

The possibility before her was different.

With the guidance of the presbytery, she entered preparation for service as a **Commissioned Ruling Elder**.

The process took time.

She studied Scripture, Reformed theology, worship and sacraments, Presbyterian polity, and pastoral care. She was examined. Her gifts were tested rather than merely assumed.

Eventually, the presbytery commissioned her to particular pastoral service.

The commission defined what she was authorized to do. She served within the oversight established by the presbytery and in relationship with an MWS mentor.

New Hope had not found a cheaper version of an MWS.

It had participated in calling forth a ruling elder whose gifts could be prepared and commissioned for pastoral ministry.

That distinction changed the way the congregation saw itself.

Members had to stop thinking of pastoral leadership as something that always arrived from somewhere else.

They began paying more attention to gifts already present among them.

Rebecca’s ministry remained connected to the wider church. She was not simply “our elder whom we decided to call pastor.”

Her commission came through the presbytery.

Her authority had boundaries.

Her preparation mattered.

Her supervision mattered.

And the missional need of the church mattered.

New Hope’s future had not depended upon finding someone who could reproduce the pastoral relationship it remembered.

It had required the church to recognize a different form of pastoral vocation already taking shape among its own ruling elders.

Story 6 — Pulpit Supply: When the Congregation Needs Room Before Deciding

First Presbyterian Church expected to move quickly.

Its pastor resigned to accept another call, and the departure was healthy. The Session assumed it would arrange temporary pastoral leadership and begin the next search.

Then several things happened at once.

Two longtime elders rotated off Session.

The congregation was completing a major capital project.

A staff member announced plans to retire.

And several members began asking whether the church's current ministry priorities still made sense.

None of these circumstances constituted a crisis.

Together, they made the Session reluctant to enter another pastoral relationship simply because the position was vacant.

They needed some room.

For several months, the congregation relied primarily on **Pulpit Supply**.

One MWS preached regularly enough to provide some continuity. Other preachers occasionally joined the rotation.

The presbytery made separate arrangements for Session moderation. The deacons and elders strengthened their existing care network, while the Session arranged appropriate pastoral support for circumstances requiring an MWS.

The arrangement was deliberately limited.

The people preaching on Sunday were not treated as the congregation's temporary pastors.

They did not become responsible for the Session's discernment.

They did not quietly acquire administrative duties because nobody else wanted them.

That boundary initially felt strange.

Members were accustomed to having a pastor at the center of congregational life. Without one, they noticed how quickly they had learned to direct questions toward whoever occupied that role.

Now many of those questions came back to the Session.

Some came back to committees.

Some came back to members themselves.

Pulpit Supply did not solve the congregation's transition.

It created enough stability for the congregation not to solve it prematurely.

Sunday worship continued. The Word was preached. The congregation remained connected to the sacramental and pastoral life of the wider church through arrangements made with the presbytery.

Meanwhile, the Session had time to listen.

Eventually, the congregation became clearer about what kind of transitional work it needed.

Only then did it enter a more substantial pastoral relationship.

Story 7 — Authorized Ruling Elder: When Geography Changes the Question

Community Presbyterian Church sat in a town large enough to have a hospital, several schools, a courthouse, and a busy Main Street.

Beyond the town limits stretched miles of ranches, farms, mountains, and open road.

The congregation had between twenty-five and thirty-five active members.

Its challenge was not simply money.

It was geography.

Most of the Ministers of Word and Sacrament in the presbytery served full-time installed calls. There were few retired clergy nearby. No Commissioned Ruling Elder lived within a reasonable distance.

The presbytery executive covered an enormous geographic area and could not function as the congregation's regular pastoral presence.

For years, Community Presbyterian had made arrangements as best it could.

Visiting ministers preached when available.

Members led worship on other Sundays.

The presbytery ensured that Session had appropriate moderation.

But the Lord's Supper was celebrated far less often than the congregation desired because an appropriately authorized person was not regularly present.

During a conversation with the presbytery, someone asked about Thomas.

Thomas was a ruling elder.

He had led worship many times. He was a careful student of Scripture. He understood Presbyterian worship. The congregation trusted him.

He did not sense a call to become a Commissioned Ruling Elder.

Nor did Community Presbyterian need him to assume the broader range of pastoral responsibilities that a CRE commission might include.

The need was more particular.

Could Thomas receive additional preparation so that he could provide regular worship leadership and preside at the Lord's Supper when authorized by the presbytery?

In this presbytery, the answer was yes.

Thomas entered the required preparation. He was examined and eventually authorized for the particular worship and sacramental responsibilities permitted by the presbytery.

