

Being Intentional about the Interim

What churches need to know when the pastor leaves

How did your last pastor leave your church? Did he retire after a long and healthy tenure? Did she leave to serve another church? Was he asked to resign? Did she move on to pursue a different career? Every situation is different, but they all have one thing in common: after a pastor leaves, each church enters “the time between the no-longer and the not-yet,” as one writer puts it. It is the interim time.

Regardless of how or why a pastor leaves a church, there is usually a range of feelings in the congregation that begin to surface. These can include anxiousness, impatience, anger, grief, and confusion. The single biggest temptation is to try to minimize these feelings by filling the pulpit as quickly as possible. Sometimes there is an underlying fear that “if we don’t get someone in here soon, the church will fall apart and close its doors.”

No matter what people thought of the previous pastor, the sight of the empty study can be unnerving. One scholar says that pastors represent “true north” in a congregation. That is not to suggest that pastors are perfect by any means but rather that, for good or for ill, people often define their relationship to the church in reference to their pastor. If the pastor is in favor

of an idea or program, some members of the congregation are automatically for it too, while others instinctively dig in their heels and pull in the opposite direction.

Veteran interim pastors Margaret Morris and Joan Mabon describe the season of being between pastors as a wilderness: “Wilderness is that place of sudden freedom, uncertain leadership, changed relationships, possible deprivation—temptations, hopes, and disappointments. That place where all old fears reappear most threateningly...but where all the hopeful futures take on new promise” (from *The Interim Pastor’s Manual*, Alan G. Gripe).

My friends who are campers tell me that in the wilderness short-term strategies are needed to ensure long-term survival. They say that each day is critical and time cannot be wasted. In the wilderness you need a good map, a lot of trust, a willingness to put up with the nervousness of the other people on the trail and, above all, the help of a good guide.

Understanding transitional ministry

Churches have used different kinds of temporary pastors during interim periods. The pulpit supply or relief pastor is often a retired person who

speaks on Sundays and leaves the rest of the ministry to a staff or leadership team. The traditional interim pastor is also usually retired and typically serves a church on a part-time basis for a short period of time. This person comes with specific strengths and interests that serve as the core of his or her ministry. As with the pulpit supply pastor, the goal of the traditional interim pastor is to maintain the ministry until a settled, or permanent, pastor is called.

An emerging ministry, however, is that of the intentional interim pastor, sometimes referred to as a transition pastor. The chief difference between the transition pastor and a pulpit supply pastor who serves on weekends or a traditional interim pastor who often serves on a part-time basis or for a few months at a time is the full-time nature of intentional interim ministry. The intentional interim serves a congregation on a full-time basis, with compensation that is identical to that of a settled pastor. Housing, either an apartment or a rental home, is provided, and the same benefits that went to the previous pastor go to the intentional interim.

This person helps the congregation examine key areas of church life that pertain to the interim period, but she or he also performs all the other duties



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of parish ministry: administering the sacraments, conducting weddings and funerals, giving pastoral care, and helping lead the church through the various councils, boards, commissions, and committees that exist.

The Interim Ministry Network (IMN) in Baltimore, Maryland, an offshoot of the Alban Institute, has focused on healthy church congregations for more than thirty years. IMN offers a variety of courses and training to clergy who are interested in this form of ministry.

Just as the ministry of the intentional interim is purposeful and deliberate, so is the first contact between the intentional interim pastor and the congregation. This process is best facilitated by the conference superintendent. It is reasonable to expect the local church to know and trust the advice of its superintendent; it is equally reasonable to expect the superintendent to be interested in the welfare of the congregation and their ability to make a good start in their next chapter as a church. Each of the

six interim pastorates I served began with the work of the superintendent who advocated the process. I considered the superintendents my partners in ministry and people to whom I was accountable during this time. This accountability also included regular written reports to the superintendent

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concerning the life of the congregation during the interim time.

