

When Your Preacher Leaves: Interim Services for Churches Between Ministers

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

INTERIM MINISTRY

Part Two: One Solution: the Intentional Interim Minister

To deal with these challenges, some congregations may benefit from adopting a method that will give them both the time and the means to make a deliberate and careful decision about their future: securing the services of an interim minister.

An interim minister, preferably one trained specifically for the role, is engaged to work with the church during the time between the departure of the last long-term minister and the coming of the next one, a period of perhaps six to eighteen months. Usually, he and the elders expressly explain to the church that he is not a candidate for a permanent position. His task is two-fold: to carry on the work of the minister of the congregation, and to help it adjust and prepare for the new era that it is now entering. He is not a “fill-in” pulpit preacher, but a full-time, salaried minister for the church during this period of readjustment. Once the next regular minister is secured, he will leave, perhaps going on to a similar task with another congregation.

Ideally, such an arrangement can turn a difficult time into one of opportunity. Relieved of the pressure to find and employ immediately a regular, long-term minister, the church can go through a period of healing from the loss of the former preacher, face problems that may have needed addressing for some time, study both its history and its current situation and needs, and determine in an unhurried and deliberate manner the course that it now needs to take. A major part of this latter decision will be determining what kind of qualifications they should look for in their next minister.

The employment of an interim usually has a further advantage. Members who were either attached to or distanced from the former minister do not view the interim as his replacement, and therefore they react to him positively. Since he is here for a limited time, and will after that be gone, they can view him and his work as a non-threatening presence, and benefit from him as they adjust to the transition from the former long-term minister to the next one.

Study and research of churches in transition have been conducted by The Interim Ministry Network, organized in 1980 and focused on analyzing the situations and problems faced by such churches and on providing training for interim ministers, individuals specifically employed to guide congregations through this kind of period. While its approaches are geared mainly toward denominational churches and their hierarchical structures, many of its findings regarding the historical, psychological, and political nature of churches in this situation also apply quite directly to churches following only the New Testament pattern.

Those studying churches in transition have found that they may be profitably analyzed in terms of the principles of systems and systems management. Like businesses and families, churches are systems, and the people who operate in them tend to conduct themselves in fairly predictable ways, some good and some not. Following the Lord's teachings, the interim minister can help a congregation's leaders guide the church toward a new era, one characterized not by continued unrest and even a succession of short-term preachers, but one carefully planned, served ultimately by a new minister whom the church has selected by careful planning, thought, study, and prayer, all conducted during the unhurried period while the interim was with them.

Quotations From Literature Useful For Church Leaders, John H. Parker

POLONIUS

Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportion'd thought his act. (1.3)

Don't say everything you think; and don't act on thoughts that are not wisely conceived or considered.

POLONIUS

Be thou familiar [sociable], but by no means vulgar [common]. (1.3)
Be friendly, but maintain dignity and reserve.

Smile of the Month

The following are actual responses from comment cards given to the staff members at Bridger Wilderness Area in 1996:

1. Trails need to be wider so people can walk while holding hands.
2. Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.
3. Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the areas of these pests.
4. Please pave the trails so they can be snow-plowed during the winter.
5. Chair lifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them.
6. The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals.
7. A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed? Please call 733-2133
8. Reflectors need to be placed on trees every 50 feet so people can hike at night with flashlights.
9. Escalators would help on steep uphill sections.
10. A MacDonald's would be nice at the trailhead.
11. The places where trails do not exist are not well marked.

12. Too many rocks in the mountains (Mike Neifert, *Light and Life*, February 1997, p. 27, in *Leadership*, Summer 1999, page 75).

This is one of more than 9,000 illustrations in www.preachingtoday.com. I (JWB) subscribe to this service. Often I find excellent illustrations for sermons. What has impressed me is their dedication to accuracy. You can receive a free weekly newsletter by requesting it at: www.preachingtoday.com.

Mustard Seeds from Favorite Books, Jerrie Barber

I try not to learn very much from a lecture, recorded message, seminar, or book. I want to find a “mustard seed” that will be helpful in contributing to my wisdom. I thumb-index books while I am reading them by bracketing with a red felt-tipped pen significant quotes that will be helpful later. I draw a red line down the edge for easy location. These are typed and filed under categories that I often find helpful later when considering a subject. I will share some books and “mustard seeds” in them.