He became an **Authorized Ruling Elder**.

The authorization did not turn him into the congregation's pastor.

That distinction mattered.

Arrangements were still needed for Session moderation. Some pastoral situations required help from an MWS. Funerals and other circumstances required planning. The congregation remained dependent upon relationships across the presbytery.

But Sunday no longer depended entirely upon whether a minister could make a long drive across the region.

And the Lord's Supper no longer had to become an occasional event determined principally by geography.

Thomas served from within the worshiping community that had formed him.

The congregation's original question had been:

"Where can we find someone to come here?"

A different question emerged:

What ministry does this congregation need, what gifts has God already given us, and what can the presbytery appropriately authorize?

The answer did not eliminate every limitation of being a small congregation in a vast rural presbytery.

It made those limitations less determinative.

Story 8 — Parish Associate: Gifts for a Particular Ministry

First Presbyterian Church did not need another pastor.

That was the first thing the Session needed to understand.

The congregation had about 180 members and a full-time installed pastor, David. Its finances were stable, its leadership was healthy, and David's ministry was going well.

But something new had begun happening.

More members were caring for spouses with dementia or helping aging parents remain safely at home. Others had moved into assisted-living communities and discovered that leaving home could bring spiritual losses alongside the practical ones.

David cared deeply about this ministry.

He also knew he could not become an expert in everything the congregation encountered.

The Rev. Susan Parker was a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the same presbytery. Her primary ministry was as a chaplain in a continuing-care retirement community.

Through a presbytery gathering, David learned about Susan's work with older adults and family caregivers. He invited her to lead an evening program at First Presbyterian.

Nearly sixty people came.

Several were not members of the church.

A few months later, Susan returned to lead a conversation for people caring for someone with dementia. Then she preached while David was away.

A relationship was developing.

At a Session meeting, one elder asked whether they ought to hire Susan part-time.

David wasn't sure that was the right question.

Susan already had a ministry.

First Presbyterian already had a pastor.

What seemed to be emerging was something more particular.

David, Susan, and representatives of the Session began talking.

Susan was interested. She loved her chaplaincy and had no intention of leaving it. She did not want to become responsible for the general pastoral care of First Presbyterian.

But she could imagine a relationship centered on gifts she already exercised in ministry.

That led them to consider a **Parish Associate** relationship.

Susan would not become an Associate Pastor.

Nor was First Presbyterian acquiring a second generalist pastor to share David's workload.

Instead, the relationship would be intentionally limited.

Susan would help the congregation deepen its ministry with older adults and caregivers. She might teach several times a year, consult with the deacons about care ministries, occasionally participate in worship, and be available in selected circumstances where her particular pastoral experience would be helpful.

David would remain the congregation's installed pastor.

Susan's primary ministry would remain her chaplaincy.

And the Session, David, and Susan would define the Parish Associate relationship clearly enough that everyone understood what it was—and what it wasn't.

That clarity mattered almost immediately.

A member whose husband had recently been diagnosed with dementia asked whether Susan could become her pastor.

Susan understood the question.

She also understood the boundary.

“I’d be glad to walk with you around what you and Jim are facing,” she said. “But David is still your pastor. I’m part of the pastoral care of this congregation in a particular way.”

That did not diminish the relationship.

It located it.

Over the next two years, Susan helped train deacons to recognize caregiver exhaustion and led conversations about aging, grief, memory loss, and the difficult decisions families sometimes face.

Caregivers from the community began attending some of the gatherings. The congregation developed new relationships with nearby care facilities.

Susan preached occasionally.

There were also months when she was hardly visible at First Presbyterian because her own ministry demanded her attention.

That was not a failure of the arrangement.

It was part of it.

The Parish Associate relationship did not exist to capture every available hour of an ordained minister.

It existed because the church had recognized particular gifts that could strengthen a particular ministry.

Each year, the Session, David, and Susan reviewed the relationship.

Was it still serving the congregation?

Was it still compatible with Susan’s primary ministry?

Were the boundaries clear?

Did the arrangement need to change—or had it completed the work for which it had been created?

First Presbyterian had not needed another pastor.

It had needed to recognize a gift, define a relationship, and make room for that gift to serve.

Emerging Models: Begin with the Mission

The relationships in the preceding stories began with forms of pastoral leadership already familiar to the church.

Sometimes one of those relationships fits the ministry before a congregation very well.

Sometimes none of them does.

When that happens, the temptation is to begin rearranging the available people.

Could two churches share a pastor?

Could a CRE cover Sundays when an MWS cannot be there?