Steps to take during transition

The work of the intentional interim combines traditional parish ministry with the task of leading the congregation through five steps a church should take during this transition time, as identified by the Interim Ministry Network.

1) Examine local church history.

Each pastorate represents a chapter in the history of a congregation. The longer the chapter, the more history there is to reflect on. One of the first steps a church should take is to examine its history—not only reviewing the most recent pastorate but going back over the past twenty-five years.

A heritage night or story night should involve the whole church and a potluck meal together. Using large sheets of paper and colored markers, the congregation reviews the past twenty-five years. The intentional interim writes down everything that the participants remember: the names of pastors, key people in congregational history, moments to remember, moments they are tempted to forget, ministries that succeeded as well as those that failed. Remembering what has been done in the past can open the door to what can be done in the future.

This is the first task of the interim congregation, and it goes a long way in helping people understand how much they have changed. (Whether they like change or not is irrelevant.) This first step can help a congregation resist the temptation to retreat into ways of doing church that may be familiar but are no longer vital. At the end of the day, intentional interim ministry is about change, an overused word if there ever was one. The fact of the matter is, change is a given, whether we want it or not. I heard long ago the axiom that “we tend to experience change as loss.” We think about what went away, not what is coming. Kathleen Norris writes in

Dakota that “disconnecting from change does not recapture the past. It loses the future.”

One congregation I worked with was dealing with a painful past and an uncertain future. For several months after I arrived, the past would try to reassert itself at monthly council meetings. A ministry idea would be proposed and someone would say, “Well, that was something (a former member) would have been interested in, but he left the church and, you know, he was a key member here.”

For several months this scenario repeated itself, always ending with the observation that a good idea wasn’t feasible because the person who had once made it happen—that key person—had left the church. Finally, when this response came up, I quietly and firmly said, “You know, key people don’t leave a church. Key people stay.” After that night the past began to fade away, and the church began to move toward a more hopeful future, which included calling a pastor who has been with them for ten years. They have added on to their building and created space for new opportunities for ministry.

2) Reconnect with denominational leadership.

One of the realities of modern church life is that many people who are members and friends of a local church are not necessarily familiar with the broader denominational family. A person’s interest in the pastor, staff, and programming of the local church may not necessarily translate into an awareness of wider ministries and resources of the entire denomination.

During the interim period, members of the search committee have regular contact with the conference office and staff. This time can also be an opportunity to introduce the congregation to other ministries throughout the Covenant through the use of guest speakers.

During my active time in interim ministry, churches I served were able to hear messages from various

denominational leaders. Each of those leaders painted a vivid image of what churches throughout the denomination are doing together, and their visits to our congregation enhanced the interim time. Practically speaking, reconnecting with denominational leadership also emphasizes the importance of the conference superintendent and the recommendations he or she makes during the pastoral search process. This task is particularly valuable when a new congregation’s founding pastor has left the church and the search is beginning for a successor. The ability of the intentional interim minister to connect people with all levels of conference and denominational leadership becomes invaluable to the process.

3) Evaluate leadership styles.

In addition to considering the pastor’s own approach to leadership, it is a good idea to consider the leadership styles of people who will call the pastor. This is important to address *before* a search committee is organized because a critical part of the search process concerns the makeup of the search committee. It is helpful to ask the question, “Does the search committee represent the changing face of the congregation, or is it the same group of people who will use the same rationale to call the same kind of pastor?” This can be a difficult question, but it is an important one.

Series preaching on the various areas of congregational life is common during the interim period. I have preached one series on leadership and included material from Garry Wills’s book *Certain Trumpets*. In it, Wills presents leadership as a triad of leaders, followers, and the goals that hold them together. Determining what we think about our leaders before they come can alleviate many complications that may arise after they arrive.

In another congregation I served conference personnel conducted a workshop using the Myers-Briggs personality inventory to identify leadership types. When people outside the

congregation present assessment materials, the intentional interim and the congregation can use that information to discuss leadership issues together. Such studies, according to one superintendent, help identify not only the various leadership styles in the church, but they also help the church understand the style of the previous pastor.

