

CONGREGATIONAL TRANSITION MODELS

IN MAINLINE PROTESTANT CHURCHES

*Research and best practices for guiding
congregations through seasons of pastoral
leadership change*



EVIDENCE. EXPERIENCE.
WISDOM FOR WHAT'S NEXT.

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Executive Summary

Across the mainline Protestant sources reviewed from 2021–2026, the strongest recurring pattern is not a single denomination-specific template, but a **transition-focused bundle**: a trained **transitional leader**, a clearly empowered lay **transition team**, structured leave-taking, congregational self-study, explicit work on grief and conflict, and a search or appointment process that happens **after** discernment rather than instead of it. This pattern appears in Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist materials, even though the governing structures differ. The convergence matters because recent national clergy research shows that conflict and relational disconnection are major drivers of ministry strain, which makes “placeholder” leadership alone a weak response in many congregations. ¹

The most effective model in complex situations is a **trained transitional leader plus a lay transition team**. It is especially well-suited for congregations coming out of a long pastorate, moral injury or misconduct, major contextual change, chronic anxiety, or unresolved conflict. By contrast, a **search-first model** can work well in healthy, stable congregations with relatively low anxiety, but it performs less well when the congregation is still comparing every decision to the previous pastor, has not clarified leadership roles, or does not yet understand its changed mission field. Episcopal diocesan guidance now makes this distinction unusually visible by publicizing both standard self-study searches and accelerated models. ²

The most effective tools are also layered. **Assessment instruments and congregational surveys** are high-value because they give search committees and boards a disciplined picture of expectations, culture, and fault lines. **Neighborhood data tools** are increasingly important because post-pandemic congregations are serving changing communities and many churches are no longer well described by their pre-2020 assumptions. **Conflict mediation** has very high leverage when conflict is active. **Coaching and transition coaches** are among the best implementation supports because they keep boards, search teams, and transitional leaders from reverting to improvisation under pressure. **Dashboards and trend tools** are useful, but only when paired with theology, strategy, and human judgment; by themselves, they do not tell a congregation what to do. ³

The evidence base, however, is uneven. Mainline denominations publish many **process guides** and **practice norms**, but relatively few public, longitudinal studies comparing outcomes across models. In other words, the literature is much stronger on what wise practice looks like than on causal proof that one model always outperforms another. The ratings in this report should therefore be read as **evidence-weighted judgments**, not as experimental findings. ⁴

Scope, Assumptions, and Evidence Base

This report assumes the user’s stated default scope: **U.S. mainline Protestant churches**, unless otherwise noted. Because the public documentation is strongest and most current there, the comparative analysis emphasizes the **Episcopal Church, ELCA, PC(USA), United Methodist Church, and United Church of Christ**. Official materials in these traditions still often use legacy “interim” language; except in source titles, this report translates that language into the requested terms **transition time** and **transitional leader**. 5

The comparative criteria used here are broader than mere vacancy length. In the literature reviewed, the most meaningful indicators of effectiveness are: whether a congregation exits transition time with **clearer mission fit, less unresolved conflict, better role clarity, a realistic profile of itself and its neighborhood, healthier boundaries with the previous pastor**, and an onboarding plan that makes the next call or appointment more sustainable. This broader definition fits recent clergy and congregational research: nearly half of clergy in a large 2023 survey had considered leaving their congregation, and the strongest drivers were not doctrinal disagreement or lack of vocation but relational fracture and conflict. At the same time, broader congregational life is changing rapidly: a 2025 national attender study found that 38% of attenders had joined their current congregation in the prior five years, 21% reported increased attendance compared with pre-pandemic participation, and 26% now participate predominantly virtually or in hybrid patterns. 6

The research base also shows why transition time now matters more than it did in older “fill the pulpit until the next pastor arrives” frameworks. Hartford/FACT data released in 2026 found resilience and adaptation alongside continued unevenness across congregations, based on responses from 7,453 congregations across 79 faith traditions. Put simply, many churches are not returning to a previous normal; they are deciding what kind of church they will become in a new environment. That makes transition models designed around discernment and learning significantly more plausible than models designed only around continuity. 7