Could several part-time positions be assembled into something affordable?

Those may eventually become useful questions.

But they are not the place to begin.

Emerging models begin with missional strategy, not staffing.

The first question is not:

What kind of pastoral leadership can we afford or find?

It is:

What is God calling this congregation, community, or region to do?

Only then should we ask:

What configuration of gifts and pastoral leadership will best serve that mission?

Congregations often inherit a staffing model and then organize ministry around it. A full-time pastor accumulates the responsibilities that fit within a full-time position. A congregation that can afford only half-time pastoral leadership tries to compress the familiar full-time position into twenty hours. Several churches unable to support separate pastors divide one pastor among them.

The staffing structure comes first.

Mission is expected to fit inside it.

Emerging models reverse the order.

Begin with the place.

Who lives here?

What is giving life?

Where is the community hurting?

What relationships already exist?

What ministry is emerging?

What gifts has God placed among these congregations and communities?

What could they faithfully do together that they could not—or need not—do separately?

Then ask what pastoral leadership would help the church participate in that mission.

The answer might still be one pastor serving one congregation.

But it might not.

A region might need a team whose gifts are distributed among several people. A congregation might need regular preaching and pastoral care but only periodic assistance from someone skilled in congregational transition. Several congregations might share particular ministries without becoming yoked or surrendering their identities.

The possibilities should not be predetermined.
Neither should innovation become a virtue in itself.
An emerging model is not better because it is new.
The test is mission.
Does the arrangement help the church participate more faithfully in what God is doing in this place?
Does it call forth and develop gifts rather than simply redistribute shortages?
Are authority, responsibility, accountability, supervision, compensation, and boundaries clear?
Can the people who serve within it sustain the ministry?
Can the arrangement change when the mission changes?
The stories that follow are therefore different from those that precede them.
They are not additional models to choose from a list.
They are possibilities.
Their purpose is to expand our imagination.
The team follows the mission. The mission does not follow the staffing model.

Story 9 — What If We Did This Together?

The idea began in a car.

Four ruling elders from three Presbyterian churches had decided to carpool to a presbytery meeting. It was nearly a two-hour drive, and after the usual conversation about families, weather, and whatever business was coming before the presbytery, they started talking about their churches.

One congregation had been without a pastor for six months.

Another knew its pastor planned to retire the following year.

The third had a part-time pastor but was finding it increasingly difficult to arrange pastoral coverage when she was away.

Someone joked that they ought to put a sign beside the highway:

PASTOR WANTED. WILL SERVE THREE CHURCHES. LOTS OF DRIVING INCLUDED.

They laughed.

Then the conversation moved on.

One elder mentioned that her church's food pantry had run out of several staples the previous week.

"That happened to us too," someone from another congregation said.

They compared notes.

All three churches were involved in food ministry.

One operated a traditional pantry twice a month. Another provided weekend food for children through the elementary school. The third distributed fresh produce during the summer after several farmers offered what they could not sell.

None of them had thought of those ministries as connected.

But the people receiving food did.

Families crossed congregational and county lines. Some parents whose children received weekend food at school also visited the pantry in the neighboring town. A farmer donating produce to one church lived closer to another.

By the time they arrived at the presbytery meeting, someone said:

"We ought to get our churches talking to each other."

Nothing happened immediately.

But the conversation stayed with them.

Several months later, the Session of one of those congregations met with its COM liaison about its pastoral vacancy.

They talked about worship, pastoral care, finances, and what kind of pastoral relationship might be possible.

Then one of the elders who had been in the car raised something that seemed, at first, unrelated.

"We've been talking with some of the other churches about food."

The liaison waited.

The elder described the ministries already operating in the three communities.

Then he wondered aloud:

"What if this isn't just three churches with the same problem? What if there is something we could actually do together?"

Another elder picked up the thought.

"And if we eventually shared a pastor, what if we looked for somebody who cared about that too? Not just somebody willing to drive among three churches. Somebody interested in helping us develop a regional food ministry."

The conversation had changed.

They were no longer simply trying to fill a vacancy.

The liaison began asking questions.

How much did the congregations actually know about one another's ministries?

Would they be willing to share something each church currently regarded as its own?

Could volunteers serve outside their own church?

What would happen if one congregation had money and another had people?

Was food security actually a shared missional priority—or merely the first thing they happened to discover they had in common?

Nobody knew yet.

That was enough reason to keep talking.

The liaison contacted the other congregations and invited representatives from their Sessions into a conversation.

Before long, two more Presbyterian churches from the region joined them.

Now there were five.

They were not asked whether they wanted to merge.

