

8 Signs Your Church Needs an Intentional Interim Pastor

By Lavern Brown

Calling an intentional interim pastor should be the first thing a church considers doing when the pastor resigns, especially if the church meets any of these criteria:

1. The pastor is leaving after a lengthy tenure (experts say "lengthy tenure", can vary from 7 to 15 years).
2. The church churns its pastors (a new one is called) every few years.
3. The pastor leaves under duress (forced out) or due to moral failure.
4. The church's leaders can't identify or agree on the church's mission.
5. It has been three years since the last ministry audit (everything is reviewed for "mission fit" and amended as needed).
6. It is a "commuter church" (members are very different from those who live near the church).
7. Attendance has plateaued (people coming in offset those who leave).
8. The church faces significant financial challenges.

Any church entering the transition between permanent pastors should pay careful and prayer attention to these danger signs. If not there is a danger the leadership team might utter five very dangerous words. If these words become a mantra the leadership could unwittingly inflict serious damage on the church that take years to repair.

Five words church leaders must avoid

"We can do it ourselves."

Those words should be neither spoken or thought by the leaders of a church that meets any of the criteria. Perhaps this is an appropriate sentiment for church leaders that have the rare good fortune of being part of a robust, vigorous congregation. Other than that they might say these five deadly words because they don't know what they don't know.

What is it they don't know? They don't know what an intentional interim pastor does, how he has been trained and what skills he brings to the church. So let's explore that briefly.

The intentional interim pastor's job

An intentional interim pastor brings mission-critical skills needed during this critical time in the church's life.

Interim Pastors keep continuity between pastors. They guide the church thru changes that leave the church's focus intact. The way congregants view their church's mission is unchanged. A Transition Pastor is intentional about managing transitions. This requires congregants to change their internal attitudes and ideas about the mission of the congregation.

During this transition the intentional interim pastor aids the church in removing the obstacles that hinder the church from achieving of its God-given potential. This leaves the church poised for growth

when the new pastor arrives. The specific skill sets that the interim pastor will employ in this project include (but are not limited to the following items:

1. Assessment. The intentional interim pastor must be able to discern the true state of the church by the use of various assessment tools, interviews with a statistically significant portion of the congregation, and a comprehensive review of all governing documents, minutes of meetings and other historical information. The fruit of the assessment are consolidated into one report that contains a succinct statement about the findings, a commentary on the factors that led to the current state, and a proposed course of action to ameliorate the problems.

2. Grief. In many cases the church needs to bring out its grief and work through the pain. The grief may be due to the loss of a beloved minister, to destructive conflict that led to the minister's departure, the loss of a compelling vision for the future or other reasons. An effective interim pastor will employ leadership behaviors that bring the congregation to relief and to a full embrace of the new normal.

3. Direct Action. If there are immediate threats to the church's welfare the intentional interim pastor provides leadership to insure that the problems are either resolved or removed in a biblical and God-honoring fashion. The interim pastor is responsible for the welfare of the whole church as a corporate body. It is likely that he will have to confront strong personalities, perhaps the "church boss" and deal firmly. This requires special skills to keep the "main thing the main thing" without getting sucked into a personal clash. In these situations the interim pastor will likely need the services of a coach to get through this phase unflustered.

4. Training. The congregation in transition will be in need of training, but the specifics will vary from church to church. The intentional interim is able to provide the appropriate training, bring appropriate ancillary materials to bear and insure that the congregation is equipped to sustain the eight key systems of a healthy church. By the time the interim leaves the church should have a sustainable training system to insure a pool of trained and qualified leaders for each of those eight systems. This system will insure proper channels of learning for various personality profiles and learning styles.

5. Mission, Vision and Strategic Planning. An intentional interim pastor will possess the skills necessary to guide the congregation into their own understanding of the mission. This requires the ability to work within denominational guidelines and doctrinal statements while remaining true to the text of scripture. The pastor must also know how to move from mission to vision and thence to strategic planning. The end result of this part of the transition process is that the members themselves own the mission, they are energized by the vision and they are committed to executing the strategic plan. The intentional interim pastor must know how to guide the congregation or its leaders so they are the ones who do the actual development work. If they don't, the mission, vision and plans aren't theirs!

6. Manage Change. Introducing change into the life of a church is tricky business. Even people who recognize and embrace the need for change can be thrown. Most people will naturally react to change with resistance borne of fear. An intentional interim pastor needs to have and use the tools that manage the change process. If not, the changes will not be permanent and the church will probably slip back into status quo ante when the new pastor arrives; this creates additional tension for the next pastor.

7. Pastor Search. The next pastor is crucial to the church's future. If the pastor has the right mix of skills, giftedness and personality, the church will move forward in fulfillment of its vision. The interim pastor

must know how to train the Pastor Search Team so they conduct a thorough search, conduct a thorough background check and interview process, and make sure that the pastor is not only the right fit, but one who can commit to helping the church move forward in its mission and vision.

8. Transition. The intentional interim pastor's duty to the church is not finished when the new pastor arrives to begin his ministry. The interim pastor will coach the new pastor for a year (perhaps longer) to insure that the pastor doesn't step on any land mines, learns how to work with the strong figures in the congregation, and quickly gains the trust needed to lead.

Training the intentional interim pastor

These mission-critical skills *are not taught in seminaries* during the pursuit of a graduate degree (in other words, *a retired pastor doth not automatically make an interim pastor*). These skills are far beyond the scope of what is required to prepare for ministry. Nor is it likely that retiring ministers coming off a long career will have mastered these skills over the many decades of pastoral service.

It is my conviction that it requires more than a powerful and pleasing personality to make an effective intentional interim. One needs special training beyond the theological degree and ordination. (William Avery, *Revitalizing Congregations*, p. 21)