A final methodological caution is necessary. The best public sources from 2021–2026 are dominated by denominational offices, dioceses, synods, and practitioner organizations. Those sources are highly valuable because they show what churches are actually doing, but they do not always publish hard outcomes such as five-year successor tenure, post-transition attendance change, or recurrence of conflict. The report therefore distinguishes between **strength of practice consensus** and **strength of published quantitative evidence**. 8

Comparative Analysis of Transition Models

The table below uses a side-labeled layout so each row functions like a compact decision card. The judgments are relative and evidence-weighted.

Model	Comparative summary
Trained transitional leader with lay transition team	Description: A trained transitional leader serves for a defined transition time while a lay transition team helps the congregation assess history, identity, leadership needs, and future mission. Typical timeline: Most often about 9–18 months in congregational-call systems; sometimes longer if conflict or deep discernment is required. Governance / leadership: Usually judicatory-supervised—bishop and synod in ELCA, bishop/canon and vestry in Episcopal settings, conference/association in UCC, presbytery and committees in PC(USA), district superintendent structures in UMC. Key activities: leave-taking, grief work, self-study, profile preparation, leadership clarification, conflict assessment, and preparation for the next call or appointment. Success metrics: completion of self-study/profile, lower anxiety, clearer mission priorities, readiness for the next leader, and healthier onboarding. Common challenges: duration, cost, and member impatience. Denominational variations: ELCA synods explicitly pair transition teams with Ministry Site Profiles; UCC expects a governing body or transition team to engage the whole congregation in discovery, assessment, and healing; Episcopal dioceses coach vestries and search committees through discernment; UMC TIIMS are used especially for after-care, conflict, revitalization, and sabbatical coverage. Overall judgment: Highest-confidence model for complex transitions. ⁹
Team-led transition with coach or synod/diocesan consultant	Description: Instead of relying primarily on a full-time transitional leader, the congregation uses a strong lay transition team supported by a coach, consultant, or synod/diocesan transition leader. Typical timeline: Roughly 6–15 months, depending on whether clergy coverage is full-time, part-time, or supplied. Governance / leadership: Lay team carries more operational weight; judicatory staff or coach supports process discipline. Key activities: meeting design, role clarity, profile drafting, listening sessions, data review, and boundary management. Success metrics: better lay ownership, improved board function, and calmer search dynamics. Common challenges: uneven lay capacity and the temptation to confuse committee work with spiritual discernment. Denominational variations: Rocky Mountain Synod uses trained transition coaches as direct liaison staff; Episcopal diocesan offices commonly coach vestries and search committees; UCC conference staff explicitly equip governing bodies and search committees with wider-church tools. Overall judgment: High value where finances or clergy supply make a full-time transitional leader impractical. ¹⁰

