

# **INTENTIONAL INTERIM MINISTRY**

## **David L. Odom (revised by Geoff Cramb)**

Portions of the following article can be given to a congregation's leaders as their first exposure to Intentional Interim Ministry. If the church leaders continue to be interested in the process after reading the material, then the church needs to talk to someone familiar with how the Intentional Interim Ministry process works in the congregation's denomination.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most churches view the time between the resignation of one pastor and the call of another as unproductive, fallow time. Some feel it is wasted time. Others fear the congregation will lose members or dollars. Still others are in a rush to call a new pastor as quickly as possible so things can return to normal.

Significant studies of hundreds of interim congregations over the past twenty years are now showing that the interim between pastors can be an important time in congregational life. Neil Chafin, an experienced consultant to congregations, says, "The way a congregation chooses to use its interim time will shape congregational growth, identity, and health for years to come. We also know that what is done in the interim time really determines whether the new minister and congregation will form a solid ministry team."

Congregations that fail to make wise use of interim time tend to repeat their history with the new minister. This can lead to pain and confusion for the minister and prevent the congregation from meeting its goals of spiritual growth for its members and ministry to its community.

Expectations of ministers and churches vary enormously. Membership in many churches is either level or decreasing. Many congregations are unsure of their future. Each generation differs on expectations for the church. The interim is the best time to talk about and clarify these hopes and questions about church life.

### **STAGES OF THE INTERIM PERIOD**

The early pioneers of the Intentional Interim Ministry movement first identified eight stages that every congregation encounters during the transition period. An excellent extended explanation is found in Wm. Bud Phillips' book, *Pastoral Transitions*.

#### **The Ending**

##### ***Termination***

The interim journey begins with an ending. Someone decides that the pastor should leave the congregation's leadership. Circumstances are dramatically different if the pastor makes this decision over time as compared to a decision by the church or denomination to ask for the pastor's resignation.

No matter the circumstances, whenever a pastor leaves at least three attitudes are present in the congregation. First is the attitude of love for the pastor. Those who love the pastor are devastated that the pastor is leaving. They are in grief and may have the

feeling that no pastor can ever be as good as the departing pastor. The energy level for those with this attitude is very low. Those who love the pastor see the threat of pastoral change very clearly.

A second attitude present in the congregation is that of rejoicing that the pastor is going. Those with this attitude may have felt that it was time for the pastor to move on to another place. They may have had complaints about the pastor or they may just believe that it is time for a change. This attitude is a source of energy. People who are ready for the pastor to leave are ready to serve the church and move it forward. They are eager for the Pastoral Search Committee to be appointed and to start moving on with the church. They don't understand or appreciate the feelings of grief that others may be expressing.

The third attitude in the congregation is that of confusion. People with this attitude do not understand why the pastor is leaving. They may not even know that the pastor is gone. This attitude represents a fair number of people in any church. They do not know what is going on.

One of the key measures of the health of the congregation in the ending time relates to the attitudes of the people. Some people will feel a mixture of all three attitudes. Other people will have only one attitude. Key questions to ask related to these attitudes include:

- How many people are expressing each of the three attitudes?
- Are people with the same attitude holding formal or informal meetings to share their concerns with others?
- Are people with different attitudes able to share openly with each other in meetings at the church?

One of the goals of the interim time can be to bring the people with different attitudes back together again. In some churches, this process happens naturally and easily. In other churches, much intensive work must be done. In any case the healing that is needed is always a gift of God.

Intentional Interim Ministry involves helping the people share their feelings, hopes and fears with each other so that they can come together with a spirit of excitement about the future with a new pastor.

### **In The Middle**

When a pastor leaves a congregation, the church passes into a phase of transition described by William Bridges as "the neutral zone." People of faith know this time as a wilderness experience. In churches, such a time often begins with great confusion. Church leaders quickly see that the pastor was doing much more than the leaders had realized. During this time, some things are forgotten. Nothing goes as smoothly as before.

During the early days of the interim, key church leaders realize that they have heightened responsibility for the health of the church. In most places the church leaders both understand and accept the additional responsibility. They want the church to do well. They welcome guidance in the best things to do.

### ***Set a Direction***

Eventually, the confusion is lessened, church leaders consider their options and recommend a direction for the church.

### ***Fresh Focus***

The church needs to develop a profile. The process for developing this profile varies from one denomination to another. In general the process includes studying the church, defining the church's identity and the kind of pastor needed to lead the church. The distinctive element for churches engaging in the Intentional Interim Ministry process is at this stage. The *Fresh Focus* engages the congregation in addressing five developmental tasks. These tasks will be discussed in detail shortly.

