

## **THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERIM PERIOD**

Intentional Interim Ministry is a focused approach for guiding congregations during the time between regularly called pastors. It is not just crisis ministry, nor is it simply maintenance ministry. It is not the same as “synodical administration,” which was reserved for crisis situations. It is ministry with specific “intentions” and tasks to be accomplished – goals defined by the process of intentional interim ministry and the specific needs of the congregation.

Intentional interim pastors receive specialized training consisting of two intensive weeks with field work in the intervening months. They also have continuing education events to keep up to date and often have support groups

There are three basic situations in which an intentional interim pastor is helpful.

- The loss of a long-term pastor through moving or retirement.
- Conflict situations.
- Shattering situations, such as misconduct or death of a leader.

During this time the intentional interim works with the congregation on the following five tasks:

### **1. Coming to terms with history**

The congregation must deal with “letting go” of the former pastor and preparing for a new one, regardless of the reason for the former pastor leaving.

### **2. Discovering a new identity**

This is a time for congregations to step back and re-examine their self-understanding, current realities, real possibilities, and goals. Often new insights, new directions and even a fresh vision emerge in the interim period.

### **3. Allowing the needed leadership changes and procedures**

Congregations can get bogged down in familiar patterns, or congregational systems may malfunction. When a pastor leaves, there is opportunity for new patterns of lay involvement. Sometimes those who have been active step back and others step forward. A new dynamic emerges and a different set of pastoral skills may be required.

### **4. Strengthening or renewing the congregation’s relationship and the church-at-large**

Many congregations have a tenuous or distant relationship with the whole church. The period between pastors often brings the congregation into closer and more frequent contact with church-wide resources and activities and thus into a more real sense of shared ministry.

### **5. Commitment to new leadership and directions**

The ultimate goal is for the congregation to move to spiritual and emotional readiness for a vital partnership with a new pastoral leader.

## **SIGNS YOUR CHURCH NEEDS AN INTENTIONAL INTERIM PASTOR**

An intentional interim period should be the first thing a church does when the pastor resigns, *especially if the church meets any of these criteria.*

1. The pastor is leaving after a lengthy tenure (experts differ over “lengthy tenure”, with figures from 7 to 15 years).
2. The church churns its pastors (a new one is called every few years).
3. The pastor leaves under duress (forced out) or due to moral failure.
4. The church’s leaders can’t identify or agree on the church’s mission.
5. It has been three years since the last ministry audit (everything is reviewed for “mission fit” and amended as needed).
6. It is a “commuter church” (members are very different from those who live near the church).
7. Attendance has plateaued (people coming in offset those who leave).
8. The church faces significant financial challenges.

Any church entering the transition between permanent pastors should pay careful and prayerful attention to these danger signs. If not, there is a danger the leadership team might utter five very dangerous words. If these words become a mantra the leadership could unwittingly inflict serious damage on the church that takes years to repair.

## **FIVE WORDS CHURCH LEADERS MUST AVOID**

“We can do it ourselves.”

Those words should be neither spoken nor thought by the leaders of a church that meets any of the criteria. Perhaps this is an appropriate sentiment for church leaders that have the rare good fortune of being part of a robust, vigorous congregation. Other than that they might say these five deadly words because they don’t know what they don’t know.

What is it they don’t know? They don’t know what an intentional interim pastor does, how he has been trained and what skills he brings to the church. So let’s explore that briefly.

## **THE INTENTIONAL INTERIM PASTOR’S JOB**

An intentional interim pastor brings mission-critical skills needed during this critical time in the church’s life. Interim Pastors keep *continuity* between pastors. They guide the church through changes that leave the church’s focus intact. The way congregants view their church’s mission is unchanged. A Transition Pastor is intentional about *managing transitions*. This requires congregants to change their internal attitudes and ideas about the mission of the congregation. For information about the distinctions of intentional interim pastors (also known as transitional pastors) read *5 Key Traits of Effective Transition Pastors*.

During this transition the intentional interim pastor aids the church in removing the obstacles that hinder the church from achieving of its God-given potential. This leaves the church poised for growth when the new pastor arrives. The specific skill sets that the interim pastor will employ in this project include (but are not limited to the following items:

1. **Assessment.** The intentional interim pastor must be able to discern the true state of the church by the use of various assessment tools, interviews with a statistically significant portion of the congregation, and a comprehensive review of all governing documents, minutes of meetings and other historical information./the fruit of the assessment are consolidated into one report that contains a succinct statement about the findings, commentary on the factors that led to the current state, and a proposed course of action to ameliorate the problems.
2. **Grief.** In many cases the church needs to bring out its grief and work through the pain. The grief may be due to the loss of a beloved minister, to destructive conflict that led to the minister's departure, the loss of a compelling vision for the future or other reasons./ An effective interim pastor will employ leadership behaviors that bring the congregation to relief and to a full embrace of the new normal.
3. **Direct Action.** If there are immediate threats to the church's welfare the intentional interim pastor provides leadership to insure that the problems are either resolved or removed in a biblical and God-honoring fashion./ The interim pastor is responsible for the welfare of the whole church as a corporate body. It is likely that he will have to confront strong personalities, perhaps the "church boss" and deal firmly. This requires special skills to keep the "main thing the main thing" without getting sucked into a personal clash. In these situations the interim pastor will likely need the services of a coach to get through this phase unflustered.
4. **Training.** The congregation in transition will be in need of training, but the specifics will vary from church to church. The intentional interim is able to provide the appropriate training, bring appropriate ancillary materials to bear and insure that the congregation is equipped to sustain the eight key systems of a healthy church./ By the time the interim leaves, the church should have a sustainable training system to insure a pool of trained and qualified leaders for each of those eight systems. This system will insure proper channels of learning for various personality profiles and learning styles.
5. **Mission, Vision and Strategic Planning.** An intentional interim pastor will possess the skills necessary to *guide* the congregation into their own understanding of the mission./ This requires the ability to work within denominational guidelines and doctrinal statements while remaining true to the text of scripture. The pastor must also know how to move from mission to vision and thence to strategic planning. The end result of this part of the transition process is that the members themselves own the mission, they are energized by the vision and they are committed to executing the strategic plan. *The intentional interim pastor must know how to guide the congregation or its leaders so they are the ones who do the actual development work. If they don't, the mission, vision and plans aren't theirs!*
6. **Manage Change.** Introducing change into the life of a church is tricky business. Even people who recognize and embrace the need for change can be thrown./ Most people will naturally react to change with resistance borne of fear. An intentional interim pastor needs to have and use the tools that manage the change process. If not, the changes will not be permanent and the church will probably slip back into *status quo ante* when the new pastor arrives; this creates additional tension for the next pastor.

7. **Pastor Search.** The next pastor is crucial to the church's future. If the pastor has the right mix of skills, giftedness and personality, the church will move forward in fulfillment of its vision. The interim pastor must know how to train the Pastor Search Team so they conduct a thorough search, conduct a thorough background check and interview process, and make sure that the pastor is not only the right fit, but one who can commit to helping the church move forward in its mission and vision.
8. **Transition.** The intentional interim pastor's duty to the church is not finished when the new pastor arrives to begin his ministry./ The interim pastor will coach the new pastor for a year (perhaps longer) to insure that the pastor doesn't step on any landmines, learns how to work with the strong figures in the congregation, and quickly gains the trust needed to lead.