

## FIVE DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF THE CONGREGATION DURING THE INTERIM TIME

Note: These tasks are similar to tasks that the people in any organization do in times of transition in our individual or our corporate lives. Some of this work is done naturally, but in most congregations there needs to be some intentionality to this work if the congregation and the new pastor are to move forward in their ministry together without spending inordinate amounts of time and energy on issues left over from the last pastorate and from the transition time itself. They will often be done concurrently; some tasks will take the entire interim time to work through, while some will need to be done once—and each congregation will have different needs in connection with the developmental tasks.

1. **Coming to terms with history.** This is a sharing of the stories of the congregation, similar to the sharing of the stories of the people of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some of the stories are sad, some funny, and some may tell of difficulties overcome, hurts healed, reconciliation effected—or hurts handled poorly, issues never resolved. Recalling the totality of the church's history helps put things into perspective, and if there are unresolved issues, they may finally be laid to rest.
2. **Discovering a new identity.** This may be especially important for a congregation coming off a long pastorate, during which the church has taken on a personality and an identity closely associated with the longtime pastor. It's also especially important for a congregation coming off a very conflicted pastorate, which may leave people feeling that their whole identity is wrapped up in conflict. Self-study is important, whether it is done formally, as in a Mission Study, or informally. Frequently a congregation's self-image lags several years behind reality, and often a congregation's perception of the surrounding community may also be out of date.
3. **Allowing needed leadership change, empowering new leaders.** As a church becomes aware of an emerging new identity, leadership changes follow naturally. Because there are several kinds of power exerted by leaders in a congregation, changing members of Session is only a part of this transition. A change in pastoral leadership affords the opportunity for those who have carried a heavy burden of responsibility to step back, at least for a time; it also affords opportunity for some who have been followers to step forward.
4. **Renewing denominational linkages.** This happens more or less naturally, as the Committee on Ministry becomes involved in the life of the church as a "church in transition." It is comforting during times of uncertainty to be able to turn to the larger church, to printed resources and human resources. It helps to know that we are not alone—that, in addition to the care and concern of God, we also have fellow human beings to turn to.
5. **Commitment to new leadership and a new future.** As the congregation moves toward calling a new pastor, an understanding of "call" and "covenant" is important. It is also important, before the congregation can say "hello" to a new pastor, to say "good-bye" to the interim pastor, and all predecessor pastors. One helpful image at this time may be of the church as a canoe, rather than a rowboat: in a rowboat, the rowers have their backs to the future, and indeed faces where the boat has already been. In a canoe, the paddlers face forward, so they can see clearly what is coming.