

A pastor shares
the rewards and
challenges of
interim ministry.

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More Than an In-between Time

Reading name tags is a common way to start conversations among pastors at the Covenant Midwinter Conference for ministers. “Hmm, let’s see, you are...and you work in...?”

In one such exchange I introduced myself as the interim pastor of a church in Michigan. The response surprised me: “You’re an interim? You don’t look old enough to be retired!”

While pleased that I had passed the age test, I was surprised that this pastor was unaware of the ministry of intentional interims. A tried and true concept in many denominations, intentional interims are becoming more and more common in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Indeed, I am not old enough to be retired, but I am currently serving my fifth interim church, a specialty that has fit my gifts for ministry, my family situation, and the local church’s need to stand back and reflect during the time between settled pastors.

Interim ministry is both tough and rewarding. It’s tough because you don’t get to stick around to see the fruits of your labor. The interim pastor has to be content to let the new pastor paint the picture that he or she had sketched out. The interim period is a time to address any sticky areas in a church’s life so the settled pastor can hit the ground running. It is better for the interim pastor, who won’t be staying, to take the heat on such issues rather than the new pastor.

The interim is there more as a consultant with more freedom to be up-front and, frankly, with less need to be loved. So issues like stewardship, conflict, unhealthy dynamics, and resistance to change are frequent interim topics. I know I may not be the most beloved pastor a church has ever had, but I do hope to be one of the most useful. Such ministry also brings a lot of goodbyes, as the interim pastor frequently has to leave people he or she has grown to love during an intense time together.

Yet interim ministry is very rewarding. Helping a church during such a pivotal point in its history and working to assure that a colleague will find a healthy, missional, and welcoming church upon arrival is necessary kingdom work. Serving in interim ministry also provides a lot of experience in a short amount of time, usually with very interesting churches and new challenges.

Different churches have different needs during times of transition, and the Covenant needs various types of interims trained to do the work. Perhaps a long-term pastor is retiring or leaving. The church may not even realize how much the personality of this pastor has shaped the mission and running of the church, especially since most of the current members joined because of that pastor. An interim can gently expose this unspoken dependence, freeing the congregation to seek and accept a pastor with pos-

sibly very different gifts and qualities. Since search committees often pursue candidates based on what the previous pastor *didn’t* do well, it can be helpful to have a time to pause and examine this tendency. Without a transitional time and pastor, a new minister can be overwhelmed with the previous pastor’s legacy, be it positive or negative.

Churches in conflict or in need of transformation benefit greatly from interim ministry. In fact, a church in these situations may intentionally take up to two or more years in interim until the issues facing the congregation have been researched and dealt with. Among the churches I have served as interim has been a church with legal issues that needed resolution, a church whose ministry had been stalled by an ineffective pastor, a new church start unable to find a worship place, a historically conflicted church that had just let its pastor go, and a conflicted church facing possible closure. The interim time is key to helping such churches look at what it will take to become healthy and missional.

