

## **The Purpose and Result of Interim Ministry**

By Bob Young

In its broad definition, interim ministry is ministry in a church that is “between ministers.” How a church approaches ministry during the “in-between time” can be either random (fill-in preaching supplied by a variety of guest speakers) or intentional (consistent, planned ministry, usually provided by one minister—an interim minister). Consistent interim ministry has the advantage of identifying a minister the congregation can look to, depend on, and develop a relationship with. In intentional interim ministry, the work of the interim minister is recognized as temporary from the start.<sup>1</sup> Effective leaders can help the church bridge the time between ministers, even when weekly preaching is supplied by a variety of speakers.

The desired result of interim ministry is that the church identifies a minister who can serve the local congregation well. The tasks or purposes of interim ministry are sometimes broader, for churches may need “space”, healing, a time to grieve, reinforcement or redefinition of their identity, and reminders of or a renewed search for God’s purpose for the local church.

Effective interim ministry often takes more time than churches or interim ministers think or are willing to give. This article surveys several interim ministry settings in which I have been involved. These are presented to show the variety of needs that may exist in a church during an interim ministry, and that every church does not follow the same path or timetable in identifying and hiring a minister. The interim settings are described in general terms to allow more objectivity in the summary, since some factors mentioned here may not have been verbalized to the congregations involved.

The interim ministry settings I have worked in range in length from a few months to almost three years. The settings include two churches that had already identified their next minister previous to the conclusion of the ministry and final sermon of the previous minister. In these cases, interim ministry focused on preparing the way for the incoming minister. Two other settings span multiple years, each lasting approximately three years. Some interim ministries occur when the previous minister leaves suddenly and under less than ideal circumstances. These ministries involve times of healing and thoughtful reflection prior to beginning the search process. One interim ministry occurred in a church that had not had a regular full-time located minister for several years; the purpose of the interim ministry was to prepare the church for renewing ministry with the employment of a full-time minister.

My first experience with a formal interim ministry occurred when I was working in a Christian university setting and elders from a nearby congregation asked me if I would preach for them each week for the next four months. Their previous minister was leaving and they had already identified their next minister. As we met together to discuss the needs of the local congregation, we decided to prepare for the future by focusing on God’s plan for the church

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<sup>1</sup> This is a generalization, and there are some situations in which interim ministers are afterward hired to serve the congregation in a full-time continuing role.

and the renewal that could come with a new minister. The incoming minister served the congregation effectively for several years.

At the opposite end of the spectrum (with regard to the length of interim ministry) are two ministries of almost three years each. In one setting, the church was uncertain of the exact roles they desired the incoming minister to fulfill, especially regarding the amount of time in the pulpit. The church first hired an associate minister who preached only infrequently. (The congregation had several members capable of preaching effectively and they asked me to continue to preach regularly.) The minister hired as an associate soon left the congregation. My interim preaching ministry continued until the church hired a pulpit minister who has now completed almost a decade of ministry with the congregation. This experience suggested to me that few churches function well without an identified, consistent pulpit presence. There is a reason most churches hire a preaching minister before hiring any ministers for special or limited ministry support tasks such as youth, education, etc.

Another church had had a negative ministry experience with their pulpit ministry resulting in a division. The immediate need in the first weeks of interim ministry was to seek stability and confidence in the local congregation. The church also needed healing—not only regarding the minister who had left but also regarding the members who had left. The church made several efforts to hire a minister before they were able to hire a minister willing to work with a wounded but healing church.

Another church contacted me to provide interim ministry over a six-month period of time. They had a full slate of activities and special emphases planned, so that my preaching was part of a more extensive program of visits by missionaries and previous ministers. The focus of the interim period was on preparation for the work of the incoming minister who has now ministered with that church for about five years.

A church that had lost its minister through a series of difficult circumstances and conflicts contacted me to assist in an interim ministry. During the interim period, the church participated in a congregational survey to determine the interests and desires of the members for the future. The church prepared its ministry advertisement with the survey results in mind, and within two months had identified their next minister. One elder said to me, “Hiring a minister has never been this easy before.” I observed that the church was prepared, knew what it was looking for, and was able to make a rapid and effective ministry decision consistent with its nature and membership. The church moved forward under the leadership of the new minister, but the minister left about two years later. Thus the church found itself involved in another ministry search. According to one member, the results of the earlier interim ministry and congregational survey helped in the selection of the second new minister who is a good match for the congregation and has been able to inspire renewal and effective ministry.

A church contacted me to assist them with an interim ministry. The church was relatively small, and had not had a full-time minister for several years. The church stabilized and grew slightly during the interim ministry as we focused on the plans for the future and the possibilities that

were before the local church. The weekly attendance grew slightly, some new young families became part of the church, and the church was able to hire a minister who has worked effectively with the church for several years.

A church lost their preacher through an unfortunate set of circumstances, misunderstandings, differing goals, and miscommunication. The church leaders asked me to provide consultation during the transitional period. The consulting role provided me a new window on interim ministry. I spent several Sundays with the church over a period of time. The church used other resources (fill-in preaching and representatives of mission and benevolent works). Consulting with the church leaders regularly allowed them to use a variety of preaching resources while staying “on target” in their desire to hire a minister who could work effectively with the church in its unique ministry context.

These interim ministry descriptions suggest the following conclusions.

- A comparison of these interim ministry settings reveals that churches arrive at the need for interim ministry through a variety of situations and circumstances.
- Because the needs of churches for interim ministry differ, there is no set schedule or time limit for interim ministry.
- While the needs in each congregation differ, the goal is the same—that the church has time to identify a new minister who can work with the church effectively.
- Intentional interim ministry asks about and addresses various needs of the church during the transitional period. Common needs include providing a time for grieving, healing, reinvestment, restructuring with new leaders and renewed commitments, and redefining purpose and dreams.
- Church members often compare a new preacher with the previous preacher, so a common need is to establish reasonable expectations for the incoming minister, and to provide a “gap” which may help lessen comparisons.