

In the United Church of Christ, interim ministry is the ministry provided to a local church or other ministry setting during a pastoral vacancy.

## History and Background

Until about 1970, most churches had to “make do” when a pastor left until another pastor was called and installed. Usually that meant finding a retired pastor for a supply preacher, who preached on Sunday and maybe visited members in the hospital, or a supply pastor who preached and spent one or two days a week on pastoral duties.

In the process of researching change in churches, the Alban Institute in Washington, D.C. made a discovery about the time between pastors. The Institute found that many changes and real opportunities for renewed life in a church occur during the time of flux and insecurity between pastorates. As in many biblical examples, God is at work when we least expect it. The discovery of the importance of the interim period led the Institute and others to think about that period and prepare people to serve as interim ministers.

No matter why a pastor leaves a church, there are swirling emotions related to the departure. For some it may be “good riddance.” For others, there is the question of “what did we do wrong that she would want to leave us?” Whether pain and grief or

relief or guilt, emotions must be dealt with. The pastor may go, but the church members are left with the joys and problems, the needs and concerns of the church with no pastoral leadership. Nobody knows what will happen in the future, which makes everyone anxious and confused, at least to some extent.

The sense of loss is like any loss, such as divorce or death. If you don't take time to deal with the feelings about the loss, they likely will interfere with the next pastorate. Churches can be like people who remarry hastily before resolving feelings and fears and end up marrying a person similar to the one they have lost rather than the best person for them.

One way the United Church of Christ has sought to address the concerns of interim ministry is through “Intentional Interim Ministry,” a resolution adopted by the 17th General Synod (1987). The Synod “expresses appreciation to all those persons who have served in interim ministry settings and recognizes their contributions to the church-at-large as well as the congregations they have served ....” The Synod also called upon local churches and others to “utilize specially qualified interim pastors in interim situations whenever possible, and avail themselves of specially developed materials and procedures to best prepare for the next installed ministry.”

## Common Practices

While some churches choose a supply preacher or supply pastor, more churches are turning to people trained to be interim ministers. Interim ministers, available in most conferences of the United Church of Christ, are ordained pastors with special training and experience to minister to the needs and challenges of the time between pastors. They fulfill the usual pastoral duties of preaching, teaching, calling and administering the sacraments. They also help the church explore and reclaim its past and sort out and understand feelings. They help the church discover its mission before the church prepares a profile to use in the search process for a pastor.

Because the interim is time-limited (usually 12 to 14 months) church members are usually willing to experience various forms of leadership and to risk changes because they won't be committed forever. Because the interim minister is not available as a candidate for the settled position, she or he can help the congregation examine the role of pastor and discover what attributes are really needed or desired.

There are three forms of ministry during the interim time:

**Transition:** A transition (intentional interim) minister provides for the worship life of the congregation, supplies basic pastoral care and leadership, and helps guide a church through the unique complexities, challenges and

opportunities inherent in the interim time, by working to create an atmosphere that brings about and/or sustains congregational health while allowing time for the search and call process to unfold in a non-anxious and intentional manner.

Bringing about successful transition ministry during the interim time requires clearly developed understandings and statements outlining mutual expectations, purpose, and direction, between the congregation, the conference/association staff and the transition minister.

Transition Ministry is a specialized ministry that brings specific skills and experience to help a congregation deal with instances such as conflict, breach of ethics, an unusually long pastorate, or when the previously called minister remains part of the congregation and/or community after retirement. The transition minister sees this ministry as his/her vocation, and has specialized training and experience.

**Sustaining:** The second form of ministry during the interim time is sustaining. A sustaining (interim) minister, like a transition minister, provides for the worship life of the congregation and works with the committees and board. By providing full ministerial service, he or she frees up the lay leadership to focus on the congregational profile and other search-related activities. The sustaining minister may or may not see this form of specialized ministry as his/her vocation. While the

sustaining minister may or may not have benefit of specialized training, such persons often make excellent use of vast life experience as well as inherent skills and abilities, seeking to keep the congregation focused on the unique opportunities and challenges of the time of transition.

**Interim Supply Minister:** Another form of ministry is fulfilled by an Interim Supply Minister. This minister (distinct from a pulpit supply minister), fulfills a vital role as one who provides some, but not necessarily all, of the essentials of pastoral and worship life during the time of transition.

The descriptions of these three forms of interim ministry are based on **Ministry During the Interim Time, Working Guidelines for the United Church of Christ Committees on Ministry**, Third Draft, 5/23/03. Published by Parish Life and Leadership © 2003.

## Responsibilities

If you want your church to experience a creative and helpful interim time when your settled pastor leaves, your responsibilities include:

- Contacting the conference or association office to ask for suggestions for interim ministers. Generally, this should be done by the governing board, which continues to be the body that deals with the interim minister.
- Interviewing candidates and prayer- fully making the choice of

who will be asked to serve as interim minister.

- Discussing beginning and ending dates of the interim period.
- Making it clear that the interim minister will not be eligible as a candidate for the settled position. Sometimes there is a temptation to want to stick with someone who is known. The viability of an effective interim ministry is lost, however, if it becomes a way to candidate for the settled position.
- Signing a contract with the interim minister describing the beginning and ending dates of the interim, the duties required, ineligibility to candidate for the settled position and compensation. Salary and benefits should be in the range of the former pastor's, including housing, insurance and pension, unless the interim minister is already receiving pension benefits. This is not a time to save money, but to secure needed services for the continued health of the church.
- Making clear what the relationship of the interim minister is with both the search committee and the conference or association. Each will have designated responsibilities during this time.
- Being open to new ways of doing things.
- Expecting to come to terms with feelings and fears related to the former pastor and to focus expectations for a new pastor.
- Planning time to study what the

church is and wants to be. This information will go into a profile, which will help the search committee in its process.

- Planning ways to say goodbye and express appreciation to the interim minister. This is important for your church and for the pastor. It is especially important for pastors who spend years serving as interim ministers and who must say goodbye frequently.

## Issues Facing the Church

- Frequently clergy who are retiring expect to serve as interim ministers, regardless of their training and expertise. What attributes really are needed for interim ministry?
- Churches often expect to appoint a pastoral search committee to locate candidates for the settled position, but are not clear about who is to locate and contract with an interim minister. How would your church handle this?
- How do you balance the need for an interim time with the need to get on with a new settled pastorate?
- How can benefits, such as health care, be provided to people who feel called to interim ministry?

## Questions

- What could you expect from an interim minister?

- How long do interim ministries that you know about usually last?
- What do you think a contract with an interim minister should include?
- What are the advantages of a trained interim minister rather than a supply minister?

<sup>1</sup> **Minutes.** 17th General Synod, 1989, page 104.