

DOES OUR CHURCH NEED AN INTERIM MINISTER?

Transitions are a natural part of church life. As ministers retire or leave in pursuit of another calling, the transition creates gaps in the ministry of a congregation. Churches have several options when planning to fill the interim between pastors or staff ministers. The information provided here presents interim options for the congregation. Though pertaining mostly to the position of lead pastor, similar interim ministry choices are available for other roles as well.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

When planning for the interim between ministers, the wise congregation will take the time to investigate their options and make a choice based on the needs and life of the church. The priority during the interim period should be the continued ministry of the congregation. Coming in a close second is preparing for the next minister. Together, continuing ministry and preparing for the future mean serving the community and church, tending to the health and functioning of the congregation, and affirming identity. The time between ministers should not be idle time, but an opportunity to grow as a congregation.

Here are a few important questions to consider when deciding how to handle the interim choices:

- How might we characterize the tenure of the previous pastor? Was it long, with a deep emotional connection? Was it short with turmoil? Did the prior minister's service end well?
- Is there conflict in our congregation? Are people polarized over the departure of the previous minister? Are there "camps" or "cliques" whose concerns should be addressed before the next minister arrives?
- What are the needs of our remaining staff? How might we support the remaining ministers on staff? What are concerns of other staff about the interim between

pastors?

Should it be decided to call an interim minister, it is important to be specific about the expectations of that person. State clearly which ministerial duties are to be performed and for what length of time. Determine the conditions for renewing, extending, or canceling the arrangement. Finally, it should be stipulated clearly that clergy serving as interim ministers will not be considered for the permanent position.

What type of interim is right for our church?

PULPIT SUPPLY

The first concern during a pastoral transition is often providing for worship leadership and preaching. One common approach for providing worship leadership, especially at the beginning of an interim period, is to engage "supply preachers," guest ministers whose primary responsibilities are in the worship service. Churches often "fill the pulpit" with other members of the church staff, with ministers who are members of the congregation, with ministers from the local area, and/or with CBF state and regional leaders. Some congregations develop a rotation for pulpit supply by utilizing guest ministers for a few weeks at a time.

Pulpit supply as an approach to interim ministry is best suited to churches that anticipate a very brief interim or for a limited time as they consider other interim options. Extended periods of pulpit supply tend to burden the church's staff and lay leaders with both recruiting and maintaining the schedule of preachers, in addition to the other weekly tasks of ministry.

TRADITIONAL INTERIM

Churches that are functioning well, have little or no conflict, and who have responded well to the prior minister's departure may thrive with a "traditional interim." The traditional interim minister typically attends to all the duties of the prior minister, including worship leadership, visitation, and committee leadership. Sometimes a traditional interim will limit the numbers of hours dedicated to ministry or focus the work on a limited number of days, especially if the minister is not local to the area.

Support for a transition team or a search team may be included in the duties of the traditional interim at the church's request. The extent of the interim minister's involvement with the search team – whether it is joining each meeting, periodic coaching, or providing other resources – should be clearly defined in the interim ministry agreement.

INTENTIONAL INTERIM

Churches that have experienced conflict, polarization or who have struggled following the departure of the former minister may benefit from an "intentional interim." The intentional interim period, usually nine-12 months, involves a planned approach to congregational

conversations, visioning, and conflict de-escalation. A minister trained for an intentional interim will typically take on the duties of the former pastor while guiding the congregation toward healthier processes and relationships.

The intentional interim minister will typically offer support to a church's transition team or search team. Along with periodic coaching, the intentional interim minister may guide the church in the development of a church profile based on congregational conversations and visioning for use by the search team. Again, the intentional interim agreement should stipulate the character of the interim's involvement with the search team.

TRANSITION CONSULTANT OR COACH

Churches may choose to supplement their traditional or intentional interim ministers with a professional transition consultant or coach. The consultant or coach usually provides specified services in support of the church or search team in partnership with the interim minister. Services from consultants vary based on the needs of the church, but tend to include church or pastor profile creation, search team guidance or applicant recruitment.

**For more
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