It is also a good idea to learn about the leadership styles and personality traits of people who will be serving on the pastoral search committee. It is understandable that much thought must go into calling a pastor; equal thought must be given to how the pastoral search committee is put together and whether or not it represents the face and interests of the congregation.

4) Discuss issues of mission and vision.

Interim work is not about developing a fixed sense of mission and vision before the new pastor comes. Rather, it means the congregation takes an active role in discussing what a new mission for ministry might entail. It means they are active participants in dreaming about what might come next. Talking about change at this point is irrelevant because change is a given; it will occur whether we are looking for it or not. The proper concern is *transition*, or how everyone deals with the change that occurs.

It might be asked how congregations can “lose the future.” One way to do that is by refusing to consider new kinds music, by using worship styles that cater to what we want rather than being open to what God wants to do in us, and by using programming that addresses issues no one is talking about anymore. We lose the future by refusing to engage in it to examine how other people are doing ministry. We lose the future by focusing on what we want instead of prayerfully asking as an entire congregation what God wants. We lose the future when we focus more on hiring an employee than on calling a

pastor who will help us engage the serious issues that come with growing together spiritually. According to theologian David Wells, we can become stunted in our growth when “God rests too inconsequentially upon the church,” when “his truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary... his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.”

One key to regaining the future is to move from asking what is being done ineffectively to sending people to visit congregations that are serving the kingdom more effectively. This does not mean trying to be a clone of another congregation, but it does mean learning the strategies of a

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healthy one—lessons that take time.

Holding mission and vision workshops can help people identify what they would like to do as a church in the days ahead. For example, with big pieces of paper taped to a wall people call out every kind of ministry they can think of. Every idea is written down without comment. Then the congregation examines these ministry ideas, considering how feasible they are *at this moment in time*. Is a preschool a viable option in an area where young families are moving away? Would senior day care be more effective? Would the church be able to act as a center for a local food pantry to help reduce the cost and energy people use to drive long distances for food items? Can it offer a tutoring program to help kids with homework? Can the church become a center for community needs of all different kinds? Can the church be encouraged to think about what *might* be done so they can have fruitful, informed, anticipatory conversations with a new pastor about what *will* be done?

Again, the purpose of this task is not to tell the new pastor what the

mission and vision of the church will be. Rather, it helps the church become willing to examine what has been done before and what might be done in the future. It is a task that unlocks the imagination.

5) Prepare for the next chapter in ministry.

Helping a church examine its history is the first thing an intentional interim pastor does. Helping a church prepare for the next chapter is the last thing he or she does. Usually this preparation begins after the new pastor has been called. It begins by referring to the new pastor by name and preparing for the beginning of his or her ministry.

This is a task that can be filled with anticipation and excitement. Working together, the intentional interim minister and the congregation

can talk about ways to welcome the pastor and his or her family. They might plan to create welcome baskets or identify people in the church to show the family around town. In my first interim congregation, a woman showed up one day, put us in her van, and drove us all over town helping us find hospitals, schools, shopping areas, and restaurants.

In this final stage, I have also conducted another workshop in which we listed what the church was like when the previous pastor left and what it was like now. Participants brainstormed what they had learned about themselves, what they still needed to learn, and what they were prepared to do in order for the next pastorate to get off to a good start. In this conversation I also took the opportunity to refer to the pastor by name so that it could be increasingly familiar to people.

This last phase of ministry is also a good time for the intentional interim minister to prepare to make a good exit. Like John the Baptist, the intentional interim must decrease so the newly called pastor can begin to

increase.

Intentional interim pastors develop strong relationships during their time with the church, and sometimes congregations are tempted to call the interim pastor to be the settled pastor. But people bare their souls to an intentional interim minister because they know he or she is leaving. If that person decides to stay, the first casualty is trust. This situation deserves an article of its own; the fact of the matter, however, is that people who study, teach, and function in intentional interim ministry agree that it is simply not a good idea for the intentional interim to stay.

