

STAGE II: THE PRE-SEARCH PROCESS

Interim Ministry Guidelines

Definition of Interim Ministry

“Interim” means the period of time between two events. For a congregation it is the period of time between the leaving of one installed pastor and the installation of the next pastor.

A congregation is particularly vulnerable during the interim period. They have said farewell to a pastor whom they may have loved. They are hoping to find a new person who will meet all their dreams for spiritual growth. They are feeling a lack of leadership. It is hoped these guidelines will help a congregation during this interim period.

The interim period is crucial for remembering who we are as a church. Our life together is never itself “interim” or “temporary.” During the interim period the church goes on being the church. The call to be God’s people on the move in the world never changes. What does change is the opportunity to begin a new era in the life of the church after an examination of who we are as a congregation and where we have been.

An interim pastor is trained to be aware of the changes facing a church and to lead the church in a constructive use of the time between.

Transitional Time

Occasionally, a congregation is experiencing health and peace during the transitional time between pastors. In this circumstance, if the Session (in consultation with the COM liaison) discerns that calling an interim pastor is not necessary, the Session may proceed to secure alternative pastoral services as appropriate.

Interim Pastors: Guidelines

The Presbytery of Genesee Valley has prepared the following criteria for approval of persons as interim pastors:

It is required that they be persons who are ordained and in good standing in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Persons who have experience in and/or an understanding of interim ministry, and persons who will be involved with Presbytery’s programs and will be advocates for Presbytery and its mission. It is desirable that interim pastors be persons who have chosen interim ministry as their specialty or are intentional about interim ministry, and that they have had interim ministry training or will avail themselves to such training. Names of those approved will be shared with congregations seeking an interim pastor.

The interim pastorate is more than “pulpit supply,” as important as that is to a congregation. The life of a congregation does not suddenly become limited to Sunday morning, but continues in its complex and varied dimensions throughout the week. The need for effective and sustained leadership is urgent.

An interim pastor can provide the kind of leadership which enables a congregation to continue its ministry, to rediscover and renew its resources, and to prepare for a new pastor. The interim pastor provides the opportunity for a congregation to move through the interim period freed from a sense of panic and crisis, so that the search for and call of the next pastor can occur in a climate of exploring, healing, dreaming, building, and most of all, continuing to be the Body of Christ.

Interim Pastors, COM, and Liaison Relationship

1. Work with session and interim to negotiate and clarify interim contract and review the interim tasks for the church. Discuss how study leave and vacation will be earned and used, so all might have an idea of the cost/benefit at the completion of the interim pastor's service. The contract is negotiated for a twelve (12) month term of service with a minimum thirty (30) day exit clause which can be exercised by either party at any time. Generally, the contract may be extended for no more than one additional year.
2. On a monthly basis, the COM liaison will be in communication with the interim and, occasionally, the Clerk of Session regarding the progress of the interim ministry tasks.
3. After six to nine months, when the honeymoon wears off, get in touch, listen, and explain what COM is looking for in the yearly report: written, with interim tasks under way; outline current situation without names; indication of where the interim pastor is with regard to study leave and vacation. This can be shared with the session.
4. Encourage and work with the interim pastor to do a six month evaluation of interim pastor/church interim tasks with session. This indicates the partnership in this interim time between the church, the interim pastor, and the presbytery (through COM). The interim pastor is also to prepare annual reports to COM on how the work of the interim tasks is proceeding.
5. Meet with the session to discuss mission study options. Interim may have special expertise in this, too, and may or may not be involved. As this is completed, approved by COM, and PNC is elected, work with interim pastor to establish boundaries and clarify the relationship with the PNC. **The interim will not be involved under any circumstances in the PNC/search process.** All PNC matters must be referred to the COM liaison.
6. The COM, Session, and Interim Pastor will negotiate a timetable for exit appropriate to the situation, including recognition of service and fulfillment of contract specifications.

Five Developmental Tasks

Loren Mead has identified the following developmental tasks for congregations which need to be understood and carried out by a congregation during the interim period.

1. ***Coming to Terms with History***: The past in the experience of every congregation includes that which has been creative and useful and that which has been debilitating. In most cases, what a congregation will be able to do in the future has a genuine relationship to what it has been in the past. Never fully limited to their pasts, congregations are yet profoundly shaped by them. The congregation's past can provide blockage to its future or fuel for a new future.
2. ***Discovering a New Identity***: Congregations, like people, have a way of getting a fix on who they are and sticking with that idea until something comes along to cause them to rethink that self-image. Congregations often get a "fix" on themselves in relationship to their pastor. When we ask congregations about their history, they always describe it in terms of the pastors they knew. The time of pastoral vacancy is a time rich with potential for taking a fresh look at reality and working at making adjustments in self-image.
3. ***Allowing Needed Leadership Change***: The time of pastoral change is a time for some stirring among the leadership team or teams. During direction-finding it is important to tap into some new leadership as well as old leadership for shaping the life of the congregation during the interim, as well as for filling the membership of the search committee. Throughout the time of the vacancy the members of the leadership team in the congregation can be aware of the special opportunity to open doors to new leaders and also to be both appreciative and understanding to those leaders who need to take a back seat for a while.
4. ***Renewing Denominational Linkages***: The time of pastoral change brings an opportunity for a congregation to rethink and renew its relationship with its denomination. The interim period is a prime opportunity for the local church to remember its connection to the larger church.
5. ***Commitment to New Directions in Ministry***: Doing this task simply means integrating what goes on and making the connections as well as possible. It means working at helping people let go of the past in whatever ways they need to do so, while honoring the continuing values from the past. It means getting a new sense of what it means to be a congregation of your denomination in your town, and what your heritage has for you and for others.

[This information is taken from *Critical Moment of Ministry: a change of pastor-Chapter IV: The Second Journey: Developmental Tasks for Congregations* (pp. 36-50) by Loren B. Mead (Alban Institute, 1986).]