

Intentional Interim Pastoral Ministry

I. Introduction

The ministry title, “interim pastor,” is not new to the Mennonite constituency. Over the years we have used this term to describe pastors who have served congregations in a temporary capacity between longer term permanent pastorates. These short term ministers have sometimes been called “supply pastors” and have typically provided preaching and on-going pastoral care, but have not sought to engage the church and its leadership around issues of vision or congregational process.

In recent years we as a Mennonite body have become more aware of the ways in which interim pastors can assist congregations to make good transitions from one pastor to the next. Congregations are also becoming more aware of the importance of intentional interim pastoral ministry.

Congregations and conferences have found this form of interim ministry very helpful. There are times when the congregation must stop and reflect on their attitudes, their behaviors, and their structures. It is a good time to make changes under the leadership of a trained interim pastor. One of these important congregational moments is during the transition from one pastor to another.

In some conferences or congregations the title, transition pastor, has come to be preferred to interim pastor. One term or the other may suggest a more passive role. With either title, we want to suggest a more intentional and purposeful role to this important change in the leadership of a congregation.

II. When is an interim pastor most essential?

Some form of interim ministry can be helpful in almost every pastoral transition; however, there are some situations in which a longer-term intentional interim is almost essential.

- A. In congregations that have experienced the ending of a long-term pastorate, an interim pastor can assist the congregation in dealing with its grief over the loss of a pastor. The interim pastor can help the congregation look at its history and how it deals with change. Then the congregation can begin to plan for new leadership by having a new vision and a new identity that is owned by the congregation.
- B. An intentional interim pastor can also assist a congregation when there has been conflict present which the church has not been able to resolve. Conflict that is not dealt with will make it difficult for a new pastor to have a good beginning or a successful ministry. The well-trained interim pastor may help address conflict issues in a way so as to guide toward reconciliation and unity.
- C. An interim pastor is almost essential following a significant congregational crisis such as the death of a current pastor or following the dismissal of a pastoral for ethical and moral violations.

III. Goals for the Interim Period

The Interim Ministry Network has projected the following eight goals for the intentional interim pastor and a transitional congregation:

A. To maintain the viability of the church

The ongoing vital program that is expected of a lively congregation consists of pastoral duties plus the Christian activities of the laity. Continuing the needed programs already underway and efforts to help make them more meaningful are the responsibility of an interim leader. (An exceptional case would be a congregation that is not viable and where the role of the interim pastor is to help it close down. This may be determined before or during the interim pastorate.)

B. To resolve feelings of grief and loss

Pastoral visitation and group meetings will involve personal, direct contact with individuals. Intentional expression of interest in feelings usually provides healing catharsis. Prayer can bring God's healing to the experience, and counsel can redirect energies to future endeavors.

C. To reinforce the ministry of the laity

Encouragement of participation and leadership by lay persons is vital. The interim period is a particularly apt time to develop lay leadership. A member of the laity may accompany the pastor when home communion is administered. Many responsibilities in the church may be carried out by lay persons rather than by a pastor.

D. To clarify the mission of the church

Congregations need to be reminded that Christians are here to serve, not only to be served. The interim may be the voice of the larger Christian community at a time when the church is turned inward to its own needs. The minister teaches by example, by preaching, and by formal teaching.

E. To deal with special needs of the church

Every church is different. As a result of careful observation and discernment, the interim will learn of specific problems in the congregation. Through knowledge of techniques in conflict management and tactful suggestions by the "outsider" (the disinterested person, the interim minister and other assistants) beneficial changes may be effected.

F. To emphasize fellowship and reconciliation

Opportunities for informal socializing offer important settings for interaction across the congregation and between the congregation's sub-groups. Seeing one another outside formal reconciliation sessions can build trust and cooperation between conflicted individuals and groups.

G. To strengthen denominational ties

The interim minister personally maintains a good relationship with the denomination and encourages the local church to participate in denomination-wide activities and program.

H. To increase the potential for a successful ministry by the next regular pastor

The interim minister is future-oriented. The interim minister is concerned with the coming of a new pastor and is helping to prepare the congregation for the arrival. In addition, he or she communicates to the new pastor any information that might be helpful.

IV. The Agreement

There should be a covenant of understanding between the denominational or conference leaders, the congregation and the interim pastor. This covenant should define the issues that should be addressed. Usually it is helpful when the congregation has a consultant to assist them in defining the issues and make recommendations. Then the interim pastor can assist the congregation in working at the recommendations. The covenant should also define the

necessary skills and ministry expectations of the interim pastor. The agreement should also note that the interim pastor must not be considered for the future permanent pastor position.

V. Qualifications

Interim ministry is a specialized area of ministry that many congregations are requesting.

- A. The intentional interim pastor should have previous pastoral experience and have a sense of call to this form of ministry. The person will need to have some flexibility and be able to move frequently.
- B. The interim pastor should receive training to serve in this capacity. There are some training workshops sponsored by Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, as well as training programs offered by the Interim Ministry Network.
- C. The intentional interim pastor should have training in conflict resolution, crisis intervention and an understanding of how to work with congregational systems. The pastor must be able to assist a congregation in working through grief, looking at their history, and working from feelings of hopelessness to a new identity and vision for the future.
- D. The interim pastor will also need to preach, teach, and carry out the ministries of pastoral care and administration.

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