Model	Comparative summary
Search-first standard search model	Description: The congregation moves relatively quickly into search structures, with self-study included but contained. Typical timeline: In one publicly documented Episcopal diocesan model, standard search involves 1 year to 18 months of self-study and search committee work. Governance / leadership: Search committee and governing board are central; judicatory offices provide matching, vetting, and policy support. Key activities: profile creation, candidate review, interviews, and eventual call or appointment. Success metrics: timeline discipline, quality of candidate fit, and orderly call process. Common challenges: weak grief work, insufficient conflict diagnosis, and unrealistic profiles shaped by nostalgia. Denominational variations: PC(USA) call process support collaborates on pastoral endings, search committee formation, and candidate identification through Church Leadership Connection; Episcopal dioceses often route profiles and candidates through the Office for Transition Ministry. Overall judgment: Moderately effective in healthy congregations; less effective in anxious or wounded systems. ¹¹
Accelerated search with extended onboarding or term-call	Description: The congregation shortens the formal search window, then carries visioning and planning into the first year or years of the next ministry. Typical timeline: One Episcopal diocesan example describes a 3–5 month accelerated search leading to a three-year priest-in-charge arrangement, with visioning and planning continuing in a year-long onboarding process. ELCA synods also publicly describe transitional roles such as coverage, intentional transition, discernment, and term-call. Governance / leadership: Strong vestry/council role, with bishop/synod/conference oversight. Key activities: shortened discernment up front, then intentional onboarding and planning after arrival. Success metrics: speed, role stability, and whether delayed visioning is actually completed. Common challenges: pushing unresolved grief or conflict downstream into the first years of the new pastorate. Denominational variations: Episcopal accelerated search; ELCA transitional-pastor categories including discernment and term-call. Overall judgment: Moderate-to-high situational value, especially where urgency is real but uncertainty remains high. ¹²
Sabbatical or renewal bridge model	Description: A transitional leader or trained specialist is used during clergy sabbatical, short-term renewal leave, or other time-limited absences. Typical timeline: Usually a few months. Governance / leadership: Temporary clergy coverage under judicatory rules; governing board remains active. Key activities: maintaining worship and pastoral continuity, protecting the sabbatical, and sometimes limited reflection on mission. Success metrics: continuity, clergy renewal, and avoidance of regression during the leave. Common challenges: this model is often too light for post-crisis or post-tenure transitions. Denominational variations: Texas Conference explicitly identifies short-term spiritual renewal leave, health/personal leave, and mid-year appointment changes as times to request a TIIMS specialist. Overall judgment: Appropriate for planned leaves; not a substitute for deeper transition work after a major pastoral ending. ¹³

Model	Comparative summary
Minimal bridge coverage or pulpit-supply-only model	Description: The congregation prioritizes worship continuity and administration but does little intentional congregational work. Typical timeline: Often 1–6 months, sometimes longer by default. Governance / leadership: Session, vestry, council, or board shoulders the load while clergy supply covers Sundays and emergencies. Key activities: continuity of worship, funerals, emergencies, and basic administration. Success metrics: short-term stability only. Common challenges: unresolved grief, hidden conflict, vague expectations for the next pastor, and overload for lay leaders. Denominational variations: Denominational materials generally treat this as insufficient except in very simple settings; Saint Paul Area Synod, for example, portrays transition time as involving governance, staffing, records, finance, and evaluation, not merely Sunday coverage. Overall judgment: Low-to-moderate effectiveness except in unusually stable, short, low-anxiety vacancies. ¹⁴

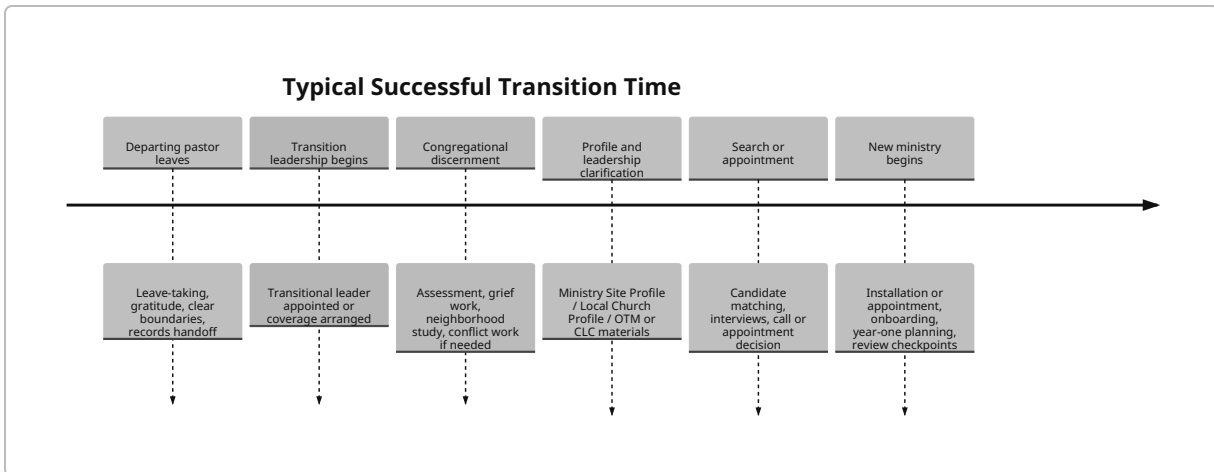
The single clearest comparative finding is that **transition-focused approaches outperform search-only approaches in complicated congregations** because they align with the real problems churches are facing now. When clergy strain is driven by conflict and relational disconnection, and when congregations themselves are adapting to membership turnover, hybrid worship habits, and changed community environments, the better question is not simply “How fast can we fill the role?” but “What kind of congregation will the next leader inherit?” The literature reviewed overwhelmingly privileges the second question. ¹⁵

