



When the Pastor Leaves

A Guide to the Interim

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WHEN THE PASTOR LEAVES—GUIDE TO THE INTERIM

Following the resignation, retirement or termination of a pastor the church experiences a significant transition. There is no way around this transition but there is a way through it. With prayer and a commitment to engage in a healthy process of saying good-bye to the former minister and using an interim process through the transition, it is possible for the church to move forward with calling a pastor.

Some may be tempted to hurry through this process, but like any loss or transition, time is needed for the church to work through issues, bring closure with the last pastor and prepare to receive the next. Churches are better served to be intentional about their transition process and to patiently seek the right match of church and pastor.

During the transition it is important to deal with the multitude of feelings experienced by the congregation. Some members may feel a significant loss in the departure of the pastor while others may experience anger. Others may experience unresolved conflict either “above or below the surface” of congregational life. Only if these issues are identified and resolved will the church be able to embrace a new minister.

If the pastor has retired, the church needs to be aware there is a need to change the relationship with the retiring pastor so that when the church calls a new minister, the church will embrace the new pastor with open arms. It is never easy to say good-bye to those we love, but the relationship with the departed pastor needs to be redefined in order for healing to occur. If the pastor is leaving for another field of service, the church may have feelings of rejection. Some members may feel a sense of being responsible for the pastor accepting another place of service. If conflict has been present, some may blame other members for the pastor’s departure.

Regardless of the reasons for the pastor’s leaving, the church needs time for the members of the congregation and community to work through these feelings. Healthy resolution of the transition enables the church to welcome the new pastor. Some say that it is a “rule of thumb” that it takes one month of interim for each year the former pastor was at the church. There are some variables which might well alter this “rule of thumb.” If the former pastor served only a very brief time or if the pastor had served the church for a long pastorate of ten years or longer, this “rule” may not apply.

Sometimes churches feel the church “will fall apart” unless a new pastor is secured as soon as possible. Usually this is not the case and far greater damage occurs if the church moves too quickly in calling a pastor. In calling the next pastor it is important to seek God’s person who is “the right fit” for the church

Following a pastor’s departure, one of the first questions church leaders must ask is “What type of interim will best serve our church?” Churches may consider a Traditional

Interim, an Intentional Interim or a combination of Traditional Interim and Church Transition Consultant.

Traditional Interims run the gamut of persons called to ministry from those without a theological education to persons working full-time in other careers or retired persons. Intentional Interims have received specialized training and are certified through such organizations as The Center for Congregational Health in helping congregations with the transition by leading the church through a self-study. Churches need to be intentional as they seek God’s timing and their next pastor.

Church leadership is often asked “When are we going to get a new pastor or staff member?” When a church is in a pastoral transition, it is often tempting to move too quickly and attempt to get to the end of the interim without going through an adequate transition process. To move too quickly often leads to complex difficulties down the road. There are many unfortunate and tragic stories from churches that failed to adequately address the transition issues of the interim. Directors of Missions and the Virginia Baptist Field Strategists are willing to provide consultation, support, guidance, and collaboration as the church moves forward.

THE TRADITIONAL INTERIM PASTOR

- The Traditional Interim Pastor primarily preaches in worship services and provides limited pastoral care to the congregation. Almost all Traditional Interims are part-time and able to devote a limited amount of time to this ministry.
- Many Traditional Interims may be employed full-time in careers, be students or be retired persons. The focus of the Traditional Interim is to maintain the ministry of the church and to prepare the way for the new minister.
- Traditional Interims may perform some or most of the responsibilities of a pastor but their focus is to serve as a bridge from the previous minister to the new one. The Interim does not generally make changes in the life of the church but seeks to be an encourager to the congregation and the Search Team.

Traditional Interim Candidates may be obtained from the Director of Missions and/or the Virginia Baptist Field Strategists. These candidates need to be interviewed and references checked in order to call one who is a good fit for the church. The Interim needs to be compatible with the church culture. He will be presented to the church for a vote to call the candidate as the Traditional Interim Pastor with a written covenant agreement.

Churches need to seriously consider using an Interim Pastor for a number of reasons.

- An Interim Pastor provides continuity and gets to know the congregation;

- The Interim provides stability for the congregation;
- A competent interim helps manage the feelings of anxiety often present when the church is without a pastor;
- Interims are available for the pastoral needs of the congregation including funerals, weddings, hospital visitation, and crisis ministries.
- Church members and visitors are more likely to contact an interim than a supply minister they do not know, during the time of transition;
- Interims often bring wisdom and appropriate guidance to the church in transition.

Traditional Interim Compensation Guidelines

Compensation is determined by several factors including an agreed upon scope of responsibilities of the interim; the expectations placed upon the interim; the area cost of living; the compensation of the previous minister; the financial resources of the church and other factors. A rule of thumb is the interim's compensation should be based on a percentage of the previous minister's compensation and workload. A full-time interim should be compensated at the same level as the previous full-time pastor.

