

# When Your Preacher Leaves: Interim Services for Churches Between Ministers

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## Thoughts on Moving for Preachers and Congregations, Jerrie W. Barber

I resigned from the Central church of Christ in Dalton, Georgia, in March, 1988. I tried to be aware, study, record, and evaluate the process of moving. I wrote several of these observations in our bulletin under “Barber Clippings.” I later compiled and wrote this article on the experience.

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“And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with them, saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’ ” (Acts 16:9). I’m certain that I don’t know everything that was involved, but it sure appears easier for Paul to decide to go to Macedonia than it has been for me to make the moves that I have made in preaching.

I have found little information available on this subject. I have one book and have attended no lectures or classes on being effective in making the decision to move or not to move and how to go about it once the decision has been made.

Since this process usually happens several times during the lifetime of a preacher and over a period of years in the congregation, hopefully these observations will be helpful.

After having thoughts from time to time of the possibility of needing to move, beginning about a year before I actually made the change, and discussing these thoughts with my family and a few trusted – and hopefully objective – counselors, I started making a list of people who know me and my work that would possibly be able to give suggestions and recommendations of places where I might fit.

When I came to the conclusion that I was ready to move from Dalton, Georgia, I began calling these thirty-eight people, asking for their help. After a period of time, I received calls from congregations who were looking for preachers. My decision was to investigate and cooperate with those who expressed an interest, regardless of size or location.

After about eight or nine appointments were made, I told the elderships involved that I would make a decision the last week in May. Some congregations decided that I was not the preacher for that place after I preached and/or interviewed with them. Time became a factor that eliminated some possibilities. I returned to four congregations for more detailed discussions. Stating what I believed to be my strong and weak points, asking and answering more questions, discussing how we thought that the Lord’s work needed to be done, and how we would work together was the focus of these conversations.

The expenditure in time effort and money was great. I attempted to do all I could in my local work in Dalton in teaching, personal evangelism, counseling, and visiting as well as give honest and complete evaluation to the opportunities of each congregation. My schedule was

eleven to twelve working hours per day, seven days a week during March, April, and May. Travel related to relocating totaled 6,691.8 miles in addition to the miles flown.

Expenses (some estimates) were: unreimbursed food and lodging: \$63.50; phone calls (friends who could make recommendations of congregations needing preachers, preachers at each congregation for the past twenty years, other preachers and Christians in the same town or community of the church looking for a preacher, plus other references: \$359.74; tapes and postage: \$63.00; travel (at 20 cents per mile): \$1,338.36. Total compensation: \$1,195.78. The net cost to me was \$628.82.

I am not complaining, just stating some facts that I have not seen in print. A preacher couldn't make a living "trying out." In fact, to do a good job and to be free to investigate freely, he needs to have some money saved to finance the process. Something that elders might consider is that the way a preacher and his family are treated on the "try out" weekend is loud communication about how it would be living and working with that congregation. We are usually on our best behavior when we are courting. Car doors are rarely opened after the first month of marriage.

What was interesting to me is that during this time, I went to a congregation to preach—not "try out." I was paid a generous honorarium plus expenses. Within a week of two I went to another congregation to "try out," preaching some of the same sermons and had to pay my way back home. This certainly was not true of all congregations. Some were most generous.

Something that could be considered is that not only are the preachers trying out – the congregation is watching, listening, observing them – but the congregation is also trying out. My family and I tried to be aware of every noticeable thing in our visits:

- The condition of the building.
- The singing.
- The friendliness of the congregation or lack of it.
- The interest or lack of interest of the part of the congregation.
- Questions that were asked – and not asked.
- Whether there was an attitude of excellence or the idea of "just doing enough to get by".
- The amount of enthusiasm from the elders, search committee, and congregation concerning the work of the church.
- Whether we were treated special or just a necessary burden in the process of getting another preacher.
- How did the congregation respond both during and afterward? Did they feel free to laugh when appropriate? Were comments specific or just "enjoyed your sermons?"
- What was the approach of the elders and/or search committee: one of openness and quest for truth, one of disinterest, or one of pressure to come to that congregation?

One of the most peaceful principles to me during the time of transition is that God is in control. He loves His church. He loves me. If, as Daniel said (Daniel 2:20-21), He is involved in government changes, I believe that He is also interested and involved in preacher changes as well. What I was to do in all my life is to find His will through following His principles. When I do this, I will have my needs met (Matthew 6:33).

Freedom comes from knowing the truth and cooperating with it (John 8:32). Both the congregation and the preacher need to be joint seekers of truth in the preacher-congregation search. To help in this process, it was my goal to be transparently honest in the interview, revealing my weaknesses and undesirable traits as well as those which look more favorable. When truth is the goal, I'm not trying to "get a job" and the congregation which might be

interested in me is not trying to “hire me.” We are searching for the truth, asking God to supply the wisdom (James 1:5), to determine if we should be together or not.

Part of the truth I was seeking during each visit or with any other communication was evaluating the fit between the congregation and me. The prophet Amos asked, “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). The correct answer is “No.” I wanted to know if we fit doctrinally. I also wanted to know if we fit in methods, emphasis, and attitudes.

One of the very helpful nights to me during this time was when an eldership agreed to meet with me to tell me why they didn’t want me to be their preacher. We met – at my request – in their building, for them to tell me why I didn’t fit in that congregation and how, from their viewpoint, I could be more effective in my preaching and teaching during the “try out” Sunday. That facet of truth, early in the process, helped me to do a better job of “trying out” with several other congregations.

