

## When Your Preacher Leaves:

### Interim Services for Churches Between Ministers

Newsletter, June 2006, #1

This is the first Interim Ministry Newsletter. We hope you find a “mustard seed” that will be helpful in your ministry.

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The following address was presented by John H. Parker at the Freed-Hardeman Lectures in 2001.

#### INTERIM MINISTRY

Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another (Romans 14:19).

#### Part One: When the Preacher Leaves

A preacher’s departure from a church, especially after an extended tenure there, creates stress. While most congregations face this event with Christian maturity and love, even the most stable find this time difficult, and some find it a time of crisis.

If the work of the minister has gone well and a bond of affection, trust, and love has developed between him and the members, perhaps over a period of many years, his leaving can affect them almost as would a death: they feel a sense of loss and grief, and a fear of what will happen to them in his absence. If, on the other hand, he leaves during a time of unrest or conflict, especially conflict involving him, then the congregation may experience division, with some members feeling loyalty for the departing preacher and resentment toward others who, they believe, have caused him to leave.

Whatever the circumstances, the weeks and months following the preacher’s departure are also stressful. The comfortable routine of the church is upset, and the leadership of the congregation feels the pressure of filling the void. “Who will occupy the pulpit and do the evangelist’s work until a replacement can be found? And how much time will we need to find the next preacher?” Speculation and rumors spread. “Whom are the elders considering? How long will it be until they find a new man? Who will he be, and what will he be like?”

Sometimes this situation results in a rush by the elders to find a replacement. They hurriedly conduct tryouts and searches, and within a few weeks they announce with relief that they have employed another preacher. But when he and his family arrive, further problems may arise. If the former minister was especially beloved, inevitably the new one is compared with him. Most members are of good will and try to make every effort to welcome and help him, but some, grieving over the loss of their former preacher, are programmed not to like him. “No one will ever be able to take brother Smith’s place” may be the attitude.

If, on the other hand, the previous minister left as a result of conflict, then the succeeding minister may find himself caught in the middle between conflicting forces. Welcomed by some, he is resented by those loyal to his predecessor who feel that to accept this “new man” would constitute disloyalty to the former preacher and surrender to the other side. He may also find himself dealing with hidden, long-standing problems—problems that in fact may have contributed to his predecessor’s leaving.

Whichever of these scenarios occurs, the new preacher may encounter problems from the start. With patience and perseverance, and with the support of the elders and other leaders in the congregation, he likely will survive them, but too often a man in one of these situations, brought quickly into a church very soon after his predecessor's departure, never gets a footing. In the one case, he fails to win over those longing for their former beloved minister; in the other, he becomes a target for conflicts and frustrations in the church. Unable to cope, he is soon leaving too.

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## Quotations From Literature Useful For Church Leaders

From *Hamlet*

HAMLET

I shall not look upon his like again. (1.1.)

Used in praise of a worthy man who passes away

OPHELIA

But, good my brother,  
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,  
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,  
Whiles, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,  
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,  
And recks [heeds] not his own rede [counsel] [1.3.]

Church leaders must live by their own counsel

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## Smile of the Month

I have read somewhere that Theodore Roosevelt owned a little dog that was always getting into fights and always getting the worst of them. On one occasion he tackled a mangy cur and took a beating. Someone said to Teddy, "Your dog isn't much of a fighter."

"Oh, yes, he's a good fighter," replied the Colonel, "he's just a poor judge of dogs!"

We should never underestimate our adversaries (*Salt 'n Pepper*, by Vance Havner, page 63).

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## Barber Clippings

This month I have spent considerable time with my father who had a heart attack June 6. His is in rehab and hopes to go home soon. I held a meeting with the Florence Boulevard

congregation in Florence, Alabama. I will be concluding my full-time work with Berry's Chapel April 1, 2007. The elders at Berry's Chapel have announced their transition plans. They will begin searching for an educational minister/office manager and hope to have him in place January 1, 2007. Andy Baker will begin preaching after I leave April 1. The Berry's Chapel elders and Andy have made a mutual commitment of eight months. During that time, they will evaluate the future for preaching at Berry's Chapel.

Jerrie Barber

[barberclippings@comcast.net](mailto:barberclippings@comcast.net)

(615) 356-8371

(615) 791-1316

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I am currently in England with Lipscomb University's Study Abroad program. While here I have been privileged to preach for the Newport, Wales, congregation where Paul Halliday is the minister. Lord willing I will return to the states on July 14 and will be available for interim ministries after that date.

John H. Parker

[Johnparker22@aol.com](mailto:Johnparker22@aol.com)

[www.interimcofc.com](http://www.interimcofc.com)

(615) 373-4462