

# INTENTIONAL INTERIM MINISTRY

## What it offers! Why you need it!

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**Intentional Interim Ministry** recognizes that the time between pastors is a time of specialized need for congregations as they process their loss and anticipate the arrival of a new pastor. There are special issues they face which require special pastoral care. And in order for them to welcome their next pastor with a “clean slate” they need to have dealt with the residue, either positive or negative, of the last pastor’s ministry among them.

Typically, a “vacant” church gets into the calling process almost immediately upon the pastor’s departure (if not earlier, as is possible when the pastor is retiring). This is a little like starting to date too soon after a divorce or the death of a spouse. Congregations need time to grieve, to put the past behind them (i.e., having dealt with whatever issues people still have with the previous pastor), and define themselves in ways that helps the next pastor know what their expectations are of him. Typically, churches in our denomination are “vacant” 18 months or more. Though many churches see this as a time of healthy introspection and developing a stronger lay leadership among their membership, some churches begin to decline in both membership and vitality, especially if there is unresolved conflict in the church and the lay leadership is either not aware of it, unwilling to deal with it, or unskilled in managing it. Churches polarize as groups try to gain the upper hand in determining what kind of pastor they need next.

Intentional Interim Ministry sees the time between pastors as a unique opportunity to effectively continue the program ministry of the church at the same time as that it asks itself what its next chapter should look like. The next chapter is not being written yet; the church is between chapters. And rather than let the loudest voices, or the best articulated opinions, or the strongest personalities dictate where the church should go next, Intentional Interim Ministry helps the whole church reflect biblically and prayerfully on what God has in store for it. Interim Ministry, thus, promotes a longer and more intentional vacancy, an unrepeatable time in which the church is enabled to carry out specific tasks that it will not get to do again, ever.

These are the possible goals of the Interim Period:

1. **To Continue the Regular Ministry of the Church.** Often church members feel some abandonment when their previous pastor leaves. Who will do the marrying and burying? And who will bring the Word of God in ways needed particularly by this congregation? Guest preachers work for a while, but people eventually tire of the variety or irregularity.
2. **To Help the Church Deal with Any Special Concerns.** The Interim Pastor does not come with his own agenda, but is trained to give helpful suggestions that make the interim process go well. He is not the “next pastor” so he comes as a bit of an “outsider” who can remain objective as he coaches the church in dealing with special concerns.
3. **To Help Resolve Feelings of Grief.** Grieving is hard work. Whether the previous pastor was loved and will be missed, or a source of problems within the church and people are

glad he's gone, the church needs to grieve. The Interim Pastor is trained to help the congregation move on through healthy grief.

4. **To Reinforce the Ministry of the Members.** The Interim Period is an excellent time for people to pull together. The Interim Pastor is trained to involve a greater number of people in conversation, help them discover places for involvement, and motivate them to do well. It can be a healthy time of trying new ministries that are given permission to fail, since the Interim Period has a time limit.
5. **To Clarify the Mission of the Church.** Many churches have done significant envisioning and goal setting. The Interim Period is a good time to review that, to evaluate it, to re-commit to what still makes sense, and to express a renewed dependence on the Holy Spirit of God for the future.
6. **To Resolve Conflicts Involving People or Issues.** Since the Interim Pastor comes as an "objective outsider," he has a less vested interest in the outcome of the conflict. He is not part of the conflict, and thus can manage the conflict in a way that brings it to healthy resolution.
7. **To Increase the Potential for the Next Pastor's Ministry.** It is never fair to the new pastor to be saddled with old issues remaining from the previous pastor. The Interim Pastor can help deal with the old issues so the new pastor can come in fresh and ready to go. The Interim Pastor can help the congregation prepare for the arrival of the new pastor in a spirit of anticipation and hope.
8. **To Emphasize Fellowship and Reconciliation.** The Interim Pastor has been trained to help churches grow their inter-relational skills. He can give special help to people to feel the church as one body, encouraging fellowship and strengthening the quality of those relationships.
9. **To Improve the Congregation's Communication System.** The regular pastor of the church often becomes the depository of the church's information. When the church has become vacant, the communication gaps are accentuated, and the lay leadership is not able (often due to time constraints, as volunteers) to get a handle on that information flow quickly. They are often reacting to negative feedback about members being left in the dark. The Interim Pastor can help the church either discover or develop clearer channels of communication.
10. **To Increase the Financial Health of the Congregation.** Typically, giving goes down when the previous pastor leaves. That is not just because people realize the pastor's salary is no longer needed for the budget, and so the church's need is less. But this decrease in giving also comes out of a sense of unrest and emptiness. Where churches have Intentional Interim Pastors, many congregations experience an increase in attendance, in participation and in giving. The Interim Pastor is trained to help the members believe this is their church, not the pastor's church or some prominent leader's church.