They were not asked whether they wanted to become yoked.

They were not even asked whether they wanted to share a pastor.

They began somewhere else.

What is happening in the communities we serve?

Food insecurity appeared quickly, but it was not the only concern.

Older adults were increasingly isolated. Transportation was difficult. Two school districts were struggling with children arriving at school hungry. Mental-health services were scarce.

Then they asked:

What is God already doing through our congregations?

They put their ministries on the table.

One church had the pantry.

Another had the school relationship.

Another had connections with farmers.

One owned a van.

One had several members experienced in grant writing.

One had money but fewer volunteers.

Another had very little money but deep relationships throughout its rural community.

Food security emerged as the clearest place where their ministries already overlapped.

So they tried sharing ministry.

The congregations coordinated food purchasing. Volunteers began serving across church lines. Produce moved where it was needed instead of remaining where it had been donated. Relationships with the schools became regional rather than isolated.

The experiment worked well enough that another question eventually emerged:

What kind of pastoral leadership would help this ministry grow?

That was different from asking how many churches one pastor could cover.

The liaison brought the question back to the COM.

What if the presbytery allowed the congregations to experiment with a **regional ministry team**?

Not five churches dividing one pastor into increasingly smaller pieces.

A team.

The congregations and presbytery began looking at gifts already available in the region.

One church still had an installed Minister of Word and Sacrament particularly gifted at developing leaders and connecting congregational ministry with community partnerships.

A ruling elder from another congregation was completing preparation to become a Commissioned Ruling Elder.

Another had an Authorized Ruling Elder who was a strong worship leader.

Two trained Stephen Ministers were already providing Christian care.

Other members brought experience in education, agriculture, nonprofit work, transportation, and community organizing.

No one person possessed all the gifts the regional ministry needed.

Perhaps no one person needed to.

The congregations proposed an experiment.

They would remain independent Presbyterian churches, each with its own Session, membership, finances, property, worshiping life, and responsibility for ministry.

They would not become yoked congregations.

But for a defined period, they would work with the presbytery to develop a regional ministry team shaped around their shared missional strategy.

The team did not erase distinctions among MWS, CRE, ARE, and other forms of ministry.

It depended upon them.

Nor did the team become an elaborate system for covering Sunday mornings.

Worship mattered.

So did pastoral care.

But the reason for the experiment was the mission they had discovered together.

A year later, the congregations gathered for a regional meal.

Someone remembered the car ride where the conversation had begun.

One of the original elders laughed.

“We thought we were talking about how hard it was to find pastors.”

“We were,” another said.

“But that wasn’t the most interesting thing we had in common.”

They had discovered something else first.

A shared need in their communities.

Gifts distributed among several congregations.

And a ministry none of them had designed alone.

Only then had they asked what pastoral leadership would serve it.

The team followed the mission.

The mission had not been designed to fit the team.

Story 10 — The Question We Haven’t Asked

For almost fifteen years, Trinity Presbyterian Church had been remarkably stable.

Perhaps too stable.

Three pastors had served during those years.

One stayed six years. Another stayed four. The most recent pastor left after five years to accept a call closer to family.

None had left under difficult circumstances.

There had been no major conflict. No financial crisis. No staff upheaval. No traumatic pastoral departure.

Each pastor had been appreciated.

And after each left, Trinity looked remarkably similar to the church that pastor had inherited.

The Session functioned well.

The budget was balanced.

The building was maintained.

Committees knew their responsibilities.

Members cared for one another.

Worship happened every Sunday.

Trinity was not dysfunctional.

It was stuck.

And membership was slowly declining.

The neighborhood around it had changed considerably.

The elementary school two blocks away now served families from several cultures. Apartments had replaced some of the single-family homes that once surrounded the church. Young adults working at the nearby hospital were moving into the neighborhood. A community health clinic had opened in what had once been a grocery store.

The congregation noticed these changes.

It simply had no idea what they meant for Trinity.

Most of its ministries would have been recognizable fifteen years earlier.

So would most of its conversations about the future.

When the most recent pastor left, the Session met with its COM liaison.

They expected to talk about what kind of pastor they should seek next.

Instead, one elder said:

“I think we’re about to do this again.”

“Do what?” the liaison asked.

“Find another good pastor. Spend four or five years together. Do pretty much what we’re doing now. Then the pastor leaves and we start over.”

Nobody challenged her.

Another elder said:

“We keep asking what kind of pastor we need. I’m not sure we know what kind of church we’re becoming.”

That was different.

The liaison asked about the congregation’s organizational life.

Unresolved conflicts?