Taking enough time

At its most elemental level, intentional interim ministry provides a congregation with the time and space to make a good end to one thing and prepare for a hopeful beginning for another. The vitality of the future is linked to how we deal with the things—both good and bad—of the past. It is important, therefore, to take enough time to identify concerns and fears and to dream about the next stage of ministry.

Opinions vary as to how long an effective interim should be. I recommend about eighteen months, though some churches have interim periods of about two years. Enough time should be allowed to examine the church's history, address leadership styles, and discuss mission and vision before the pastoral search committee is formed. After that, the intentional interim pastor works to provide leadership and care for the congregation while the search committee works with the conference superintendent to develop a church profile, sift through resumes, talk with potential candidates, and attend to the many other tasks involved in calling a new pastor.

It is important to address one final assumption regarding churches that have intentional interim ministers—namely that if you have an interim of any kind it means something in your church is wrong, broken, or needs to

be fixed. Actually, some of the easiest congregations to work with are the ones where the roof fell in and things are a mess. These churches know they are in trouble, they are eager for the chance to lighten up, and they listen carefully. The biggest challenges come with those who think everything is basically all right and that a tweak here and there will get them ready for what happens next.

Even churches that think they don't need an interim time can get stuck. A Lutheran congregation in Montana faced this scenario several years ago. For around fifteen years, the pastor had “walked on water.” He was solid, steady, beloved—but now he was gone. The congregation called an intentional interim minister, and this particular pastor decided from the start he was not going to replicate the ministry of the last pastor. Rather than use the large, elegantly appointed pastor's study, he moved into a smaller office down the hall. The former pastor took Mondays off, so he took Fridays off.

The interim pastor took as many reasonable opportunities as possible to differentiate himself from the former pastor. He would later say that after the first six months the congregation wanted to fire him; after two years they were genuinely sorry to see him go but equally excited about the arrival of the newly called pastor. In acting as he did, he helped the congregation realize that while their new pastor would be many things he would not be the old pastor.

Different churches enter interim time with different perspectives. Many churches have had a good ministry and are looking forward to receiving a new pastor for the purposes of continuing the good work that God will carry on to completion. But other churches that enter an interim period are angry and have been that way for a long time. Business meetings are tense, worship seems contrived, and the pastor's study has a revolving door. These are not necessarily bad or troubled or toxic churches. They

are churches that have been hurt in the past and have not been able to heal. Sometimes rushing from pastor to pastor, they have not taken time to think about their history, change some patterns of behavior, or develop a sense of anticipation about the future. Not doing that work will only cause churches to continue in destructive patterns of conflict and depression. But facing their issues, especially in partnership with someone who loves and values their place in the kingdom of God, can help churches learn from the past and embrace the thought of the future.

Interim time in a congregation is when the systems “unlock.” This idea was addressed in part by Covenant theologian, professor, and pastor C. John Weborg at the annual meeting of the Interim Ministry Network in 2003. He noted that “an interim period represents an end that has arrived and a beginning that is yet future. Yet the pressure of the impending new ministry can cause mischief. Relinquishment of previous loyalties needs time to be worked out. ‘Power blocs’ need time to recognize their reality and the need to deal with each other's visions, expectations, methods, and memories. All parties need to recognize that the form of congregational life is pressed by the end that is upon them, yet there is danger of hastening the end in order to shorten the interim in immature ways.... Congregational forms change, yet it is the same congregation being drawn forward by a new end in sight.”

In reality, we are all in one form of interim life or another. Every believer and every congregation would do well to heed the words of the hymn “Sing of Everlasting Kindness” (#647, *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook*): “Called to tasks that seem unending, called to walk a path untrod, called to pass through unknown perils, called to trust you, Lord our God. Grant us faith and hope and courage, though the way we do not know; lead us, love us, guide, support us, we will follow where you go.” ■