### ***Search and Negotiation***

The next two stages of the interim time involve the Pastoral Search Committee. The gathering of resumes, interviewing candidates and checking resumes is done in confidence. The church is waiting on the search committee to complete its work. This often means that the church feels and acts as if it is in a holding pattern. People do not want to rock the boat too much. Some are afraid of changing anything for fear that the new pastor will have a different idea. Occasionally people will take advantage of this time to make many changes in the church. In any case, the Pastoral Search Committee is focused on its responsibility and may be less aware of what is happening in the church.

### ***Call***

Finally the search committee emerges and announces a candidate. The committee introduces the person to the church. Following an opportunity to meet the prospect, the church makes a decision about the pastor.

When the pastor accepts the call of the church, then the congregation is on its way out of the wilderness of the middle time and into an experience of the "Promised Land."

### **New Beginnings**

#### ***Commencement Service***

The commencement of the new pastor normally marks the beginning of a honeymoon time between pastor and people. This time of warmth and good feeling is an occasion for the pastor and church to get acquainted with each other. Hopefully, no major problems will arise in the first several months of the pastor's ministry. The lack of problems will allow the pastor and church leaders to build a strong relationship with each other.

#### ***Startup***

When the new pastor arrives, many of the church leaders will be very happy and quite tired. The church leaders have carried many extra burdens during the interim time. In

most cases, they will gladly hand these responsibilities to the new pastor. Many church leaders will take some time to catch their breath as the new pastor is getting to know the church.

If the beginnings go well, the church will soon forget all about the interim time. The days in the wilderness fade and the joy of a new beginning spreads. The honeymoon time will lay the groundwork for years of significant ministry for the pastor and congregation.

If the beginnings do not go well, then the pastor and church will soon be embroiled in conflict. Problems early in the pastor's ministry will likely shorten the ministry of the pastor. Most of the time, the problems of the beginnings are linked to issues not resolved in the endings or middle times. Making good use of the interim between installed pastors can make a difference in the ministry between the next pastor and the people.

## **THE FIVE DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF THE FRESH FOCUS**

Research led by Loren Mead has identified five tasks of churches in the interim. As mentioned earlier, these tasks form the basis for the *Fresh Focus*. The five tasks are:

1. Coming to Terms with History

It is vital to make time for healing within the congregation and for putting the service of the former minister in perspective. There must be a time of letting go of the former minister and for discarding old expectations, wounds, patterns, and baggage of the past. Only when the congregation has let go of the former minister, can a new minister be fully accepted.

2. Examining Leadership and Decision-Making Concerns

Every congregation today must be conscious of developing new leadership for the tasks of ministry and for incorporating younger and newer members into its body. The interim is prime time for reviewing the membership, its needs, and its ways of organizing, and for making decisions on how to best use its resources.

3. Rethinking Linkages and Networking

A congregation has often learned to see the denomination through the eyes of its former pastor. With increasing polarization of theological differences, it is crucial that each local congregation clarify its mainstream theological belief. A congregation that does not deal with this aspect of its life runs a strong risk of calling a minister who does not align theologically with the congregation. This can be a devastating experience for the minister and congregation and lead to severe congregational conflict.

4. Clarifying The Congregation's Identity

A congregation must periodically redefine a sense of purpose, direction, and what distinguishes it from other churches in the community. The interim is an appropriate time to do this. It is also an ideal time to conduct membership and

neighbourhood studies to find out how effectively the church is reaching and serving its own community. A church that fails to connect and serve its community through missions and ministry becomes an endangered church. Many churches today have turned inward to serve their own members. Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

5. Developing A Commitment to New Clergy Leadership and the Future

When a congregation has completed the four preceding tasks, it is ready to talk with candidates who can be a good match for the congregation. During this phase of the interim, the congregation prepares to receive a new leader and makes arrangement for call, induction, and start-up for its new minister.

These are the five crucial developmental tasks of a congregation in search of a new pastor. If congregational members do these tasks thoroughly with wide participation, the chances for effective ministry with a new pastor are greatly enhanced.

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE INTERIM TIME**

### **The Transition Team**

The church accomplishes the process of intentional interim ministry. Leadership for the process is vested in a group of church members chosen by the Intentional Interim Minister in association with the congregation and local church leaders. This group is called the Transition Team and it is selected by asking church members to identify three or four people that they most trust to guide the church transition in the interim between pastors. The team should be representative of diversity in the congregation, including men and women, younger and older people. This team usually has between 10 and 15 members depending upon the size of the church and the diversity necessary for it to be broadly representative of the congregation.

The Transition Team works through the developmental tasks of the interim church themselves. They then decide how to best involve the congregation in dealing with these tasks. The Transition Team is responsible for recommending to the congregation when the *Fresh Focus* process should be concluded and the search for a new minister begin. The membership of the Transition Team and its appropriate functioning is a key to the church's experiencing the full benefits of the intentional interim process.