Not particularly.

Confused staff roles?

No.

Responsibilities that needed to be reclaimed from the former pastor?

No.

Significant grief from the departure?

People were sad, but the departure itself had been healthy.

The congregation did not seem to need the kind of organizational transition that would ordinarily suggest an Interim Pastor.

Then the liaison asked about mission.

The answers became less certain.

“What is Trinity here to do?”

Silence.

Finally, someone began describing the church’s programs.

The liaison tried again.

“That’s what Trinity does. Why is Trinity here?”

The question that eventually became central to the transition was harder still:

Where is God already at work in this community, and have we joined God there?

The Session realized that this was the work it needed to do before searching for another installed pastor.

But it did not necessarily need a full-time temporary pastor to do it.

Its immediate pastoral needs were fairly modest.

Two Ministers of Word and Sacrament in the area could provide regular Pulpit Supply. The deacons already had a strong ministry of congregational care. Arrangements could be made for pastoral situations requiring an MWS and for appropriate Session moderation.

What Trinity did not have was someone with the particular skills to lead sustained vocational discernment.

The Session and COM began exploring an experiment.

Trinity would continue its arrangements for preaching and pastoral care and engage a **Transitional Consultant** for a defined period.

Her assignment was simple to state and difficult to accomplish:

Help Trinity discover who it was becoming and what God might be calling it to do in this particular place.

She began by refusing to let them write a new mission statement.

Trinity already had one.

It was framed in the hallway.

Few people could remember it.

Instead, she asked them to learn their neighborhood.

Members walked the streets around the church. They met with the elementary school principal, people at the community health clinic, apartment managers, neighborhood leaders, and local organizations.

They listened before proposing anything.

Then they came back together.

What surprised you?

What troubled you?

Where did you encounter life?

Where did you encounter loneliness or struggle?

What was already happening that Trinity did not need to create?

And then the theological question:

Where might God already be at work in what you have seen?

That question changed the conversation.

For years, Trinity had talked about getting people from the neighborhood into the church.

Now it began wondering whether God might be calling the church into relationships that already existed in the neighborhood.

The elementary school did not particularly need Trinity to create another program. It needed adults willing to show up consistently for children who needed reading help.

The health clinic did not need the church to operate a health ministry. It needed community partners who could help isolated patients find transportation and support.

People in the apartments were not waiting for someone to invite them to a Presbyterian program. But several residents were already trying to create ways for neighbors to know one another.

Trinity began experimenting.

Small things at first.

Not a five-year strategic plan.

Members volunteered at the school. A few began working with the clinic around transportation. The church offered space to a neighborhood group without insisting that Trinity run the gathering.

Some experiments went nowhere.

Others created relationships.

The consultant kept bringing them back to the same questions.

What are you learning?

Where is there life?

What gifts does Trinity actually possess?

What are you doing because God seems to be drawing you there—and what are you doing merely because churches are supposed to do things?

Meanwhile, Sunday continued.

The consultant did not become Trinity's preacher, primary pastoral caregiver, or temporary center of congregational life.

That separation was part of the value of the arrangement.

Discernment is not always comfortable work. Sometimes she had to ask questions people would rather avoid. Sometimes she had to point out that an answer sounded more like nostalgia than discernment.

She could press the work without simultaneously negotiating the ordinary relational demands of being the congregation's pastor.

And Trinity had to own what emerged.

The consultant would leave.

The vision could not leave with her.

After eight months, something had shifted.

Trinity still had a balanced budget. The committees still worked. The building was still maintained.

But those things no longer constituted the congregation's primary evidence that it was healthy.

Members could describe their neighborhood.

They could name relationships beyond the congregation.

They could identify places where they believed God was already at work.

And they had begun discovering which of their own gifts might belong there.

Only then did the Session return to the question with which it had begun:

What kind of pastor should we seek?

Now they could answer it differently.

They were looking for someone who could join a congregation already moving outward—someone curious about the community, comfortable developing lay leadership, attentive to partnerships, and willing to keep asking where God was already at work.

The consultant had not given Trinity a new mission.

She had helped the congregation recover its capacity to discern one.

Story 11 — What We Could Not Have Planned

Nobody set out to create a new model of pastoral leadership.

It began with solar panels.

Three Presbyterian congregations were located within twenty miles of one another in the same town and its surrounding communities.

The largest had about five hundred members, a full-time Minister of Word and Sacrament, and a Director of Christian Education. It also had a large building and parking lot that cost more every year to maintain.

The congregation was financially stretched.

It wasn't in crisis, but personnel and property costs were consuming an increasing share of the budget. The Session had begun wondering how long it could maintain both its building and its current staff.