Polity changes the mechanics, but not the core logic. In **Episcopal** settings, bishops and transition canons shape process, candidate vetting, and approval, with vestries and search committees carrying parish discernment. In the **ELCA**, synod bishops arrange transitional leadership and congregations often move from a transition team to a call committee through a Ministry Site Profile. In **PC(USA)**, presbyteries and the Office of Call Process Support work through committees, search teams, and Church Leadership Connection. In the **UCC**, conference and association staff support local church governance, profiles, and search-and-call practices. In the **UMC**, bishops and district superintendents operate within an appointment system, but still use specialized transitional leaders for congregations in conflict, after trauma, or during renewal leave. ¹⁶

Quantitatively, the uptake of transitional forms is substantial where public data exist. One ELCA synod reports that **about one fourth** of its congregations are in some form of transition at any given time. PC(USA) national occupation data published in 2026 list **341 interim pastors or interim associates** and **694 temporary pastoral relationships** in 2022, suggesting that transitional forms are not edge cases but a significant part of the ministerial ecosystem. Those counts do not prove which model is best, but they do show how normal transitional arrangements have become. ¹⁷

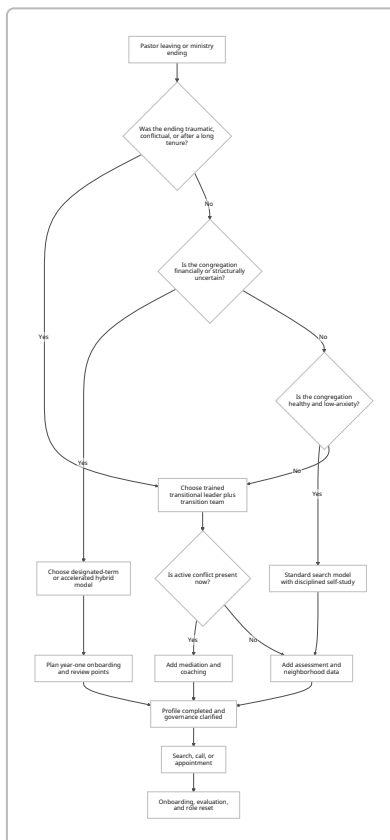
Choosing a Model and Typical Transition Time

A successful transition time is usually phase-based rather than event-based. The Lutheran and Episcopal examples reviewed are especially clear: first comes leave-taking, then transitional leadership and self-study, then search or appointment, and finally structured beginning-new-ministry work. ¹⁸



This phase sequence is directly visible in the Saint Paul Area Synod's four-part process—leave-taking; transitional leadership and transition team; call process; beginning new ministry—and in the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island's distinction between transition, self-study, receiving names, and either standard or accelerated search. ¹⁹

The next diagram translates the literature into a decision tool. Its purpose is diagnostic, not canonical: denominational rules still govern final process choices.