God teaches in His word that we are to be more concerned with the inside than with the externals. I remember having preached that principle (I Samuel 16:7), but I also recall being so impressed twenty years ago with a new church building and a large Sunday morning attendance that I agreed to move to a congregation where there was clearly not a basis for a good working relationship between me and the elders of that church. They hired me at 9:30 one Wednesday night. After thinking about the heart of the situation as well as the externals, I resigned at 6:00 the next morning. Solomon wrote, “It is better to dwell in a corner of a housetop, than in a wide house shared with a contentious woman” (Proverbs 25:24).

I am thankful for the experience of the months of evaluation of myself and where I needed to be. It has been a good opportunity to learn and to test God’s principles.

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## Quotations From Literature Useful For Church Leaders, John Parker

### SHAKESPEARE QUOTATIONS FOR MINISTERS:

“. . . Thes blazes . . .

Giving more light than heat . . .

You must not take for fire.

HAMLET 1.3.

Some statements appear good and strong but lack any real substance

it is a custom

More honor’d in the breach than the observance.

HAMLET 1.4.

Some customs and traditions are better ignored or canceled than continued.

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

HAMLET 1.4

These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.

HAMLET 1.5

You might apply this statement to any number of senseless or unintelligible speeches, comments, or emotional outbursts that you hear.

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## Smile of the Month

A famous coach tells the story on himself about a vacation he and his family took in Maine. When they walked into a movie theater and sat down, the handful of people there applauded.

“I can’t believe it; people recognize me all the way here,” he thought to himself.

Then a man came over to him and said, “Thanks for coming. They won’t start the movie for less than ten people” (*Speaking from the Heart*, by Ken Durham, page 126).

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## *Mustard Seeds from Favorite Books*, Jerrie Barber

The “how to” book on transitions is *Managing Transitions*, by William Bridges, © 1991, 2003 by William Bridges and Associates, Inc., published by Da Capo Press. When I read this book earlier this year, I distributed copies to our elders and staff. We are presently reading it in staff meetings. At the end of many of the chapters, there is a check list to suggest ways to manage transition.

Here are some “mustard seeds” I filed:

“People seem to ‘overreact’ to a change when they are reacting more than we are. But when we think that way, we overlook two things: first, that changes cause transitions, which cause losses, and it is the losses, not the changes, that they’re reacting to; and second, that it’s a piece of *their* world that is being lost, not a piece of ours, and we often react that way ourselves when it’s part of our own world that is being lost. Being reasonable is much easier if you have little or nothing at stake” (pages 26, 27).

“Whenever something that is viewed as a break with the past turns out successfully, people forget the loss they felt when the change happened and begin to celebrate it as a ‘tradition.’ But the status quo is just an innovation brought about by a transition that people have forgotten” (page 36).

“When people trust their manager, they’re willing to undertake a change even if it scares them. When they don’t feel that trust, transition is much less likely to occur. The good news is that you can build such trust; the bad news is that it takes time to build trust—so it behooves you to get started right away” (page 109).

“Transition is like a low-pressure area on the organizational weather map. It attracts all the storms and conflicts in the area, past as well as present. This is because transition ‘decompresses’ an organization. Many of the barriers that held things in check come down. Old grievances resurface. Old scars start to ache. Old skeletons come tumbling out of the closets” (page 111).

“One of the ironies of the organizational world is that outplacement services have become an accepted way to assist terminated employees but no comparable body of services has

been developed to help those who are left behind. There are really two ironies there. The first is that money and effort are being devoted to people who can no longer contribute to the success of the company. The survivors, on whose efforts and motivation the future of the company depends, get little or no attention. The second irony is that the kinds of training that are given to terminated employees by an outplacement program are designed to equip them to find work and manage their careers in a continually changing business environment. This is the kind of training that all employees need in a rapidly changing environment, but these newly trained former employees are now working for the company's competitors" (page 138).

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### Barber Clippings

I preached in a meeting this past week at Bumpus Mills, Tennessee—my fourth with them. Tuesday morning, I drove to Cadiz, Kentucky, to have breakfast with the elders of the Eddyville, Kentucky, church. We agreed that I will begin working with that congregation the first Sunday in May, 2007. We will be living in the "preacher's house" next to the church building in Eddyville. Gail and I visited there the weekend of August 19, 20. I preached, taught the Sunday school class, participated in a "Family Meeting" that afternoon—explaining what we planned to do if we came there and answering questions. We asked everyone to give input to the elders and me for three weeks. It is our plans for me to preach there from six to eighteen months, teach classes Sunday morning, Wednesday night, and in homes, conduct a congregational self-study, teach leadership classes, and do other work that will help the work to be more effective when the new preacher comes. I appreciate the confidence the elders have in me and the invitation to work with them.

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I am now developing my PowerPoint series "Abide with Me": Stories of the Great Hymns based on my tour this summer of hymn sites in England and Wales. Each lesson concentrates on the history and spiritual lessons of one of the beloved hymns and features photographs by international photographer Paul Seawright of the University of Wales as well as other photographs that I took myself. Currently I am presenting the series on Wednesday nights at 6:30 at the Granny White church in Nashville. Currently I am presenting the series on Wednesday nights at 6:30 at the Granny White church in Nashville. This series, as well as the one of Fundamentals of Christianity, based on my book BOUND AND LOOSED: FUNDAMENTALS OF THE CHRISTIAN SYSTEM, will be available for midweek presentations to churches by December. I am currently available for weekend interim ministry appointments.

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