

IM Focus: Autumn 2020 Interim Ministry in the Diocese of Chelmsford

Interim Ministry offers ‘transformational change’ in parishes.

In 2015 Chelmsford secured support from the Strategic Development Fund for the Turnaround Project. This aimed to support parishes where there had been leadership issues and pastoral breakdown, a failure in governance, lack of resources, building issues, and ‘a sense of tiredness’. One of the five turnaround intervention strategies proposed was Interim Ministry (IM), which was sanctioned by changes in the Clergy Terms of Service in the Church of England in July 2015. The Turnaround project enabled a programme of testing and trialling Interim Ministry and other transitional appointments. An end-of-project review in 2018 considered IM to be: *‘the biggest success, offering transformational change in a significant number of parishes.’*

The initial proposal aimed to fund three full-time roles for five years. Potential parishes were identified by Archdeacons, Area Deans and Mission and Ministry Advisors from a list of around 38 parishes which had been identified as being most in need of intervention. Eight were initially identified for IM. However, as the scope of the work increased, so too did the range of opportunities for IM.

Between 2015 and 2018 different forms of Interim and ‘transitional’ ministry were tested by around 16 appointees (some used multiple times) in 46 different settings, from single parishes to multi-parish benefices, to teams, ministry units and also testing a deanery-wide and episcopal area-wide approach:

- A half-time IM was deployed to support two additional parishes in a neighbouring benefice for 18 months.
- An incumbent in a half-time post took an additional half-time IM appointment in a neighbouring parish.
- An SSM became an IM Consultant working alongside an incumbent to support transition.
- A curate took an 18-month IM appointment with support from their training incumbent.
- An experienced retiring clergy couple shared an IM role.
- Two lay leaders became Interim Pastors with the support of a neighbouring ministry unit.
- A ‘Turnaround Area Dean’ was appointed to coordinate change across 5 parishes.
- An Episcopal Area appointed a ‘Turnaround Minister’ to support several parishes in vacancy

The Diocesan Director of Lay Ministry, Revd Dr Elizabeth Jordan, led an evaluation process with lay leaders of churches which had experienced IM between 2015 and 2017. Her report noted that: *‘the provision of interim ministry has clearly made a substantial difference to the lives of churches which have benefitted from the process’.*

But it also noted that there was ‘no clear process’ for appointments; ‘considerable difference in understanding and practice of IM’ across the diocese, the ‘great variety of expressions’ and ‘different patterns of accountability and supervision’, all of which had made it more difficult to establish a coherent and consistent approach and good practice. Many IMs had no formal training and ‘were using skills, tools and materials they had acquired in life before ordination’. Her report recommended a collegiate approach, focused on sharing skills and experience within the diocesan IM group. The evaluation observed that even where there were shortfalls in the appointments process and the parish was not well prepared for an IM appointment, a good process could make up for this. Conversely, a poor handover at the conclusion of an IM appointment can undermine a good process and leave parishes with a sense of frustration and lost opportunity.

The evaluation highlighted the value of engaging with the parish ‘network of relationships’ – the archdeacon, bishop, deanery (particularly area deans and lay chairs), mission unit and diocese – as part of a systematic approach to interim ministry. The evaluation noted IM was challenging conventions, such as the idea that nothing changed during vacancy, and that there should be no handover between clergy leaving and joining the parish. It recommended that IMs prepare a handover file, contribute to the job description and parish profile, and met the new post-holder.

This process of experimentation and the evaluation led to a more consistent process of appointment and reporting across the diocese after 2018, resulting in greater clarity and decision making, improved engagement and buy-in from parishes; IMs were better understood and supported, leading to better outcomes.

Best practice in the diocese now includes:

- A common appointment framework for IMs across the diocese;

- Effective consultation and communication with PCCs about the rationale for IM;
- Clear objectives, support systems and supervision for the IM.
- Supervision by Archdeacons, embedding senior staff in ongoing IM review and evaluation.
- Evaluation of IM using a log frame to record progress, outcomes and impacts.
- Overlap/handover between the IM and incoming incumbent.
- A diocesan IM networking group offering mutual support and learning.

Evidence of change

A review of the impact of IM across the project in 2019 indicated quantitative changes in parishes were not always a reliable barometer of change: a decline in both attendance and share performance was commonly visible in parishes requiring IM and transitional ministry. Where there were positive changes – a flurry of new attendance or giving – these were not always sustainable. In many cases the pattern of decline was not reversed in the lifetime of these short appointments, but that did not mean that positive progress had not been made.

Qualitative changes indicating renewed confidence, energy and engagement were often visible and appeared to be a foundation for future turnaround. The following 12 positive outcomes from Interim Ministry were commonly identified from evaluation and handover reports:

1. Interim Ministers listen and engage neutrally with the issues of the parish.
2. IM encourages transparency and better communication
3. IM builds engagement/re-engagement by parishioners.
4. IM generates a sense of confidence and energy.
5. IM promotes the development of a shared vision for the future
6. IM encourages better governance
7. IM encourages a more positive approach to financial stewardship
8. IM generates a sense of progress and ownership of church fabric.
9. IM offers an opportunity to experiment and try out new patterns and forms of worship.
10. IM offers fresh engagement with core spiritual disciplines such as bible study and prayer
11. IM encourages a parish to identify mission priorities, new opportunities and partnerships
12. IM helps parishes to prepare for the future

Through this project we have learned how best to appoint and deploy Interim Ministers, and to support them so that they remain stable and non-anxious leaders of transformation; we have helped them to understand and lead effective IM processes, and we have started to develop a body of expertise and materials which can be used to train and develop others.

We are now mainstreaming IM into our leadership training, ministry practice and appointments process. We have built better awareness of IM within the diocese – and nationally through our networking activities – and there is a growing understanding and consistency in this work across the diocese. It is clear that there is a growing interest in using Interim Ministry but, in common with the rest of the country, we do not have enough trained and equipped ministers. There is more scope to train Pioneers and Licensed Lay Ministers with relevant background skills, and enable skilled lay leaders to use some these tools in vacancy, so that the process of transformation need not wait for ‘an expert’ to turn up, but can be led from the grassroots with support.

The Turnaround Project has also offered a great opportunity for partnership and learning with other dioceses. Chelmsford has used SDF resources to stimulate national learning and networking: it hosted the first national conference on IM in February 2017, and has developed a network and initiated regional IM gatherings and training. We hope this foundation will offer a springboard for the further development of Interim Ministry nationally.

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