THE INTENTIONAL INTERIM PASTOR

Another option, the Intentional Interim, can assist churches in the time of pastoral transition. This model is particularly helpful following:

- The departure of a pastor who served the church many years;
- When a church is experiencing some form of crisis;
- There is a lack of clarity within the congregation;
- When there is congregational conflict
- When the pastor left under duress or was terminated.

Intentional Interims have received training in how to deal with these crisis situations. Their training includes six significant areas:

- Understanding the dynamics of the transition and institutional-grief processes and knowing how to deal with them;
- Assisting a local church in using the interim period for significant congregational development;
- Knowing the developmental stages a congregation goes through without an installed minister and the roles of both interim consultant and interim pastor in each of those stages;
- Relating to a congregation so that its sense of self-determination is enhanced and a minimum of dependency is established;
- Learning how to work with a congregation during the interim so that it and its new minister will have a better match;
- Assisting in starting a creative and healthy relationship between the congregation and the new pastor.

An Intentional Interim uses an established process to assist a congregation in focusing on five areas:

- Heritage—examining a church's history, e.g., coming to terms with why the last pastor(s) left.
- Leadership—a careful examination of staff positions, job descriptions, policies and procedures, bylaws, and lay leadership. Common issues addressed often include the recruiting and training of new leaders and seeking ways to involve more members in decision making so as to create a true consensus as the church moves forward.
- Connections—Baptist theology, financial support of other ministries, partnerships in ministry and missions—most church members are disconnected from these important areas of a church's life. The interim period is a key time for reconnecting the church to Baptist life, unifying the church around these concepts, and making sure the Pastor Search Committee finds an appropriate candidate for the church.
- Mission—a church should have a call from God that belongs to the whole church. Too often the church depends upon the pastor to create the mission and to enlist workers, while the church ignores the mission because they have not heard the same call. The IIM period will guide a church in finding their God-given purpose and to express it with broad generalities and specific short-term actions.
- Future—the first three Focus Points help a church answer, "Who are we?" The fourth task answers: "Who are we supposed to be?" This last task prepares a church for the calling of a pastor by developing a Pastor's (desired) profile and a church profile, to complete the question: "How are we going to get there?"

Two key elements of Intentional Interim ministry:

- The church officially votes that it will work on a self-study, including the first four developmental tasks of the interim church before it releases a search Team to begin searching for a new pastor. The church does not elect a Pastor Search Team until after the self-study phase has ended.
- The church has a specific covenant describing the relationship between the Intentional Interim pastor and the church. These covenants include the fact that the outside person is not open to accepting the call from the church to serve as the next permanent pastor.

A significant part of the Intentional Interim Ministry is the naming of a Transition Team. The Intentional Interim will facilitate the Transition Team and the work of leading the church in the interim ministry. This team usually consists of five to seven members elected by the congregation for the purpose of working closely with the Intentional Interim in the self-study process.

Compensation for the Intentional Interim is based on whether the Intentional Interim is either full-time or part-time and is

paid accordingly. If the church wants a full-time Intentional Interim pastor, then the congregation can expect to pay the Intentional Interim the salary of a full-time pastor.

Please contact your Director of Missions or your Virginia Baptist Mission Board Field Strategist to help evaluate the church's need for an Intentional Interim. The Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, North Carolina is also a resource and may be contacted as identified below.

The Intentional Interim Process

- The Intentional Interim process is presented to the church Leadership for consideration by a Field Strategist;
- A Field Strategist presents the Intentional Interim process to the congregation for consideration;
- The Church votes on the intentional interim process;
- The Deacons or a Search Team is appointed or elected to find an Intentional Interim Pastor that will be a part of the transition process decided on by the church. Resumes may be obtained from the regional Field Strategist and/or the Center for Congregational Health.
- The candidate for intentional interim pastor is presented to the church for approval;
- The Intentional Interim Pastor is called by the congregation and a covenant with the interim pastor is voted on at the time of the call;
- A Transition Team is elected by the congregation with the guidance of the Intentional Interim pastor;
- The Transition Team is trained by the interim pastor;
- The Intentional interim pastor and Transition Team guide the congregation through a series of five Developmental Tasks;
- The Pastor Search Team is chosen based on established church process;
- The Pastor Search Team is trained for its task by a Field Strategist or the Director of Missions;
- The Pastor Search Team begins its work of searching for a pastor;
- The Pastor Search Team presents a pastoral candidate for congregational approval;
- The new pastor accepts the call of the congregation and interim period concludes;
- The new pastor is installed and the ministry to which God has called them begins!

The Transition Team

One of the first responsibilities of the Intentional Interim Pastor is to lead the church in the selection of The Transition Team. This team, elected by the church, is composed of capable trusted leaders who have the church's best interest at heart. The team will communicate regularly on its work to the church. It is important for the church to elect this team only after the Intentional Interim has begun working.

The Transition Team is selected by asking church members to identify three or four people they most trust to lead the

church in the intentional interim self-study process. The deacons of the church or the nominating committee ask church members to identify these people on a Sunday morning by writing the names on index cards. The appropriate group (either deacons or nominating committee) then contacts these individuals by asking them if they are willing to serve on the Transition Team. People are asked to serve on the team based on the number of times they were identified as a most trusted person by the church.

