

Change Management: Intentional Interim Ministers and Congregations

This week's message is by Rev. Malcolm Himschoot who serves the United Church of Christ as the Minister for Ministerial Transitions with the Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA) Team. He is also current Vice President of the Board of the Interim Ministry Network.

When pastors leave, die, retire, move on, or are let go, churches often wonder: What do we do now? Though it might seem rare for these events to happen – and it is rare for any particular congregation to experience such events – across whole denominations these events are a regular occurrence.

The ministry of Jesus Christ can bear such times of pastoral change. In fact, since the Christian journey is all about transformation, faithful churches can use these moments to move forward in powerful ways. The challenge that typically comes with the opportunity of change in the life of a congregation is to manage anxiety, while embracing a whole host of tasks in preparation for what is next.

Intentional interim ministry defined

The United Church of Christ recognizes intentional interim ministry as a pastoral practice for those with ongoing education in organizational dynamics and leadership transition.

Intentional interim pastors accompany a church using skills such as conflict facilitation, strategic planning, and process management. Such skills are often drawn from and recognized by professional consultants and executives who are not pastors.

Intentional interim ministry is spiritually grounded and theologically-minded, as pastoral work is. Yet practitioners are prepared to move themselves every 18 months on average, supporting or equipping different congregations as needed with the perspective of an outside resource person.

Church process with a chosen interim

Facing pastoral vacancy, a congregation through its governing body might interview a small number of intentional interim ministers to meet one whose approach and skills match the church's need. Depending on circumstances, pastor and congregation can expect to spend one or two years together. The intentional interim minister is not eligible for the subsequent call, but rather focuses on chosen transition tasks to help the church advance into its future.

Used well, the interim time has a purpose to unify a congregation, in order for the church to confidently call a new pastor in an open-ended commitment to God's ministry among and ahead of them. UCC materials ritualize this purpose by opening and closing the intentional interim time using liturgy in worship.

As unique as the work is for every church, one contribution of an intentional interim minister is to help leaders attend to excellent



Figure 1 www.pixabay.com

communication. A second contribution is to help the church note a clear sense of progress and/or learnings in preparation for a successful search for their next pastor. During the time they work together, the intentional interim minister often requests a transition team named by the church to help lead churchwide activities toward important assessment, learning, reflection, and discovery that will draw this community of faith together and onward.

Work of preparation is done before the church sets a new Scope of Work for the next minister, and before the church commissions a Search Committee to fill that position according to the Local Church Profile. The best clarity of the whole church will later help a small group in the confidential search process, to interview and prayerfully choose one candidate as a match with God's calling as expressed by the congregation.

When the search committee has made their decision of candidate, and the whole congregation has voted to issue a call to the next minister, the intentional interim minister completes their work with the congregation.

Assessment of the field

A first generation of intentional interim pastors across denominations named this specialization, founding the ecumenical Interim Ministry Network in the 1980s. They observed that pastors serving a congregation after the trauma of a prior pastor's misconduct would commonly not stay very long. A congregation where a beloved long-time former pastor contributed to, but carried away, much of the church's identity often did not effectively bond with their next minister. Routine conflict in certain congregations generated cyclical pastoral crisis which also resulted in rapid turnover. Practitioners brought together theory and field expertise, creating training programs for others to avoid the pitfalls of unintentional short-term ministry.

Decades later, Russell Crabtree was critical of interim ministry, citing the difficult experience of congregations amidst leadership change. He conducted quantitative research on congregants in the middle of an interim period. After a pastor's departure, in the middle of an interim, he found that 20% of congregants experienced a "disturbing" level of anxiety and conflict, an increase from 11% before the pastor's departure.¹ Crabtree's data did not return to the same churches to measure their experience at the end of an interim, nor specify the type of interim leader serving the church during this time.



Figure 2 www.pixabay.com

In contrast, longitudinal research commissioned by the Center for Congregational Health (CCH) was specific to churches going through pastoral change with the support of a trained and intentional interim minister, and their research evaluated the effect on congregations over time. Researcher Lynn Casteel-Harper sampled congregations 2-3 years after the interim was over, once their new settled minister was in place. 91% of respondents agreed with the statement that, "From my perspective, the overall health of the congregation significantly improved during the interim period." A similar percentage, 90%, agreed with the statement that, "From my perspective, the overall health of the congregation continues to improve since the end of the interim period."²

Along with opportunity and excitement in a time of change, some degree of stress, uncertainty, emotion, confusion, ambivalence, conflicting roles and values are present. Managing those things well, and leading a community with transparency and trust toward a more creative and participatory place, is the role of a great transitional leader.

Notes on future possibilities

The landscape of ministry is always changing, and further possibilities are emerging for those with transitional expertise.

1. The length of service by an intentional interim minister is not always long. Pastoral change in many churches can be effectively completed in a year, according to intentional interim ministers in an internal study by the Interim Ministries in the Episcopal Church (IMEC). Three-quarters of intentional interim ministers in the survey estimated a quality interim at around 12 months for a “healthy” congregation with an average-length prior pastorate.³
2. Although intentional interim ministry is not the only model for organizational transition through pastoral change, the need for intentional interim ministers is projected to increase in the future. Of all active authorized ministers in the UCC, 54.8% are age 60 and above, a percentage which has been increasing.⁴ Rates of retirement by parish pastors and corresponding pastoral vacancies are thus predicted to rise.
3. Departure planning and pastoral succession are receiving new attention from retiring pastors utilizing contracted transitional consultants. There might be some time between pastors, no time between pastors, or measured overlap between old and new pastors, depending on circumstances. William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird include the intentional interim model as one form of effective planned leadership transition in their 2014 review of research on very large churches.⁵ Success with all models, they found, depends on a deliberate and clean ending by the prior pastor in their former role.
4. Not all UCC churches are positioned to call another settled pastor after the interim. Sometimes an in-between season leads to other adjustments by a church, including the discernment of life-cycle changes such as endings or beginnings. Following an interim, the specific purpose of a designated term might be named by a church looking into shared or yoked pastoral ministry, merger, other exploration, relocation, or closure.
5. Some conferences of the UCC presently experiment with shared intentional interim ministers serving as a coach to multiple congregations at one time. Alongside a pastor filling a supply role in the church’s worship life, a separate coach can help each church accomplish organizational transitional work, whether that church is positioned for full-time or part-time pastoral leadership. A shared coaching model helps meet a need especially where there is not a critical mass of intentional interim ministers to both provide pastoral ministry and support transitional work in every congregation.

1 J. Russell Crabtree, Transition Apparitions: Why Much of What We Know about Pastoral Transitions Is Wrong (Self-published: Magi Press, 2015), 40.

2 B. Leslie Robinson, Jr., Executive summary of post-intentional interim ministry research, Unpublished report for the Center for Congregational Health, 2006.

3 Ronald D. Pogue, Executive summary of data from survey of Interim Ministers (Episcopal) and Diocesan Transition Officers (Episcopal), Unpublished report for the Interim Ministries in the Episcopal Church, 2015.

4 United Church of Christ, Fall 2017 Statistical Profile,

21, http://www.ucc.org/research_statistics-and-reports, last accessed 12/19/2017

5 William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, Next: Pastoral Succession that Works (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 134-37.