

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

THE INTERIM PASTOR

An “interim” pastor is one called for a specific purpose and period of time to lead a congregation during the in-between times of installed pastoral leadership. The interim pastor is called when, for any reason, the regular pastoral position has become vacant. The interim does many of the same things as the regularly called pastor, but within a different framework of time, goals, and planning. The interim ministry has three primary functions: (1) maintenance of congregational life and ministry; (2) enhancement of selected aspects of congregational life and ministry; and (3) working at specific designated tasks. The goal of interim ministry is to fulfill these functions in a way that will enable the congregation and the next pastor to be prepared with vision, commitment, and excitement for the future.

John the Baptist is an excellent model of an interim pastor. His ministry had a specific purpose and time frame. He was called upon to “prepare the way” of the one who would follow. He immediately removed the focus from self and put it on the one who was to follow. He knew when his ministry was completed. When Jesus came, John gracefully bowed out of the picture. In this biblical understanding of the interim pastor, there are some basics that can be useful today.

The interim period can be an opportunity for congregational development and renewal, rather than just a time to keep the doors open. A planned interim pastorate can have positive and long-lasting benefits for the congregation. This in-between-ministers time is proving to be valuable for congregations, not just to give them continuity until a new pastor arrives, but to provide a designated period to resolve problems, evaluate themselves, overcome the grief or anger some feel from losing their pastor, and to select priorities and goals for the future. Philip Porcher, writing in an Alban Institute pamphlet, suggests:

The relatively new understanding and use of the interim period has sound biblical and theological roots. As we study the history of the ancient Hebrew people, the life and ministry of Christ, and the formation of the early church, we find that times for going apart, for withdrawal, rest, renewal, regrouping and then beginning again were very much in evidence. The Christian concept of death and resurrection speaks powerfully to periods in our lives when, individually or collectively, we need to say “good-bye” to the old and “welcome” to the new (in all phases of our life). The interim period is a time of grieving and letting go of what has been and then renewing our faith, beginning to open ourselves to a new future.¹

A positive way to help congregations deal with a change in pastoral leadership is through an interim pastor. Every congregation has its own unique concerns, but there are some issues and

1. Philip Porcher, *What You Can Expect from an Interim Pastor and an Interim Consultant*. Washington: The Alban Institute, 1980, p. 2.

feelings common to all congregations during pastoral change. Some commonly experienced feelings are . . .

- relief/anger over the pastor's leaving
- guilt over some aspects of the past
- insecurity about the present and the future
- recognition of reality of the situation
- awareness of need for some help
- hope for the future
- excitement about a new pastor ²

Others have suggested congregations go through these feelings naturally, but a person with some training and support can help guide this process toward a happier and more constructive resolution.

When the pastor leaves, for whatever reason, all people experience loss with the departure. The pastor who stood with them, led them, and ministered in their midst will be missed. It's difficult to imagine going on without secure pastoral leadership. At this time the congregation asks, "What do we do now?" Feelings of confusion, grief, emptiness, and fear often surface. The response is, "We need to find a pastor fast, to hold things together." A congregation should not rush to find pastoral leadership. Certainly the mission and ministry will continue.

How a congregation chooses to meet this challenge has a lasting effect on the "ministry" of the congregation. This should not be a time of maintenance, of keeping things going until the next minister arrives; but a time to look intentionally at concerns and explore future opportunities for ministry. A congregation that understands interim ministry has unique opportunities for exploration and moving forward. This can be a challenging and stimulating time for the local church, if used in a thoughtful and constructive way.

The following information about the interim period and interim pastorate is offered to help in an understanding of this important role: ³

- The interim period helps the congregation move toward a positive future vision.
- It allows space for transition, preparing the congregation for new leadership.
- The time frame gives opportunity for the congregation to re-examine goals and its basic mission.
- An important function for the interim is to work at congregational issues, such as re-defining identity, conflict resolution, etc.
- A side benefit is that congregations become more responsible for their ministry and claim it as their own.
- Since the interim is short-term (usually from six to eighteen months in length), problems may be addressed because the interim pastor will soon be leaving.
- In certain situations mediation skills may be required.
- The interim pastor must have a positive sense of self-worth, not gauging the success of his/her ministry on congregational feedback.

2. Alan G. Gripe, *The Interim Pastor's Manual*. Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1982, p. 9.

3. This information was gathered from Brethren pastors serving in interim roles and District/Executive Ministers.

The interim pastor shall . . .

- Be clear about his/her role;
- BE A GOOD LISTENER;
- Be aware of the grief process of losing the pastor and encourage the sharing of good times with the last pastor;
- Help with the transition by gently naming the importance of letting go and anticipating the new pastor;
- Have a clear job description with specific goals and a definite beginning and ending date established.
- The agreement should include a clause for early termination (usually a thirty-day period).
- An interim pastor does not initiate changes in program or organizational structure that will create a problem for his/her successor.
- The interim is never a consultant to the search committee or possible pastoral candidate.
- The interim is usually not to be considered as a candidate. [*See paragraph at the end of these suggestions.*]
- If an interim or congregation is open to him/her being considered a candidate for the permanent pastoral position, that decision should be made at the time of signing an agreement so stipulated therein.