The team should be large enough to be representative of different groups and segments in the congregation, including men and women, younger and older people. This team can have between five and seven members depending upon the size of the church and the diversity necessary for it to be broadly representative of the congregation.

Intentional Interims are specifically trained to work with the Transition Team and to assist them in the five developmental tasks

A CHURCH TRANSITION CONSULTANT

Some churches are not clear about whether they need an Intentional Interim. Often this can be a difficult choice. A third option is to use a Traditional Interim Pastor and a Church Transition Consultant. This approach might be considered somewhat of a hybrid between the Traditional and the Intentional Interim.

A Church Transition Consultant may guide the church through a process somewhat like the Intentional Interim. This process may help the church to clarify its identity, personality, challenges, strengths, opportunities, barriers for growth and candidate profile.

While many churches feel this work can be done solely by the Pastor Search Team or other church leadership, we also know that a fresh set of eyes, speaking the truth in love is a valuable asset. The Consultant will be able to see and to articulate what may be hidden from the Team and be able to facilitate a process for working through the issues and considerations necessary for the church to move forward.

A church that decides to use a Consultant for interim transition issues should insure that any traditional interim pastor or supply pastor is supportive of the work of the consultant with the congregation. A Director of Missions or a Virginia Baptist Mission Board Field Strategist may identify appropriate Church Transition Consultants or may serve in that capacity.

Should the Interim be considered as a Pastoral Candidate? Interim pastors are better able to help a congregation address issues, challenges and opportunities when they have no vested interest in their own call as pastor of the congregation. The interim pastor needs to focus on what is best for the

congregation to engage in during the interim. This process may be compromised if the interim desires to be called as pastor.

The covenant with an Interim Pastor should preclude the Interim Pastor from being considered as a candidate for pastor. When an Interim becomes a candidate the relationship changes and violates the covenant between the church and Interim.

Consideration of the interim pastor as a candidate may decrease the Interim's effectiveness. While it is often a temptation for the church to want to call the Interim as pastor, this may interfere with the Pastor Search Team's work in securing the best candidate and match for the church.

If the Interim was considered and voted upon and the vote did not meet the Constitution and Bylaws' requirement for an affirmative vote, then a difficult situation is experienced by everyone. For these and other reasons, the interim should not be considered as a candidate for pastor.

Using an interim pastor helps your church stay healthier during a time of transition.

- The time between pastors can be one of the most effective periods in the life of a church. The interim pastor can help the church utilize this time to evaluate, refocus, heal, solve problems, and prepare for the calling of the next pastor.
- Church attendance tends to remain higher when an interim pastor is serving the church. He brings continuity to the ministry, and this helps maintain positive growth with most (if not all) "fringe folk" remaining in the congregation.
- Visitor retention can be higher when pastoral care is present. Without the stability of consistent pastoral ministry, newcomers may continue their search for a church home and fail to take a second look at your church.
- Giving tends to remain higher. Giving is often generated by need. If the local church seeks to save money during the interim period, they may find it difficult to regain that income when it is needed to provide for the new pastor. When churches have a full-time interim pastor from the start of their pastoral vacancy, everyone knows that the budget needs are similar, and giving reductions usually do not happen.
- The senior pastor's leadership position is strengthened. Some churches reassign a staff member to fill the senior pastor role during the interim. This may create some potential difficulty when the new pastor arrives and the staff person must return to their previous assignment.
- The energy of church leaders remains higher and burnout is avoided. With the presence of an interim pastor, they are not carrying an increased load of ministry. As a result,

when the permanent pastor arrives, they are energized to begin ministry together.

- With an interim pastor present, the church can take the necessary time to prayerfully and diligently engage in the search process for a new pastor. It is extremely important for potential pastoral candidates and the church that the right "match" occurs. Either, or both, can be hurt and the cause of Christ hindered by a careless or rushed search process.

Biblical Models of Interim Ministry

Several Biblical expressions of ministry capture the spirit of interim ministry. From a theological perspective transitional times are primarily wilderness times. The great story of Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness is an archetypal expression for the community in transition.

In the wilderness, faced with uncertainty, the people grieve for what they have left behind, even if it was a life of hardship. They may grumble and seek to hold fast to temporal realities and forget the God who has liberated and sustained them. Yet in the midst of the wilderness the people encounter God anew and find a new identity that it is not limited by the past. And Moses, the one who has led the people through the wilderness to this new understanding, does not get to enter the Promised Land.

Another great transitional ministry in the Bible also took place in the wilderness and was that of John the Baptist. He stood between the Old and New. He prepared a way for the new by calling the people to repentance, to make a heartfelt change in the way they perceived themselves and God. Like Moses he did not get to see the fruits of his labor but saw that it was necessary for himself to diminish that Christ may increase.

These two stories capture some of the essence of interim ministry. It is a time of calling a people to leave behind the known of the past, which may be secure or in turmoil, to examine who they are and the direction they are going, and to prepare for the unknown future. Like John the Baptist interim pastors need to assist in the transition of leadership rather than establish themselves as leaders.

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