

## Understanding the Theory of Change and Transition

Understanding the difference between change and transition will help you:

- Look for God in your midst
- Understand your own role and power – or lack of it!



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Understanding Change & Transition- 1

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### Talking Points

#### ***Suggested reading for reflection: Exodus 16:1-3***

The God of creation is constantly working; therefore change is a normal part of life. The Bible is full of stories of change – and of the wilderness time which often accompanies it: the Israelites wandering for 40 years before reaching the Promised Land; Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism. These transitions brought a new and deeper awareness of God.

***Note: This session is the central one for understanding transition, and it is a good one to use not only with lay leadership but the congregation as a whole. Using personal examples participants will reflect on a past experience of change, identify the signs of transition in that experience and how they found God during that period – or not. These insights will help leadership and the congregation gain perspective on their time of transition.***

***Depending upon the time available you can invite participants to use their reflections on their own experience of transition to consider strategies to help the congregation and its leadership move through whatever change is facing the congregation.***

## Change and Transition: *What's the Difference?*

- Change is the event that happens – *the outward and visible*.
- Transition is the internal process that happens - emotional, psychological, mental, and spiritual responses to change – *the inward and spiritual*.

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### Talking Points

It is important to understand that change, while understood as a normal and ongoing reality of life, still brings with it some anxiety. While an actual change is a certain event at a certain time, the response to that change – transition – is an on-going, psychological process without a definite timeframe.

Change and Transition are not the same. Change is more the “**outward and visible**” event that happens.

Transition, however, is the ongoing internal process that happens. It involves the emotional, psychological, mental and spiritual responses to change. These are invisible – we might say the “**inward and spiritual**” responses.

One might say that **change is an event while transition is a process.**

## Change Is Like A Move to a New Location



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### Talking Points

To put it another way, change is like a move to a new place. There may be some intermediate steps, but one day you are in your old house and on another day you are living somewhere else. The change was about getting from one location to another.

## Transition Is More Like a Journey: *When Does the New Place Feel Like Home?*



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### Talking Points

Transition, on the other hand, is like the journey you take that makes the new place feel like home. It includes all the emotional, psychological, spiritual aspects of life and of change.

William Bridges, who popularized the distinction between change and transition, cites three phases in a transition: Endings, “Neutral Zone,” and Beginnings. We might call his “neutral zone” the wilderness experience.

You cannot move to the new without leaving behind the old and crossing the distance in between. And you cannot begin to feel “at home” in the new place until you let go of whatever is holding you to the past. Transition can be long or short – and the wilderness is where most anxiety is experienced by an individual or a system dealing with change. Because the old ways are past and the new not yet fully incorporated, it also presents a significant growth opportunity – or challenge - for a person or a group.

## Transition Feels Like the Time between Trapezes

- What is hard about letting go of the trapeze bar?
- What is it like to be between trapeze bars?
- What will it be like to grab the next trapeze bar?



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### Talking Points

Transition has also been described as the “time between trapezes,” when the old has gone but the new is not yet firmly established.

**Note: Musician Fran McKendree has a wonderful recording of a piece by Danaan Perry entitled The Fear of Transformation which uses the trapeze imagery. It would be a good adjunct to this discussion and could be played here to help generate a conversation. The single audio CD can be purchased at [www.franmckendree.com](http://www.franmckendree.com).**

**Use the three questions on the slide for a general conversation or as a bridge to the next slide for a more in-depth conversation about participants’ own experiences of transition.**

## When Have You Experienced Transition?

- A time of significant change – what was it?
- What ended?
- What helped get you through the transition?
- What were the signs that things were going to be OK?
- When did things seem “normal” again?

Looking back, where did you see God at work  
in the midst of your transition?

