

## MISTAKES CHURCHES MAKE DURING AN INTERIM MINISTRY

After thirty years of service, the pastor of Community Pine Church retired. For the majority of members, he was the only church pastor they had ever experienced. Lay leaders quickly formed a search committee to get started on finding an interim pastor. Any step that might delay them seemed a waste of precious time. They feared the months between pastors could deplete resources and members' energy. After some discussion, the committee produced a vague document about the congregation and the kind of leader they were seeking.

### Avoiding the Familiar Missteps

The transition time between a departing pastor and a regularly called and installed permanent pastor presents an extraordinary opening for possible transformation. Too many churches miss this infrequent opportunity because of confusion or haste.

*Fuzzy expectations.* Lay leaders in a rush to put the word out tend to skip the essential first step of discussing their expectations for the interim minister. What are the duties they want the interim to perform? What responsibilities are the highest priorities? After reaching an agreement on these questions, the committee draws up a contract or covenant, which specifies some of the following duties: preaching, administering baptism and communion, conducting funerals and weddings, performing administrative duties, supervising other church staff, contributing to church communications (bulletins, newsletters, and social media), and providing pastoral care.

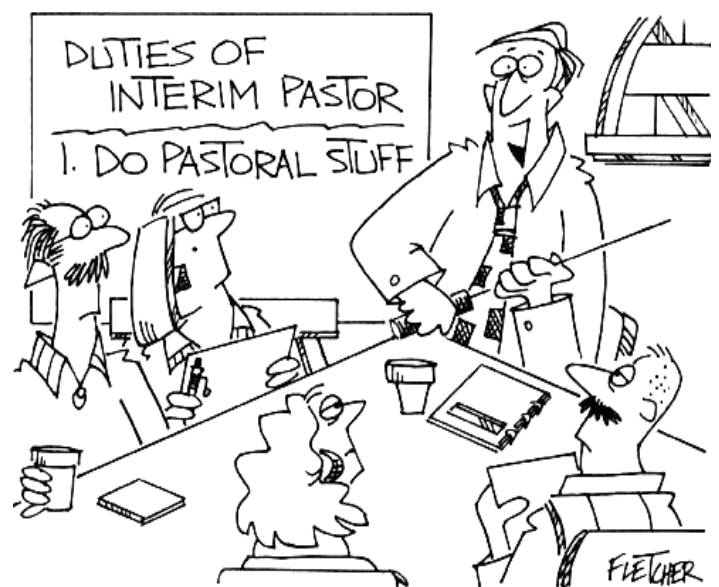
*Process matters.* A bad process for hiring an interim pastor leads to a bad decision. Process is not about what happens, but how decisions are made. In panic mode, members circumvent thoughtful conversations with other members and key denominational contacts. Planning for the next step in the congregation's future takes prayer, wisdom, and buy-in from all stakeholders.

*Big fights over small issues.* Long-time members may hold strong preferences about worship style and church programs. However, insisting on carrying over certain

traditions takes the focus away from the church's central mission and theology. Beware of the "fight and flee syndrome" where a few members stir up a controversy but leave the church instead of seeing it through. Rather than advocating for what "we want," church leaders need a longer-term perspective that points to what is best for the congregation's future.

*Delaying controversial decisions.* Members so value stability and calm that they put off any action that may generate conflict. For example, the interim period is the best time to deal with problem staff. That way the new pastor begins with a fresh start, unburdened by cleaning up past problems.

*Deciding if the interim can be a candidate for permanent pastor.* Possibly no other issue proves to be a bigger obstacle. Some denominations prohibit an interim from becoming the regularly called, permanent pastor. Other denominations have loosened the restriction and advise congregations on a case-by-case basis. Regardless, the initial contract or covenant should clearly state whether the interim pastoral position is open for a permanent call or closed to a permanent call. The terms of



"PRODUCTIVE MEETING, FOLKS!...  
NOW...ON TO THE NEXT STEP!"

call should also indicate the beginning date and ending date and whether the contract can be renewed (for an example, see Letter of Agreement for Interim Pastor by the Church of the Brethren<sup>1</sup>). If this matter is not settled in advance, the congregation spends too much energy on the issue. Invariably, conflict ensues because some members have formed a personal attachment with the pastor already on the scene while others do not see the interim pastor as a good match for the congregation.

### The Traditional vs. Intentional Approach

Two different broad strategies capture the congregation's leadership choices during an interim period.

*Traditional approach.* In the traditional approach, the church searches for someone to keep the doors open and help the congregation tread water. The interim minister's role is seen as providing stability and keeping all programs and ministries running. The goal in this approach is not to move the church in any particular direction. A local retired pastor may be asked to provide this type of leadership to prevent the church from losing momentum. Certainly an experienced pastor, serving as an interim, can maintain and enhance the church's ministry.

*Intentional approach.* Congregations making this strategic decision see this in-between time as a transitional window. They ask for someone with an adaptive leadership style who will serve for a designated period to resolve conflict, create space for grief or anger some members may feel from losing their previous pastor, and assist with efforts to identify future goals and priorities. This approach emphasizes transformation and renewal rather than continuity. The biblical role model for this approach is John the Baptist, who God called to prepare the way for the one who would follow him.<sup>2</sup>

### Traits of an Effective Interim Pastor

Interim pastors share the same characteristics as other effective pastors. However, many interim pastors have special training and experience serving as an interim in other churches. Many interim pastors feel called to do interim ministry as their unique, long-term call. Flexibility and listening skills are essential because every congregation presents one-of-a-kind ministry challenges.

As the search committee screens candidates, look for:

- Years of experience as a pastor
- Specialized training for interim pastors<sup>3</sup>
- History of service (number of churches and years at each one)

- Excellent references
- Evidence of life-long learning
- Current on ministry approaches

Above all, a pastor's leadership style has to match the congregation's needs. In reality, in most churches, members hold different views on leadership. Some want a transformational leader, a pastor who would bring new ideas and create a common vision. Other members want an inspiring leader, a pastor who would encourage lay leaders' gifts and share leadership with them. Another faction feels most comfortable with a servant leader, a pastor who puts the needs of others first and takes care of current members. Do the majority of members prefer a lay-directed congregation where lay leaders come up with most initiatives and make most of the major decisions? Or do the majority of members feel more comfortable with a pastor-directed congregation where the pastor makes most of the decisions? Or do most members want to share leadership with a pastor where a pastor inspires and encourages members to make decisions and take action?

### Interim Ministry Blessings

As a congregation prepares for new leadership, the pause yields many benefits. The church can hit the "re-boot" or "re-start" and find unexpected renewal and energy. Members become more responsible for the church's ministry and claim its mission as their own.

The conventional view was that there was no way to fail as an interim pastor. If the interim pastor performed poorly, then that pastor just made the next pastor look better! If the interim pastor's leadership was excellent, then the new pastor gained a better foundation to build on for the future. However, this perspective fails to account for the extensive damage an ineffective interim leader can do. The first rule of wise leadership is "do no harm." A second principle is also important: "Ministry is never about the minister; it is always about the gospel the minister proclaims."<sup>4</sup>

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1. <http://www.brethren.org/ministryoffice/documents/interim-ministry-resource.pdf>.

2. Ibid.

3. For example, training by the Interim Ministry Network (<https://imnedu.org/>) and many denominations. See also Transitional Ministry Education Consortium, <https://www.transitionalministryeducation.net/>.

4. Daniel O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), xi.