The core decision points come straight from denominational guidance. ELCA policy highlights long pastorates, changed mission contexts, discipline-related exits, and significant discord as cases especially suited to experienced trained transitional leadership. UCC guidance explicitly joins transition teams, discovery, assessment, and healing to the preparation of the next settled call. UMC TIIMS guidance identifies after-care, conflict, revitalization, and renewal leave as specialized use cases. Episcopal dioceses distinguish between a longer self-study search and accelerated pathways that shift some planning into the onboarding period. ²⁰

In practical terms, the best-fit rules are fairly stable. If the departure followed a **long and beloved pastorate**, use a deeper transition model. If the congregation is **already fighting**, add mediation before expecting committee work to solve the problem. If the congregation faces **financial or structural uncertainty**, use a designated-term or accelerated hybrid so the church does not lock itself too quickly into a leadership design it has not yet clarified. If the congregation is unusually healthy and aligned, a search-first model can be sufficient—but even then, structured self-study is still worth doing. ²¹

Evaluation of Transition Tools

The tool table below rates effectiveness **relative to transition use**, not as universal church tools. Cost categories are also relative. Where public price signals exist, they are noted; where they do not, ratings are inferred from the need for external specialists and staff time.

Tool	Comparative summary
Congregational assessment instruments and surveys	What it does: surfaces expectations, energy, conflict zones, strengths, and readiness. Effectiveness: High when used early in transition time and interpreted with leadership present. Relative cost: Low to medium. Hartford's church inventories cost \$200–\$300 online; Holy Cow's CAT pricing is higher and usually includes required interpretation, with current public price signals ranging from several hundred dollars upward depending on size and service level. Required expertise: Medium. A survey is easy to administer; interpretation requires skill. Implementation steps: choose instrument; define population; communicate purpose; collect broad participation; interpret with board/search team; translate findings into profile and priorities. Why it works: it reduces fantasy, nostalgia, and projection. Best use: almost every transition, especially before profile writing. ²²
Profile and self-study tools	What it does: turns discernment into a public-facing narrative and leadership specification. Effectiveness: High, but only if preceded by honest listening. Relative cost: Low. Usually embedded in denominational systems. Required expertise: Medium. Teams need facilitation and writing skill. Implementation steps: gather self-study data; describe congregation and context; clarify mission priorities; define leadership characteristics; revise with judicatory support; then release the profile. Examples: ELCA Ministry Site Profile, UCC Local Church Profile, Episcopal OTM portfolio systems, and PC(USA)'s CLC-related processes. Best use: every call or appointment process. ²³

Tool	Comparative summary
Neighborhood demographic tools	What it does: compares the congregation's assumptions with actual neighborhood data. Effectiveness: Medium-high, particularly in post-pandemic contexts and changing communities. Relative cost: Low to medium. MissionInsite retail reports are publicly listed from \$95 to \$400, while some UCC and UMC bodies provide access through conference or denominational licenses at no charge to local congregations. Required expertise: Low to medium. Leaders can start easily, but deeper interpretation benefits from coaching. Implementation steps: define radius; review age, race/ethnicity, household and economic patterns; compare with congregation; identify mismatches; adjust outreach, staffing profile, and mission priorities. Best use: before finalizing search profiles and strategic priorities. ²⁴
Visioning and strategic planning frameworks	What it does: converts transition data into priorities and action. Effectiveness: High when the framework is tied to a few concrete decisions; moderate when treated as inspirational language only. Relative cost: Medium. Can be internal, but many churches use facilitation. Required expertise: Medium-high. Good facilitation matters. Implementation steps: gather lagging data; identify leading indicators; set 2–3 priorities; test them against mission field realities; review quarterly. Examples: PC(USA) Vital Congregations and Episcopal data-trend tools explicitly connect data, discernment, and strategy. Best use: for congregations uncertain what kind of leader they actually need next. ²⁵
Conflict mediation and alternative dispute resolution	What it does: creates a structured setting to restore trust, clarify roles, and address disputes before they distort the search or appointment process. Effectiveness: Very high when conflict is real; low when conflict is absent. Relative cost: Medium to high, because outside facilitation is usually required. Required expertise: High. This is specialist work. Implementation steps: diagnose whether conflict is active or latent; engage third-party facilitator; set behavioral covenants and process norms; document decisions; schedule follow-up. Best use: after forced exits, misconduct, factional conflict, or repeated failed searches. ²⁶
Coaching and transition coaches	What it does: keeps a congregation from drifting, overreacting, or collapsing all leadership functions into the search committee. Effectiveness: High as an implementation support. Relative cost: Medium. Public practitioner pricing commonly lands in the hourly-consulting range; Holy Cow's transition coaching is posted at \$150/hour, and some synods or dioceses internalize the cost through staff transition coaches. Required expertise: High from the coach, moderate from the congregation. Implementation steps: appoint coach; clarify scope; schedule regular board/search-team check-ins; use coaching to interpret data, prepare interviews, and resolve process confusion. Best use: almost any congregation with limited experience leading a transition. ²⁷