How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems, by Peter Steinke, published by The Alban Institute, © 1993, is a book I read first in 1998, 1999. I bought a copy for each elder. During 2000-2001, we read this book in staff meetings at Berry’s Chapel.

Here are some thoughts I have found helpful:

“But shifting the burden does not lift the burden; it merely relocates it. Not until the emotional process is seen and interrupted will substantive change occur. In other words, thinking must regulate automatic processes. The defining of self must replace the defining of others” (page 52).

“Actually religious institutions are the worst offenders at encouraging immaturity and irresponsibility. In church after church, some member is passively-aggressively holding the whole system hostage, and no one wants to fire him or force her to leave because it wouldn’t be “the Christian thing to do.” It has nothing to do with Christianity. Synagogues also tolerate abusers because it wouldn’t be the Christian thing to do” (page 59).

“By far the most difficult form of pursuit behavior to recognize is criticism. How can those who act adversarially be said to be in pursuit? We feel alienated, not close. But criticism is characterized by overfocus. The “stinger” and the “stung” are emotionally connected. Whenever a gnawing critic gets inside our brain cells and we can’t expunge him, we are connected, even if negatively. Whenever someone gets under our skin, we are infected with anxiety. If we are reactive to a pursuer, the pursuit behavior achieves its goal: connection. Strange as it sounds, the critic wants to be close. After all, if we can’t be close through play, ecstasy, touch, and nurture, our only option to accomplish closeness is through angry outbursts, specious charges, or harsh accusations. People feel close to us when they know we are thinking about them. What we think is not as important as that we are thinking about them. We play into the hands of criticizers when we react to their invasion rather than define ourselves to it” (page 89).

“Although we know today that secrets are a telltale characteristic of dysfunctional families, we often protect and refuse to expose irresponsible whisperers. Thus many responsible

people, by not facing up to the secrecy, participate in another kind of secrecy: secrecy about the secrecy. It's all very anxious behavior" (page 90).

Barber Clippings

July is "good-bye to Chad and Shelly Hedgepath month" at Berry's Chapel. My wife, Gail, and I had lunch with them today. They have been with us seven years. The first five years, Chad was our youth minister. For two years, he has been associate minister and educational director. He has done an excellent work in all capacities.

Our original transition plan two years ago was that Chad would be the next preacher at Berry's Chapel. However, last summer after another of many trips to Honduras, Chad and Shelly came back with a dream to move to Honduras and start a children's home. They have led in raising money to purchase a 700 acre ranch for that ministry. After the last Sunday in this month, they go to Guatemala for intense Spanish instruction, then to Honduras to begin that work.

If you would like to know more about that work, you can check it out at: <http://www.laspalmasrefuge.org/> or email Chad and Shelly: chad@missionlazarus.org ; shelly@missionlazarus.org .

Transition plans have to be flexible. Transitions consist of an ending, the neutral zone, and a new beginning (from William Bridges' work, *Transitions*). I plan to share that book in a future newsletter.

The Berry's Chapel staff has Chad's "funeral" planned for Tuesday, July 26. We will eat together, have flowers, give sympathy cards, and talk about how we will miss him. Although we look forward to seeing him in the future, it will never be the same at Berry's Chapel without him and Shelly.

We want to do the ending well in order for all of us to have good new beginnings. That almost sounds like gospel: death, burial, resurrection.

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This week my wife Jill and I complete our two months of teaching and traveling in Britain and return home. Currently we are touring sites connected with the composition of great English hymns. Yesterday, July 9, we visited the grave and the ancestral home in Wales of William Williams, author of "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" and of hundreds of other hymns. His descendants have continued to own the family farm and live in the same farmhouse. The current Mr. Williams represents the sixth generation. He and his wife are most delightful hosts and show their many visitors from all over the world mementos from the composer. In the future as I have opportunity to speak for congregations I hope to include PowerPoint pictures of such sites as part of lessons based on the great traditional hymns.

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