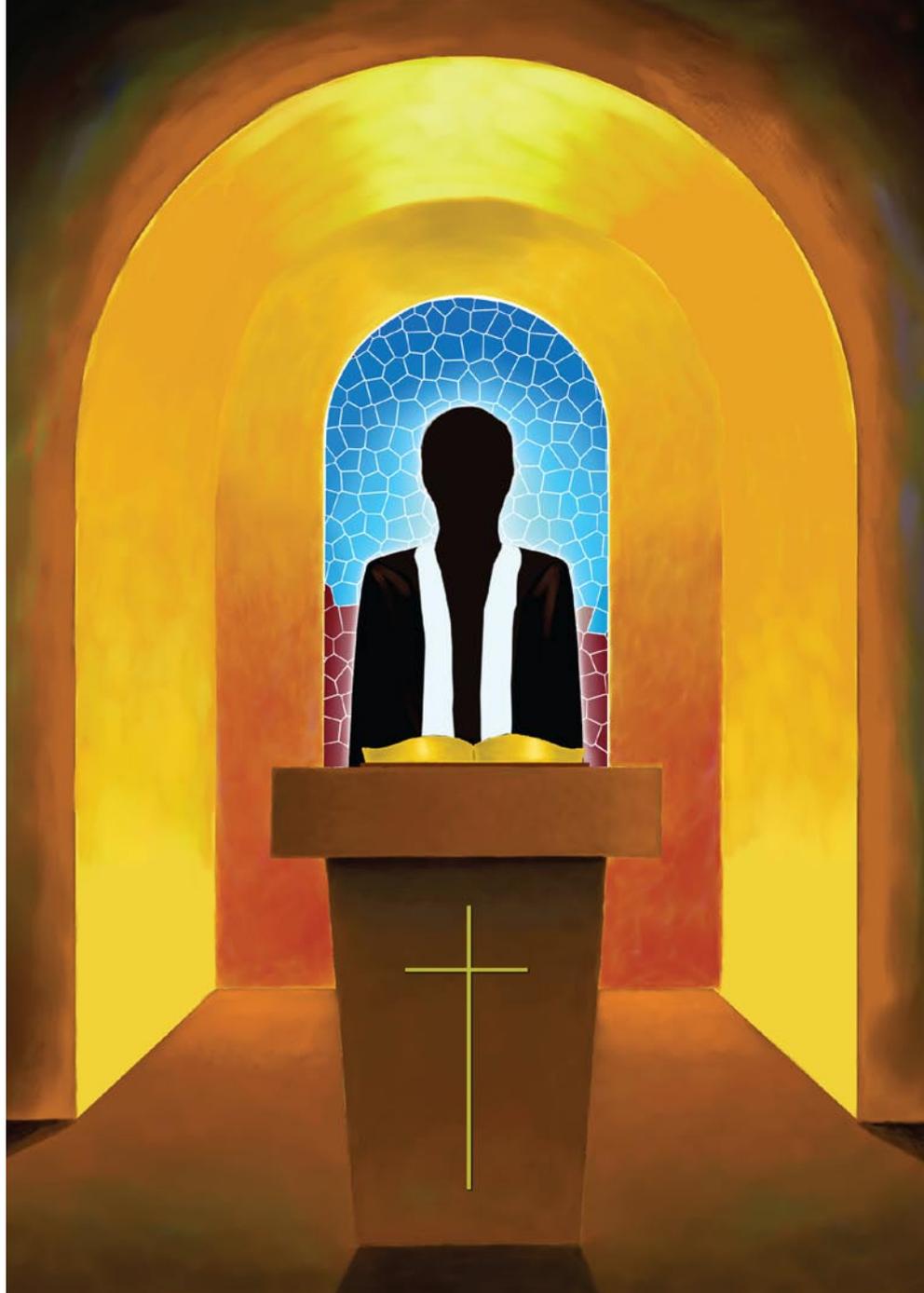
I have heard people in congregations say, “We don’t need an interim. We’ve never used one before and did just fine.” That may be. Perhaps a pastor supplying the pulpit and doing basic pastoral care is enough. But not always. What price might exhausted lay leaders pay while waiting for a new pastor to be chosen? What programs or ministries will lag while the search committee takes more key lead-

ers out of circulation? What problems in the church will just get passed on to a new administration rather than being brought to light and dealt with? What unhealthy tendencies might arise in the leadership vacuum, as anxious people subtly jockey for control?

When a pastor leaves, church dynamics can change at low levels or with hurricane force as grief and anxiety mix. A good interim keeps the energies focused in a positive direction as the coming change is explored, educating the congregation on the nature of change. The more people learn about the process of congregational change, the more likely they are to recognize themselves as part of a wider system and deal with the change well. Churches may be encouraged and celebrated as the interim pastor points out that they are doing many things well that had been taken for granted.

Interim pastors abide by some rules. For one, the interim is not involved in the search process, nor does the interim know anything about who is candidating. That task falls to the conference superintendent. Second, the interim and the congregation agree that the interim shall not candidate for the new pastoral position. This frees the congregation to search without being captive to the interim's feelings of acceptance or swayed by whether or not the congregation is embracing the transitional issues. By not candidating, the interim remains free to address necessary issues without the fear of being rejected. He or she also honors the search process into which other pastors have placed their names in good faith. The church must understand that hiring someone as interim is not a way of trying someone out for the "real" job.

I remember speaking with a lay leader shortly before leaving my first interim. He reminisced about the last fourteen months with some surprise. "I never thought we'd be a healthier church now than when our last pastor left. I was expecting the interim to just be a time to maintain the status quo."



That church had experienced a 28 percent increase in giving, increased attendance, rejuvenated their worship life, and honorably put to rest a sticky, historical legal issue. The congregation went on to call a dynamic permanent pastor who did indeed hit the ground running. With her leadership, the church has since built a new parish center that serves the whole community.

I look forward to the day when the Midwinter Conference will be a gathering place for an "interim pastors' group," as it is now for chaplains, spiritual directors, and other special ministries. Our denomination will be the stronger for it. ■

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Beth Ernest is the interim pastor of Federated Covenant Church in Dowagiac, Michigan, and serves as vice-chair of the Great Lakes Conference.