The interim shall . . .

- Keep in close touch with the group in the local church you are working under;
- Effectively get to work;
- Preach challenging upbeat sermons around the theme of praise, discipleship, reconciliation, forgiveness, vision, family struggles, and affirmation;
- Always keep the title distinct—INTERIM PASTOR!

Usually the interim should not be considered as a candidate for the permanent call. This should be stated clearly in the contract or letter of agreement. However, in some situations the interim may be considered as a candidate. This should be acknowledged when the church board employs the interim. Item five (5) in the letter of agreement indicates “open to permanent call” or “closed to permanent call.” If the designation would change after employment, it would be processed through church board action in consultation with the interim and District Executive/Minister. The former term *interim pro tem* has been dropped from our terminology.

Remember, the interim pastor has a unique role and can have a significant impact on the ministry of a congregation. Just like John the Baptist, the interim pastor helps “prepare the way” for the one who is to follow. When the call is extended to the new pastor, the interim pastor gracefully bows out of the picture, knowing his/her role is completed.

Bibliography - Resources for Interim Ministry

Bendroth, Normal B. *Interim Ministry in Action: A Handbook for Churches in Transition*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Bendroth, Norman B. *Transitional Ministry Today: Successful Strategies for Churches and Pastors*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. 2014.

Bird, Warren and Vanderbloemen, William. *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 2014.

Child, Barbara, and Kron, Ketih, Eds. *In the Interim: Strategies for Interim Ministers and Congregations, Second Edition*. Boston: Skinner House Books. 2017.

Crabtree, J. Russell and Weese, Carolyn. *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions with Sensitivity, Creativity, and Excellence*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2004.

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Gripe, Alan G. *The Interim Pastor's Manual*. Louisville: Geneva Press. 1997.

Helgeson, John. *Freedom and Interim Ministry: 12 Freedoms of the Interim*. Canton, MA: ARPress. 2024.

McCutchan, Stephen. *An Interim Pastor's Gift: A Guide to Raising a Congregation's Awareness Regarding the Health of Clergy (Healthy Clergy Make Healthy Congregations, Bk. 3)*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. 2014.

Nicholson, Roger S. *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

Robinson, Anthony B. *Rethinking Interim Ministry Congregations Issue 4*. (2012)

Smith, Molly Dale, Ed. *Transitional Ministry: A Time of Opportunity*. New York: Church Publishing, Inc. 2009.

Taylor, Cam, and Simpson, Alan. *Between Pastors: Seizing the Opportunity*. Delta, British Canada: Outreach Canada Ministries. 2014.

Thompson, Beverly and George, Jr. *Grace for the Journey: Practices and Possibilities for In-Between Times*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. 2011.

Thorstad, Brian A. *Redevelopment – Transitional Pastoring that Transforms Churches*. City: Next Step Resources. 2016.

Tull, Justin. Interim Ministry: Positive Change in Times of Transition. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform. 2012.

Zimmerman, Richard P. Walk with Me to Another Land: A Narrative Approach to Transitional Ministry. Eugene: Wipf & Stock. 2017.

Other resources that may be applicable to intentional interim ministry include:

Beaumont, Rev. Susan. How to Lead when You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season. City: Rowman and Littlefield. 2019.

Rendle, Gilbert R. Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World. City: Rowman & Littlefield. 2018.

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

LETTER OF AGREEMENT INTERIM PASTOR

Between _____ and the _____ Church of the Brethren

The Interim Minister shall serve _____ time beginning _____ and shall be for a period of _____. This letter of agreement may be terminated by either party upon 30 days notice. There shall be intentional assessment of the interim ministry at regular intervals by the appropriate congregational leadership.

I. TIME EXPECTATIONS

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II. GOALS FOR THE INTERIM PERIOD

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-
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III. RESPONSIBILITIES OF MINISTRY

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IV. SALARY AND BENEFITS

- A. Will receive \$ _____ per month, with \$ _____ for salary and \$ _____ for housing allowance.
- B. The interim will be reimbursed for travel at the IRS established rate.
- C. Pension
- D. Medical or Miscellaneous Benefits
- E. Vacation will be prorated according to time served.

V. CALL [check one]

- Open to permanent call
- Closed to permanent call

Signed: _____ Interim Pastor
_____ Church Board chair

Copies to: Church Clerk, Treasurer, District Executive/Minister

Office of Ministry
Church of the Brethren
1451 Dundee Avenue
Elgin, Illinois 60120-1694

III. Additional information that will be helpful in placement process

Training for Interim Ministry _____

Experience(s) as Interim Pastor _____

Specific skills for Interim Ministry _____

Are you interested in additional training in Interim Ministry? ____ Yes ____ No

Other: _____

District Executive/Minister _____ District _____

Date _____

**Please send the completed form to the Office of Ministry, Church of the Brethren General Offices,
1451 Dundee Avenue, Elgin, IL 60120-1694.**

Office of Ministry
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Elgin, Illinois 60120-1694