### **The Intentional Interim Minister**

Most Transition Teams need some outside help in working through the intentional interim process. Such help can be secured in at least two ways. An intentional interim pastor normally provides the best assistance. This person is an accredited minister with pastoral experience, who has had additional training in leading a congregation through the intentional interim process. The intentional interim minister performs at least two roles in most churches. First, the minister serves as the interim pastor of the congregation. This includes preaching, teaching, pastoral care and administration. Second, the pastor works as a consultant to the Transition Team in working on the developmental tasks. The specific responsibilities of the pastor are normally clarified in a written covenant between the minister and the congregation. Each covenant reflects the uniqueness of the relationship.

## **Intentional Interim Consultant**

Some churches are not able to find an intentional interim pastor who is able to fill the pastoral office of the church. Therefore, these churches choose two people to help the church through the intentional interim process: one to serve as the interim pastor, and the other to serve as a consultant to the Transition Team.

The consultant would be a person who is trained both in consultation skills and in the intentional interim ministry process. Consultants' names are available through the Transitional Ministries Association. We do not have a large "pool" of consultants available currently. Consultants work on an hourly basis with the congregation. Experience indicates that a consultant is not as effective as is a full-time intentional interim pastor. The consulting option is given to churches as a way of making sure that they can find the appropriate leadership for their church.

## **Costs of Intentional Interim Ministry**

The level of service that the church needs determines the cost of this process. If the church wants a full-time pastor to serve as the intentional interim pastor for the congregation, then they can expect to pay that pastor approximately what they paid their last full-time pastor. Additional expenses might be for housing in the community where the church is located. The Transitional Ministries Association asks for \$300 per IIM placement, to assist in training. If the church does not need the pastor to work on a full-time basis, then the church can negotiate with the interim to handle less responsibility and thus, less pay. If the church chooses to use a consultant, then that arrangement is normally made on an hourly basis based on the amount of work that the consultant will be doing with the congregation and Transition Team.

## **Covenant Relationship**

One of the characteristics of an intentional interim pastor and church relationship is that relationship is defined by some written covenant. This covenant states clearly what the expectations of the church are for the intentional interim pastor and what the church has committed to do in terms of intentional interim ministry. The pastor's role should be well defined, including the fact that the interim pastor will not be a candidate to serve as the permanent pastor of the church.

## **Key Elements of Intentional Interim Ministry**

When a church has decided to have an Intentional Interim Minister, it will take two important steps:

1. The church has officially voted that it will work on a *Fresh Focus*, including the five developmental tasks of the interim church before it releases a search committee to begin searching for a new pastor. Ideally, the church will not even elect a search committee until after the *Fresh Focus* phase has ended.
2. The church has a specific covenant describing the relationship between the intentional interim pastor/consultant and the church. These covenants include the fact that **none** of these outside persons is open to accepting the call from the church to serve as the next permanent pastor.

## How Long Does It Take?

The intentional interim process typically takes approximately 12 to 18 months from the decision of the congregation to begin intentional interim ministry until the calling of the next pastor. However, certain circumstances can extend (or shorten) this period of time. Experience indicates that if the previous pastor had a long tenure of service of more than 10 years, then the interim time will be extended beyond a year. If the church had a significant conflict with the previous pastor, that also will likely extend the interim time.

The Transition Team that guides the process determines the amount of time that it takes for a church to do intentional interim ministry. It also is determined by the length of time that a search committee requires finding an acceptable minister to serve as pastor. There are no hard and fast rules. Usually a church commits to work with an intentional interim pastor for one year. The covenant can be renewed after that time, if the church and interim so desire. Most of the time, these covenants also can be terminated at any point by the pastor or the congregation.

## Myths About Intentional Interim Ministry

- # 1: *Intentional interim is better than traditional interim ministry.*  
Intentional interim ministry is not better or worse, it is simply different than how churches have traditionally handled the interim between pastors. Some churches need to go through a process of *Fresh Focus* and other churches do not need that sort of formal process. Many people serve very effectively as traditional interim pastors of congregations and they need to be recognized for the valuable service that they perform both for those congregations and for the Kingdom of God.
- # 2: *Intentional interim ministry is only for troubled churches.*  
Intentional interim ministry is designed from experience with healthy congregations. Certain congregations in difficult situations may find intentional interim ministry particularly valuable. However, any church that can benefit from *Fresh Focus* and clarity about who it is before it calls a new pastor, can benefit from the process of intentional interim ministry.
- # 3: *Intentional Interim Ministry is very costly.*  
The process is designed so that it should not be much more expensive than having a permanent pastor full-time.
- # 4: *The intentional interim pastor will tell us what we need to do.*  
The intentional interim pastor is a guide to help the process. The work of intentional interim ministry is a work of the church deciding and doing what it needs to do.

## Does This Process Work?

Intentional interim ministry works differently in every church because it is a process designed by the congregation's leaders. The Transitional Ministries Association is happy to provide the names of lay leaders in congregations that have experienced this process so that you may contact them directly about their experiences.

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