The second congregation had about two hundred members.

Its pastor was preparing to retire.

The church was financially stable, but several elders were worried about what would happen next. The rising cost of minimum terms of call—particularly healthcare and pension costs—was making a full-time installed pastoral relationship increasingly difficult to imagine.

Yet the congregation believed it needed full-time pastoral leadership.

It had an unusually large number of families with children. Its retiring pastor had taught adult education, helped resource children's ministry, and provided the everyday pastoral presence the congregation had come to depend upon.

Moving directly to a part-time pastor might balance the budget.

It might also leave significant parts of the congregation's ministry without leadership.

The smallest church had seventy-five members.

For years, it had been served faithfully by a part-time Stated Supply pastor. Now she was leaving the area because her husband had accepted a job elsewhere.

The congregation had good financial resources, including a healthy endowment.

What it did not have was an obvious next pastor.

It did not need full-time pastoral services.

It did need someone.

The three churches knew of one another. They occasionally saw one another at presbytery meetings.

Otherwise, they lived mostly separate lives.

Then several ruling elders attended an event at the local community college.

The college sat almost geographically in the middle of the three congregations. Its environmental studies department was hosting a community conversation about energy, environmental stewardship, and climate-related concerns in the region.

During a break, an elder from the largest congregation mentioned that her church had been exploring ways to reduce its energy use.

"We'd love to put solar panels over the parking lot," she said. "We have plenty of parking lot. We just don't have the money to do it."

An elder from the smallest congregation laughed.

"We don't have your parking lot, but we might be able to teach you something about recycling."

His congregation had recently received denominational recognition for its environmental-care practices and had developed a community recycling program.

A third elder joined the conversation.

She was from the two-hundred-member congregation and was teaching an adult Sunday school class on environmental justice.

Before they left the college that evening, someone said:

“We ought to get some people from our churches together.”

So they did.

A few weeks later, several members from each congregation met to talk about environmental stewardship.

At first, that was all they intended to discuss.

But small talk has a way of opening doors that agendas do not.

Someone mentioned the enormous amount of unused space in the largest church.

Someone else talked about the undeveloped land beside the mid-sized congregation.

The smallest congregation described its recycling work and the challenge of deciding how its endowment could serve ministry beyond maintaining the church itself.

Eventually, someone asked:

“What if we did something with the community college?”

Nobody knew exactly what *something* meant.

They decided to find out.

Representatives from all three churches met with faculty from the environmental studies department.

The conversation became generative quickly.

Could some of the unused space in the large church support community education?

Could the undeveloped land at the mid-sized church become a demonstration garden or food-security project?

Could the smallest congregation use some of its financial resources to help launch work none of the churches could undertake alone?

The professors had ideas too.

Students needed field experience. Faculty wanted stronger community partnerships. Grant opportunities existed that individual congregations might never find—or qualify for—on their own.

They left with more possibilities than plans.

But something else had happened around the edges of the meeting.

The elders had begun talking about their churches.

The elder from the mid-sized congregation mentioned that their pastor was retiring.

“We don’t really know what we’re going to do,” she said. “We think we need someone full-time, but I’m not sure we can afford another full-time MWS.”

The elder from the largest congregation understood the pressure.

“We’re wondering whether we’re going to be able to keep our DCE.”

The elder from the smallest church shook her head.

“We’d love to have a DCE. We have three families with children and absolutely nobody willing to lead anything for them.”

They laughed at the mismatch.

One church had something it feared it could not keep.

Another needed more of precisely that ministry.

A third wanted just a little of it.

Nothing came of the conversation that day.

But one of the elders from the largest church went home thinking about it.

He made an appointment with his pastor and told him what had happened.

They talked about solar panels and gardens and recycling.

Then he told him about the other conversations.

The pastor listened.

A few days later, he called the elder back.

“I keep thinking about those other churches,” he said. “Maybe we ought to have lunch.”

Representatives of the three congregations met.

The pastor began with the community-college partnership. He was excited about what the churches might do together around environmental stewardship.

Then he asked a different question.

“Would either of your congregations have any interest in sharing our DCE?”

The smallest congregation answered almost immediately.

Yes.

They did not need a full-time Christian educator. They did need someone who could work with their three families, equip volunteers, and help them build something more sustainable than hoping someone eventually volunteered.

They could contribute financially.

The mid-sized congregation was interested too.

Its retiring pastor had carried much of its educational ministry. If that responsibility could be shared differently, perhaps the congregation did not need to reproduce the pastorate it was losing.

