

## Making Interim Plans

It is the responsibility of the governing board to make interim plans. This means deciding whether the church anticipates a short or long period for the search. Often, an interim pastor will be hired on a part-time basis. Some churches find it best to engage a full-time interim pastor, while others manage for a short period of time with a variety of lay leaders or supply pastors from the area. In any case, church members will need to assume more leadership.

When the pastor resigns from a church, often the first question asked is "What are we going to do?" The traditional response is, "Find a new pastor, fast." All people experience loss and emptiness with the departure of a person who has served them, led them, ministered with them, befriended them, even disagreed and been at odds with them. No matter what roles the pastor has filled, it may seem difficult, if not impossible, to imagine going on as a local church without secure pastoral leadership. No one feels comfortable with holes, and as a result the instinct is to fill that vacancy as soon as possible with the first available and acceptable candidate.

A church without a pastor is not just a vacancy, like an empty motel room waiting the next occupant. It continues to be a local church of faithful individuals who are seeking to grow in faith and to develop as a community. Although you may feel that your life together is short-circuited by the surprise of losing your pastor, growth cannot be halted or set aside until your next pastor arrives. Life will not wait. The time between pastors is an essential part of the church's life. This period between the resignation of your pastor and the arrival of another is called *interim*, the in-between time.

The interim can be one of the most challenging and stimulating times for your

local church. It is temporary, usually from six to eighteen months, and thus has some limitations. A church which understands interim ministry has unique opportunities for exploration and growth.

During this time feelings surface: confusion, grief, anger, fear, emptiness, distrust. The governing board becomes the focus for many of those emotions. Board members often feel helpless and overwhelmed by the need to provide the church with a sense of direction and security. Knowing that there are tasks to be accomplished and trained experts to provide guidance can make a big difference.

In addition to its usual tasks, the board's tasks during the interim period may include:

1. Determining leadership skills needed during the interim period.
2. Assessing probable time span of the interim period.
3. Securing and contracting with an interim pastor.
4. Selecting, training, and supporting the Search Committee.
5. Promoting a sense of stability in the congregation amidst change.
6. Completing a Local Church Profile or seeing that it is completed.
7. Determining preliminary salary and benefits for the next pastor.
8. Providing leadership to the congregation.

A local church goes through the following developmental tasks in the interim:

1. **Understand and accept the church's history.** It is essential that your church recall and share its history openly in order to affirm where it has been and

understand where it is now. Filling out a Local Church Profile helps a church review its history and understand its place in the community.

2. **Renew the church's sense of mission.** The interim time is an opportunity to test the church's vision. Is this what members want to be and do? It is a time to ask, Who are we as a local church, and where do we want to go? Success in choosing a new pastor is closely correlated with the church's awareness of its past and its visions of the future.
3. **Shifting leadership.** It is natural that different people are attracted to different kinds of leaders. When a pastor leaves, new leaders may emerge. New centers of power come together. New and old leaders can have positive experiences when a third party, such as an interim pastor or consultant, works creatively with the church.
4. **Being committed to denominational linkages.** When a pastor leaves, the local church can be creatively open and responsive to denominational resources. This is an opportunity to use conference or association staff members as consultants and to be in contact with lay and clergy leaders of neighboring congregations.
5. **Becoming committed to new leaders and a new future.** The church members need to be able to deal with their feelings about the resigning pastor and begin to look ahead.

The developmental tasks overlap and often coincide with one another. All are a necessary part of a successful interim. When your pastor resigns there are varieties of possibilities available to your local church as members prepare for the future. It is important that the governing board work closely with the conference or association staff person to utilize resources fully.

### **Determine the type of interim leadership.**

Work closely with the conference or association staff person to discover what types of interim leaders are available.

Options may include:

1. A church may contract with an ordained minister for pulpit supply only. The ordained minister comes once a week to preach and may lead worship.
2. A church may contract for pastoral supply help. Then the ordained minister preaches and does pastoral calling.
3. A church may choose to contract with an interim pastor (part-time or full-time) to utilize fully this in-between time in the life of a church. Some conferences have pastors especially experienced and trained in interim ministry.

This is an excellent time to **consider a person of a race or ethnic background different from most of the church's members.** If your church has not had a woman pastor, **choosing a woman during the interim** could help church members become comfortable with a pastor who is female.

The value of the interim will be enhanced if the governing board **develops goals and objectives to be achieved during the interim.** These should be clear during the time of negotiation. With an interim pastor present, your church will be able to let go of your previous pastor and begin to engage in honest discussion and decision making about future leadership needs.

Soon after the pastor resigns, a decision should be made about an interim pastor. The conference or association staff person working with your church will provide resources and guidance as the church thinks through these options and determines what persons are available to serve the church during the interim. She or he will also provide guidance as a written contract with the interim pastor is prepared.

The interim period can be a time of stimulation and renewal for your local church as it prepares to new leaders. A successful interim requires negotiating a **clear, specific, and realistic contract between the interim pastor and the local church.** Assumptions by both parties need to be tested to avoid confusion or frustration in the future relationship. Discuss the length of the relationship, remuneration and

benefits, hours, and specific duties and responsibilities of the interim pastor and the church. **Make certain it is clear that the interim pastor will not be eligible to candidate for the pastoral opening.** Usually the interim pastor is not involved in the search process and this needs to be clearly stated. (See the following Suggested Covenant for Interim Ministers for help in preparing the contract.)