

Making a Healthy Pastoral Transition with the Aid of an Intentional Interim Pastor

Pastors resign for a wide variety of reasons. Some accept a call to another church. Some retire. Some engaged in improper behaviors. Some are pressured or forced to resign. Some cannot handle the financial pressures or the relational entanglements. Some burn out.

Depending on the circumstances surrounding a pastor's resignation, congregations experience a wide variety of emotions ranging from sadness, devastation, disappointment, elation, confusion, and anger. In almost every case, a pastoral resignation creates a high level of anxiety within the church. Some members become temporarily or permanently disengaged with the church. Some start attending other churches.

Consequently, many churches panic and seek to find a new pastor as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, many mistakes are made on the rebound. Selecting a pastor before doing some serious soul-searching is very risky. A swinging pendulum can be observed in the history of so many churches.

If they had a young pastor they want an older pastor. If they had an older pastor, they want a younger pastor. If they had a pastor who cared deeply for the flock, they may want one who reaches out to new people. If they had one that reaches out to new people, they may want their next

pastor to be one who cares deeply for the flock. Sadly, the swinging pendulum doesn't usually bring in the kind of pastor a church really needs for the long haul. There is, however, an alternative—the Intentional Interim Minister (IIM).

An IIM does not simply fill the pulpit on Sunday mornings. And he does not simply take the place of the pastor in terms of conducting services, preaching, visiting, counseling, and administration. He does these things up to the level of a church's interest, however, his job number one is to take a congregation through an intentional process of self examination that will lead them to a better understanding of who they are and the kind of pastor they really need.

Almost every church would benefit from going through this process. But the churches that have lost a founding pastor, a beloved pastor, or a long-standing pastor especially benefit from this process. So do churches that feel like they need a pastor who is significantly different than their previous pastor, that have lost their sense of direction, that are experiencing high levels of conflict, that have split, that are recovering from pastoral misbehavior, or are experiencing declines in attendances and revenues and morale.

An IIM is a seasoned pastor who is called to temporarily pastor a church for 9 to 18 months as they work their way

through the intentional interim process. He has specialized training in the dynamics of church transitions. The IIM is part of a network that provides him with accountability, counsel and support. The churches that decide they need an IIM suspend their pastoral search until the IIM has brought them to a certain point in the intentional process. This usually involves several months.

The benefits of having an IIM are as follows:

1. He provides many of the key services of a pastor.
2. He prevents a backlog of pastoral needs for the incoming pastor.
3. He relieves much of the anxiety the church feels over the loss of their previous pastor.
4. He keeps a church moving forward as much as possible during the transition.
5. He helps to curtail any potential power grabs.
6. He confronts some of the issues that may be detrimental to the effectiveness of the next permanent pastor.
7. Most importantly, he leads the church through a process of soul-searching that helps them make a wise choice in their next pastor.

As part of the process, a church does five self-studies.

1. The first Self-Study is called the Heritage Self-Study. In it we look at the high points in the church's history, especially over the past three to four pastors. We also look at the low points

that have had an adverse effect on the present situation.

2. The second study is the Connections Self-Study. In it we ask ourselves if we need to strengthen our connections to our denomination, ministry partners, community, and with one another. If so, we go to work at doing this.
3. The third self-study is called Leadership. In it we ask: How effective are our decision-making processes? What prevents us from being more effective? Are we effectively raising up workers and leaders? What hinders us from doing so? Are we following our constitution? Is our constitution in need of updating?
4. The fourth self-study is called Mission. In it we ask ourselves what God has called our church to do and what He would like to see our church become over the next five to ten years. We look at the changing demographics of both our membership and community over the past ten years and discuss how these should affect the way we do church.
5. The final self-study is called Future. By now we are highly familiar with the issues that we are facing as a church. We have probably brought closure to a number of issues. On the other hand, some of the issues require a long time commitment and are going to be left for the next permanent pastor to deal with. We want him to come into our ministry

with his eyes wide open. We do not want to woo him with pretenses such as is often done in dating. Also, by now we really know the kind of pastor that we really need.

Churches are like houses. Some churches are in good shape and want to make some home improvements. Others need some maintenance and attention. But others are handyman specials. We want to call the kind of pastor we really need.

In all this process takes 9 to 12 months depending on how many hours the church wants the IIM to work, how many pastoral responsibilities he is asked to perform, and how effective he is at keeping the intentional process at the forefront of his responsibilities.

The IIM does not work alone. He and the congregation appoint an ad hoc Transition Team (TT) to work with him at leading the congregation in the self-studies. The TT is formed within a month of the IIM beginning his ministry. It consists of 5 to 10 people who are somewhat of a microcosm of the congregation. More importantly, the church is looking for people who are spiritually minded, committed to Christ, committed to the church, trustworthy, good listeners, reasonable, conscientious, and available for weekly meetings for one year. Congregants nominate people that they consider to be qualified and those nominations are tabulated. Beginning with the people that received the most nominations, the IIM selects the TT. No staff or staff family member may serve on the TT. No two people from the same

family may serve. We do want a board member or two on the TT. If there is a divisive issue in the church we want people that are on different sides of that issue. We may want some representation from significant ministries of the church.

When the IIM and the TT have led the congregation through the five self-studies, the church appoints a Pastoral Search Committee (PSC). After all that they have been through, a few members of the TT should be a part of the PSC. The IIM is not part of that committee but gives them their initial training and meets with them as needed to answer questions and provide counsel. Ideally, he stays with the church until they have called their next permanent pastor.

It is common for some people within the church to want the intentional interim pastor to become the next permanent pastor. However, if an IIM is thinking about the possibility of becoming the next permanent pastor, it changes the way he thinks. He is no longer solely focused on doing what is in the best interests of the church. Thinking about the best way to secure the job undermines and compromises the intentional process. It also prevents the PSC from doing a complete and conscientious search.

And while there are some who like the IIM, there will be those who don't. They will feel angry and alienated if he is called to be the permanent pastor. And, if it all comes to a vote and the interim minister is not accepted as the permanent pastor, he will feel rejected and it will be hard for him to continue to serve effectively as an IIM.

For these reasons, we put it in the agreement between the intentional interim pastor and the church that under no circumstances will he be considered for the permanent pastor position.

The agreement also states a specified and limited period of time for the ministry of the intentional interim pastor. We usually state 9 to 18 months with the option of the church extending that three months at a time. Should the church or the IIM want to shorten the agreement, they may do so by giving the other an agreed upon amount of notice. The agreement would also contain:

1. a general description of ministerial duties,
2. an agreed upon number of hours to work,
3. compensation details,
4. and a listing of the ministerial expenses the church will cover.

To calculate the compensation of an intentional interim, you usually start with the departing pastor's salary, assume that he worked between 48 and 50 hours a week, and prorate the IIM's compensation according to the number of hours you expect him to work. All of this is negotiable since every church and every pastor has unique circumstances.

If I can provide you with any further information, do not hesitate to contact me or any of the following.

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