That possibility followed the elders into another conversation.

When the mid-sized congregation met with its COM liaison about the approaching vacancy, they began as congregations often do.

What kind of pastor should we look for?

What can we afford?

Do we need an MWS?

Could we manage with someone part-time?

But now the Session had another piece of information.

Christian education might not have to be bundled into the next pastoral position.

The liaison wondered with them whether a full-time Commissioned Ruling Elder might provide the pastoral leadership the congregation needed within the missional strategy beginning to emerge.

The Session had not considered it.

After the meeting, one elder stayed behind.

“If we’re thinking this way,” he said, “you ought to know what’s happening at the smaller church.”

He explained that its Stated Supply was leaving and that the congregation needed relatively little pastoral time but had few obvious options.

The liaison contacted them.

Their conversation went in yet another direction.

Perhaps the congregation did not need to search first for another part-time pastor.

One of its own ruling elders had gifts for worship leadership. With appropriate preparation and presbytery authorization, an elder might serve some of the congregation's regular worship and sacramental needs while other pastoral needs were met through relationships with the neighboring churches and the presbytery.

No one had designed a master plan.

There wasn't one.

The congregations kept talking.

They kept experimenting.

And they kept asking whether what was emerging actually served the mission.

Eighteen Months Later

The three congregations were still independent.

Each had its own Session, budget, and worshiping life.

The largest still had its installed MWS, but his ministry now included supervising the CRE serving the mid-sized congregation and developing a collegial relationship with the Authorized Ruling Elder serving the smallest.

Occasionally, the three exchanged pulpits.

Not merely because someone needed Sunday coverage, but because members were beginning to understand that the other congregations were part of a ministry they shared.

The Director of Christian Education now served all three churches through an agreement among the congregations.

Wednesday evening became the center of their shared educational ministry.

They gathered for a meal. Children and youth met in age-appropriate groups. Adult education drew people from all three congregations.

Sometimes a pastor taught.

Sometimes the DCE did.

Sometimes a community leader or professor from the college joined them.

The three churches had not created three Christian education programs.

They had created one learning community large enough to do things none could sustain separately.

And then there was the work with the community college.

The land beside the mid-sized congregation became a two-acre community garden and environmental-learning project.

The smallest congregation provided a grant from its endowment. The community college helped secure additional state funding. Students worked alongside church members and neighborhood volunteers. Produce from the garden began finding its way into local food ministries.

The large congregation eventually secured funding for solar canopies over part of its parking lot with technical and grant-writing assistance from the college. Its underused building began hosting community classes.

Professors from the college regularly taught at all three congregations.

The churches contributed something too.

Land.

Buildings.

Money.

Volunteers.

Relationships.

A place where people could gather.

And a willingness to try things before they knew exactly what those things would become.

None of this solved every problem.

The large congregation still had difficult decisions to make about its building. The mid-sized congregation had to learn what it meant to be served by a CRE rather than expecting the CRE to reproduce its former pastor's ministry. The smallest congregation still had pastoral needs beyond what an Authorized Ruling Elder could provide.

Sharing a DCE required calendars, agreements, supervision, money, and patience.

Collaboration created complications along with possibilities.

But eighteen months earlier, each congregation had been looking primarily at what it lacked.

The large church saw personnel costs it might no longer be able to sustain.

The mid-sized church saw a pastor it could not afford to replace in the same way.

The small church saw a departing Stated Supply and no obvious successor.

Those problems were real.

They simply were not the whole story.

The large congregation also had an MWS, a gifted Christian educator, an enormous building, and a parking lot.

The mid-sized congregation had families, land, and people hungry to connect faith with the life of their community.

The smallest congregation had an endowment, experience in environmental stewardship, and ruling elders with gifts not yet fully called forth.

The community college had faculty, students, expertise, relationships, and access to resources the churches did not possess.

Once they began with those gifts rather than their shortages, different questions became possible.

They never gave the arrangement a name.

Maybe it didn't need one.

It wasn't a yoke.

It wasn't a merger.

It wasn't a multi-church parish.

It wasn't simply shared staffing.

It was three congregations, a community college, several forms of pastoral and lay leadership, and a collection of gifts that had begun finding one another.

No committee had designed it.
It had grown from conversations.
An elder talking about solar panels.
Another talking about recycling.
Someone teaching a class about environmental justice.
A pastor asking whether another church could use part of a DCE.
A liaison wondering whether a CRE might fit a congregation's emerging ministry.
An elder asking whether the smallest church might need something different altogether.
Each question opened another possibility.
They had begun by asking:
How are we going to keep what we have?
They ended up asking:
What has God already given us—and what might become possible if we put those gifts together?
There was no staffing model waiting at the end of that question.
There was a missional strategy.
The pastoral relationships took shape around it.

