

INTERIM MINISTRY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Indiana

Interim means “in between.”¹ In terms of a congregation’s history, it refers to that period between the departure of one pastor and the arrival of the next. It also refers to the dynamic process during that time, which involves intentional goals, tasks and specialized leadership. This is interim ministry.

This interim period – which all congregations experience at one time or another – is a crucial time for remembering who we are as a church. The church goes on being the church during those “in between” times. Its call to serve God, to be God’s people “on the move” in the world, remains; the need for the ministry of the laity is stronger than ever. God is still God, and the Church is still God’s people even, and perhaps especially, during times of transition and change.

That is why interim ministry is more than arranging for the service of a minister to lead worship on Sundays. When a pastor leaves a church, the life of the church does not suddenly become limited to Sunday mornings. It continues in all its complex and varied dimensions throughout the week, and the need for effective and sustained pastoral leadership continues as well. This is the value of interim ministry: to provide the kind of leadership which helps the congregation continue its ministry, rediscover and renew its resources, and prepare for a new pastor. Interim ministry provides the opportunity for a congregation to move through its “in between” time, freed from a sense of panic and crisis.

There are some specific tasks to be understood and undertaken by a congregation during the interim period. These include:

1. Coming to terms with your own history. A congregation may experience a sense of loss at a pastor’s leaving. There may be widespread grief, which needs to be addressed. If the pastoral relation was severed under trying circumstances, anger may need to be expressed, and healing needs to take place. The congregation may need to be released from the restricting power of the past in order to openly and fully prepare for and accept the new pastor.
2. Accepting shifts in lay leadership. When a pastor leaves, new patterns of lay involvement will develop and often there are feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about change. The interim ministry can help provide the environment in which change can occur positively, creatively and helpfully.
3. Reclaiming the congregation’s core values and discovering a new identity. Some congregations have a way of thinking they will always stay the same, when indeed, time is passing and they are changing. The interim ministry provides both time and process to take a good look at themselves; find out who they truly are (core values), and project more realistically who they want to become (new identity).

¹ Adapted from Guidelines for Interim Ministry. Connecticut Conference UCC. 1983.

4. Strengthening of regional and denominational ties. During an interim period, congregations often find themselves closely in contact with regional staff persons, particularly through the Search and Call process. The interim period is a prime time for the local church to remember its covenant relationship with the wider church.

The accomplishment of these tasks enable the congregation to search for and call its next pastor in a climate of exploring, healing, dreaming, building and, most of all, continuing to be the Body of Christ.

Normally, interim ministry is a full-time position filled by a fully qualified minister with standing in the region. It is expected that compensation will be for full-time service.

In certain situations, a congregation may enter into an “Intentional Interim Ministry agreement.” This implies the congregation, region and interim minister agree that the search for a new minister will not begin for a specified period of time, or until certain tasks have been accomplished. Generally the intentional interim minister will have specialized training and/or experience.

In congregations, which have been served by a part-time minister, it may be appropriate to call an interim minister to a part-time position.

General Guidelines²

I. Components of Interim Ministry

- A. An interim ministry is normally a minimum of six months to a maximum of 24 months. In some circumstances, with regional advice and consent, it could be somewhat longer. However, in any case, the covenant contract between the church and the interim should be time limited.
- B. A clear agreement (preferably a covenant) is negotiated, including the three parties essential to a productive interim period – the congregation, the regional minister and the interim – defining the partnership, goals, and tasks expected to be achieved, and the specific responsibilities and roles of each partner in the covenant.
- C. An understanding that some self studies will probably be useful in a congregation prior to beginning the search process and that there may be “unfinished agenda” that can be identified and worked on during the interim period.

² Adapted from Standards for a Specialized Interim Ministry. The Interim Network. 1984.

- D. An agreement that the interim will not be considered an eligible candidate for the permanent position is essential. Exceptions may be made, but only in the rarest of cases and in consultation with the regional minister.

II. Basic Qualifications

Qualifications for interim ministers shall be:

- A. Recognition or standing in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) or a partner denomination. Persons outside the region may be used.
- B. Experience in at least two different congregations in a responsible leadership role, which can be evaluated by the Regional Commission on Ministry.
- C. Ability to work effectively with volunteers in a church system.
- D. Pastoral skills in such areas as: helping people deal with grief, anger, despair, healing hurts and divisions, moving persons from a sense of hopelessness to a vision of hope.
- E. Administrative skills in such areas as day-to-day operation of the institutional church, planning and implementation of plans, corporate decision-making, and the ability to negotiate, compromise, and mediate differences.
- F. Ability to plan and lead worship experiences and preach the gospel.
- G. A personality that can move into a new situation and adapt quickly, relate to the congregation on an “interim basis,” and be able to let go and move on when the work is finished.
- H. Regular continuing education in the field of interim ministry. Local congregations are encouraged to support their interim in this effort.

III. Additional Qualifications for “Intentional” Interim Minister

- A. Awareness of the normal developmental tasks and the probable unique dynamics of a congregation in an interim period.
- B. Ability to enable a congregation to sort out a variety of feelings about itself, the previous pastor, the Indiana Region and the called pastor.
- C. Crisis intervention skills.
- D. Training and skill in conflict management/resolution.

- E. Ability to facilitate team building among those who may not be working well together.
- F. A knowledge of the Regional Policies and Guidelines for helping a congregation search for and call a new pastor and clarity on the interim's role in the processes.

IV. It is Expected That Interim Ministers Have the Following Characteristics:

- A. A clear sense of calling, a sense of “professionalism” in regard to ministry.
- B. Ability to care for one's self, to sustain one's self in all kinds of situations, and the ability to cope with one's own stress.
- C. Maturity and emotional stability.
- D. Flexible, adaptable and goal-oriented leadership style.
- E. Patience and understanding.
- F. Physical vitality.
- G. Positive faith stance.
- H. Hope
- I. Good sense of humor.
- J. Vision

The Indiana Commission on Ministry Expects These Ethics of Interim Ministers:

V. Ethical Considerations for Interim Ministers

- A. Because of the temporary nature of interim ministry, an interim should not transfer his/her church membership to the interim congregation s/he is serving.
- B. The interim should maintain a low profile role the day the congregation meets a candidate. There are creative ways in which the interim can be involved, but this must be carefully worked out with the congregational leadership.

- C. Under no circumstances will the interim make any comment on the personality, ability, or record of any person whom the search committee is considering.
- D. Evaluative discussions of former ministers are likely to occur during the interim period. The interim shall attempt to guide such discussions into productive channels.
- E. The interim shall be supportive of the denomination, region and ecumenical partners.
- F. The interim shall have no pastoral relationship with the congregation or its members once the new minister is in place, without the specific invitation of the called minister.
- G. The interim will not meet as a regular member with the search committee or assist in the search process. Exceptions may be made only in consultation with the chairperson of the search committee and the regional minister.

NOTE: All interim ministers must file Search and Call papers, 4 references, and a Disclosure Form through the General Search and Call office.