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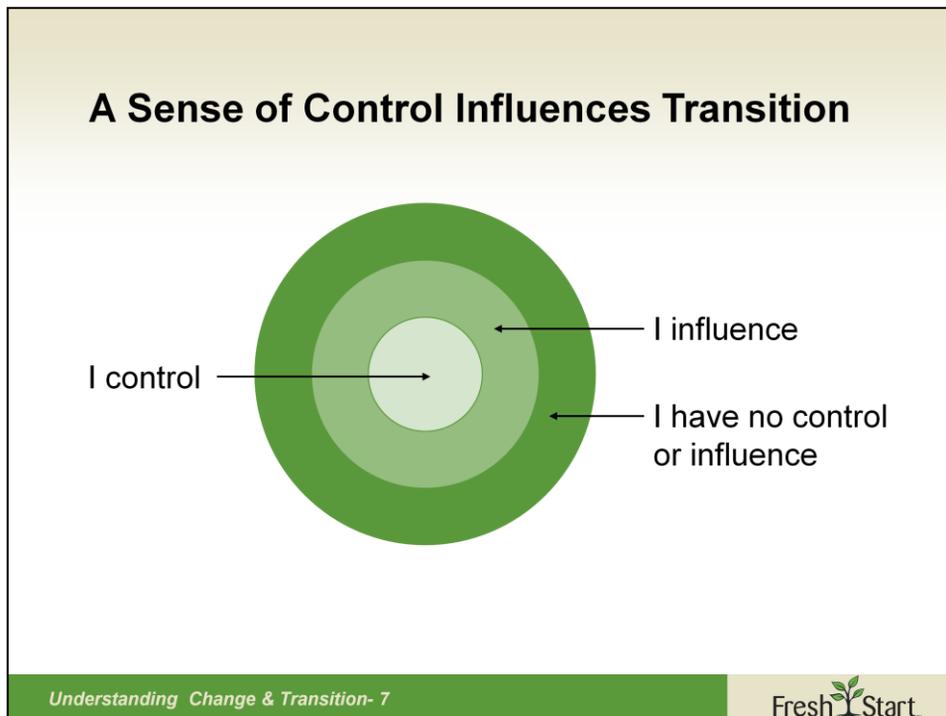
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### Talking Points

Think about a time of significant change in your life (OTHER than one you or your congregation is currently facing) – for example, graduating from college, getting married, moving to a new city – and with a partner:

- Briefly describe the change
- Talk about what “ended”
- What helped you get through the transition?
- When did things seem normal again?
- Looking back, where did you see God at work in the midst of your transition?

***After people have had time to share their stories, facilitate a general discussion of what they learned in that process.***



### Talking Points

How easily people move through a transition depends on a variety of factors.

One is a sense of control: You are more likely to have an easy transition if the change is one over which you have control or at least influence.

However, as the slide indicates, what you can control or influence is a relatively small piece of the whole. At some point we need to trust the process; trust others; trust God to bring us through to the other side.

***Note: If there is time you may want to use the Change Readiness Assessment found in the Tools section of the Vital Practices website ([www.evp.org](http://www.evp.org)). It enables individuals to look at how they characteristically respond to change and could lead to further discussion about how their typical responses help or hinder them in accepting change.***

## One More Thing about Transition. . .

Transition time can be so chaotic or painful that it is tempting to go back to the old status quo or engage in uncharacteristic behaviors.



Trust us: Neither is very helpful for long term stability!

### Talking Points

Because the present isn't what it used to be in times of change, people sometimes want to go back to the way things were (remember the Israelites in the wilderness yearning for Egypt?) or they engage in uncharacteristic behaviors (the Golden Calf).

## Congregation in Transition

1. What do people need to let go of ?
2. Are there signs of wanting to return to the past or uncharacteristic behaviors? What are they?
3. On a scale from 1 (*letting go*) to 10 (*firmly into whatever is new*), where are you personally?
4. On a scale from 1 (*letting go*) to 10 (*firmly into whatever is new*), where is the congregation as a whole?
5. What would ease the transition – for you? For the congregation?

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### Talking Points

So here are some questions we might want to ponder about the current transition facing your congregation. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses to each of these questions, then we will discuss.

***Allow time for people to write down their responses, then facilitate a discussion, capturing ideas that would help the vestry, search committee, or other lay leaders with the transition.***

***If there is not enough time, ask the participants to think about these questions in the coming days and let the vestry know if they have any thoughts about what might be needed to ease the transition. You may want to give them a copy of the slide to take with them.***