Conclusion — Choosing for This Season

A pastoral vacancy creates pressure.

Sunday is coming. People need care. The Session needs leadership. Staff members need supervision. The congregation wants to know what happens next.

Those needs are real.

But urgency can narrow our imagination.

A congregation can move very quickly from:

Our pastor is leaving

to:

We need another pastor.

And from there to:

How do we find someone who can do what our last pastor did?

Sometimes that may be exactly what the congregation needs.

Sometimes it is the wrong question.

The stories in this guide suggest another place to begin.

Begin with the season.

What is happening in the life of this congregation?

What has ended?

What needs to be grieved, repaired, learned, or released?

What is already healthy and should simply be nourished?

What is changing in the community?

What gifts are present among the people?

Where is God already at work?

What ministry is trying to emerge?

Only then ask what kind of pastoral leadership will help the congregation live faithfully in this season.

Temporary Does Not Mean Less Important

Temporary pastoral relationships are sometimes treated as arrangements to endure until “the real pastor” arrives.

But a temporary relationship may be precisely the pastoral relationship a particular season requires.

Its limits may even be part of its usefulness.

A good pastoral relationship does not have to do everything. It needs to do the work for which it has been established.

That requires clarity from the beginning.

What work does this season require?

What gifts does that work require?

What responsibilities belong to the pastor, the Session, other leaders, and the congregation?

And what kind of pastoral relationship best holds those things together?

The Congregation Is Not a Vacancy

Once a position becomes vacant, the vacancy can become the center of attention.

The congregation begins describing itself according to what it no longer has:

We don’t have a pastor.

That may be factually correct.

It is not an adequate description of a congregation.

The church still has people with gifts. It has relationships, history, leadership, ministries, resources, knowledge of its community, neighboring congregations, and community partners. It belongs to a presbytery.

Above all, it remains a church called into the mission of God.

A vacancy identifies something that is absent.

Discernment also asks us to notice what is present.

If the only question is:

How can we afford the pastor we used to have?

the possibilities will always be constrained by what has been lost.

Another question is available:

What has God given us for the ministry to which we are being called now?

That question does not make financial limitations disappear. It does not make polity optional or suggest that every congregation should invent an unconventional staffing arrangement.

It simply refuses to let scarcity have the first word.

Mission Before Staffing

Sometimes the congregation and presbytery may discover that no familiar model, by itself, adequately fits the missional strategy taking shape.

Creativity should not begin with rearranging personnel.

It begins with mission.

What is God doing here?

What gifts are already present?

What relationships might be possible?

What could be done together that does not need to be done separately?

Only then do we ask what configuration of pastoral and lay leadership would serve that ministry.

The team follows the mission. The mission does not follow the staffing model.

This discernment is not the congregation’s work alone.

The presbytery brings a wider field of vision. Through the Commission on Ministry, it can see people, gifts, congregations, needs, and possibilities that a single Session cannot.

The relationship between a congregation and its COM should therefore be more than regulatory.

At its best, it is a partnership in discernment.

Sometimes the most important contribution a liaison can make is not an answer but a question the Session has not yet thought to ask.

A Relationship for a Season

Seasons change.

A relationship that fits faithfully now may not fit forever.

That does not mean it failed.

Nor should a temporary relationship continue indefinitely simply because changing it would be difficult.

Congregation and presbytery should return periodically to the questions with which they began:

What is this relationship helping us do?

What are we learning?

What has changed?

What gifts have emerged?

What no longer fits?

What does the next season require?

Paying attention to those questions is part of discernment.

The Question Beneath the Question

A congregation facing pastoral transition understandably wants to know:

Who will lead us now?

Pastoral leadership matters.

So do preaching, sacraments, pastoral care, administration, and the everyday work of congregational life.

But beneath the question of *who* lies another question:

What ministry is God calling us to embrace during this season of our life?

Once that question is taken seriously, the congregation is no longer merely filling a vacancy.

It is discerning what gifts, relationships, authority, leadership, and pastoral care will help it participate faithfully in God’s mission.

Sometimes the answer will be familiar.

Sometimes it will surprise us.

The goal is not innovation.

The goal is not preserving a staffing model.

The goal is faithfulness.

So the question with which a Session begins may also be the question with which this guide should end:

What ministry is God calling this congregation to embrace during this season of its life, and what kind of pastoral leadership will best help us live faithfully into that ministry?