Tool	Comparative summary
Leadership development and transition-team formation	What it does: broadens ownership beyond clergy and prevents the next pastor from inheriting an overdependent system. Effectiveness: High. Relative cost: Low to medium, depending on training needs. Required expertise: Medium. Boards and teams need role clarity and some training. Implementation steps: appoint transition team separately from search team where possible; train on boundaries, discernment, and communication; distribute work; review progress monthly. Best use: especially strong in congregations accustomed to pastor-centric leadership. ²⁸
Dashboards and trend tools	What it does: tracks attendance, giving, participation, and neighborhood data over time. Effectiveness: Medium by themselves; high when paired with strategy and theological interpretation. Relative cost: Low. Episcopal tools are public-facing, and register applications are integrated into reporting systems. Required expertise: Low to medium. Teams need basic data literacy. Implementation steps: pick a small set of lagging and leading indicators; review monthly or quarterly; pair numbers with board discussion and mission decisions; adapt interventions. Best use: year-one onboarding, financial sustainability review, and reality checks against nostalgia. ²⁹

A practical ranking emerges from the evidence. If a congregation can only do a few things well, the highest-return stack is usually: **assessment survey, neighborhood data review, trained transitional leadership or coaching**, and—if there is conflict—**mediation before search**. Dashboards and longer strategic frameworks are helpful, but they work best as second-order supports once the congregation has already committed to honest diagnosis. ³⁰

One caution is especially important for tool use. A survey or dashboard can easily become a substitute for discernment if leaders treat the numbers as destiny. Episcopal General Convention guidance is unusually explicit on this point: trend tools assist visioning and strategic planning, but data are largely lagging indicators and do not predict the future unless a congregation simply proceeds without intervention. That observation matches the broader literature well. In transition time, tools are best understood as aids to listening, not replacements for judgment. ³¹

Annotated Bibliography

Hartford Institute for Religion Research. “I’m Exhausted All the Time”: Exploring the Factors Contributing to Growing Clergy Discontentment. Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations report, 2024. This is one of the most important contextual reports for transition work because it explains why so many congregations no longer benefit from simplistic vacancy-management models. Its central finding is that clergy distress is strongly tied to conflict and relational disconnection rather than merely to personal weakness or generalized loss of faith. That makes it especially useful for evaluating why mediation, coaching, and structured discernment matter in transition time. ³²

Hartford Institute for Religion Research and Faith Communities Today. Signs of Rebound Amid Uneven Recovery: The Changing Congregational Landscape. Report, 2026. This report is essential because it situates transition time inside the post-pandemic reconfiguration of American congregational life. It shows

both resilience and unevenness, which is exactly the environment in which many mainline churches are now discerning their next pastorate. The report is especially helpful for arguing that transition models must attend to adaptation and not assume a simple return to pre-2020 congregational patterns. ³³

Hamm, Allison K., and David E. Eagle. "Clergy Who Leave Congregational Ministry: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 49, no. 4 (2021): 291–307. This peer-reviewed review article is valuable because it disciplines overheated clergy-crisis narratives. It shows that clergy exit is often discussed with weak empirical grounding, and that better causal evidence is needed. For transition-time analysis, its importance lies in methodological sobriety: churches need better-defined outcome measures and should resist making sweeping claims about success or failure without evidence. ³⁴

Peterman, Janet S. "How Do We Start Again? Reconsidering Pastoral Ethics in the ELCA from the Vantage Point of Interim Ministry." *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (2021). This is one of the best recent theological-practical essays on why transition ministry is not merely administrative. Peterman argues that transition work clarifies pastoral ethics, boundaries, and the truth that the mission belongs to the congregation rather than the pastor. Even when one translates the legacy terminology into "transition time" and "transitional leader," the article remains one of the strongest denominational reflections on why transition work should reshape settled ministry too. ³⁵

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Office of Call Process Support. *Call Process Support*. Current official resource page, accessed June 13, 2026. This is the clearest recent official PC(USA) explanation of how the denomination supports congregations through pastoral endings, search committee formation, and candidate identification. It is especially important because it shows that transition work in the Presbyterian system is inseparable from presbytery-level structures and the Church Leadership Connection system. It is a foundational source for understanding how search-focused and transition-focused work intersect in Presbyterian polity. ³⁶

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Office of Vital Congregations. *Vital Congregations*. Current official resource page, accessed June 13, 2026. This source matters because it reframes transition as part of wider congregational vitality rather than as a narrow staffing event. The page explicitly describes continual assessment, discernment, and faithful action as the purpose of the initiative. It is therefore especially useful for evaluating visioning, leadership development, and strategic planning tools in transition time. ³⁷

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *Manual of Policies and Procedures for Management of the Rosters*, section on transitional ministry for congregations in transition. Current online edition, accessed June 13, 2026. This is the single most authoritative ELCA source in the review because it sets out who authorizes transitional ministry, what congregations in transition are expected to do, and when trained specialists are especially indicated. Its policy language is also unusually concrete about situations requiring stronger transition practice: long pastorates, changed mission contexts, disciplinary departures, and significant discord. It is indispensable for rigorous work on ELCA transition models. ³⁸

United Church of Christ. *Search and Call*. Current MESA resource page, accessed June 13, 2026. This is one of the strongest official ecumenical/mainline pages because it explicitly links transition time to discovery, assessment, healing, profiles, diversity tools, and conference support. The page is especially useful for showing that intentional transition work is not only a clergy specialty but a congregational and conference-guided process. It also provides one of the clearest statements that a minister serving in transitional terms should not become a candidate for the settled role. ³⁹

Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. *Transitional Intentional Interim Ministry*. Current official resource page, accessed June 13, 2026. This is the best recent public UMC source located in the review for understanding how specialized transitional leaders function inside an appointment system. It is especially valuable because it names the concrete use cases for trained TIIMS specialists: after-care, conflict, revitalization, sabbatical coverage, health leave, and mid-year changes. That specificity makes it a strong comparative source even though it is conference-level rather than churchwide. ⁴⁰

Episcopal Diocese of Long Island. *Transition Ministry*. Current official diocesan page, accessed June 13, 2026. This source is unusually useful because it publicly distinguishes between **standard search** and **accelerated search** instead of treating all Episcopal transitions as one model. Its timelines are concrete, and its accelerated-search description shows a hybrid approach in which the formal search is shortened but visioning continues into a year-long onboarding period. For comparative work, it is the clearest recent Episcopal source showing how a denomination is experimenting with alternatives to a single slow standard process. ⁴¹ |

The literature is good on **process design**, better than many church leaders assume, but still thin on **longitudinal comparative outcomes**. The most important unresolved questions are whether these models measurably improve longer successor tenure, reduce conflict recurrence, strengthen giving and volunteer retention, or lower clergy exit risk after installation. Those questions are answerable, but the public literature from 2021–2026 has not answered them systematically yet. ⁴²

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