

The Interim Pastor

Rationale, Selection, Responsibilities, and Remuneration Resources

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May the Lord, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd. (Numbers 27:16-17)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I pastor a wonderful community of believers called Highpoint Church in Aurora, Colorado. One of Highpoint's most unique qualities is its ability to maintain a string of long-term pastors. While most churches can experience several pastoral turnovers in a decade, Highpoint has been pastored by only seven men in over 85 years of history.¹ The last three pastors alone have a combined service of nearly 60 years! This is a wonderful strength! However, it also means Highpoint has only assembled a pastoral Search Committee two times since 1958. To be honest, we lack experience in pastoral transitions and need to protect our strengths by shoring up our weaknesses. I believe an interim pastor is one of several ways this can be done.

Even though I was elected in mid-October of 2002, my predecessor continued at the helm until the day before I started that December. He left the office on a Friday and I started on Sunday. What seemed like a seamless transition was actually strained, confusing, and rushed. In looking back, it would have been wise for an interim pastor to give the Board advice, deal with sensitive issues, help the church reposition for change, and prepare for the arrival of a new pastor.

An interim pastor is a temporary person who serves as a link between the past and the future. They fill the leadership gap to allow the Board to remain focused on identifying qualified candidates and the staff to continue focusing on their portfolios. It is a temporary position that reports directly to the Board, carrying out a written job description that is determined by the Board. Like a harbor pilot, they board the ship only to pilot it through the uncertain and dangerous channel of the marina. Once on the other side, they relinquish control to the ship's captain and depart.²

My mentor, Wally Weber, has gained extensive experience by serving as an interim pastor during most of his retirement. He and his wife, Jan, hired me while I was in bible college many years ago and have been a well of wisdom all these years. After I spent several hours interviewing him on this topic, he gave me a list of deacons he had worked with and suggested I call them. I asked each one to comment on the pros and cons of having an interim pastor. The overwhelming response was positive. Several stated they could not have overcome the many challenges presented without the interim's help. The most reoccurring obstacles stated were decreased giving, declining attendance, lowered morale, consistency in the pulpit, and attempted interference from strong personalities who desired influence during the leadership vacuum. Those interviews led to many months of educating myself on the best practices of pastoral transitions. When revising Highpoint's bylaws, the Board and I included a requirement that the church employ an interim pastor in all future transitions. We were pleased that the congregation unanimously adopted that recommendation.

This document is the product of that research.³ I pray you will find it helpful in considering options in your own leadership transitions.

Gene Roncone
Highpoint Church, Aurora



Chapter 2

The Biblical Precedent for Interim Ministry

Scriptures give us many examples of spiritual leaders who provided interim ministry during times of transitions, crises, or emergencies.

In the Old Testament, Moses served as an interim leader, transitioning the people of Israel from Egypt to Canaan. His leadership helped God's people transition from nomadic tribes to a structured society. In 2 Kings 11 we are told that Jehoiada the priest thwarted an attempt to assassinate every member of the royal family. He hid Joash, the last remaining heir, in the temple for seven years and secretly trained him in the things of God. This interim prepared the young Joash to become king. Nehemiah was called by God to bring focus, leadership, and scriptural teaching to the people returning from Babylonian captivity. He helped them transition into their new lives in Jerusalem.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist is an excellent model of interim leadership. His ministry had the specific purpose of preparing people's hearts and minds to accept the Messiah. He was called upon to "prepare the way" of the One who would follow him (Matthew 11:10). Jesus appointed 72 people to go ahead of him and establish temporary ministry points in towns he intended to visit at a later time (Luke 10:1). Titus was appointed by the Apostle Paul to serve in a temporary role at Crete and to bring order to the church and raise up leaders (Titus 1:5). Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica for a temporary time to provide sound teaching and protect new converts from false doctrine (1 Thessalonians 3:2). In 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 and 3:1-9, the church was encouraged to recognize the unique value and contribution of temporary leaders like Paul, Apollos, and Peter.

David Bittinger makes a powerful case that the forty days Christ was on earth following His resurrection and before His ascension served a critical interim purpose. According to Bittinger, this interim season of ministry allowed the disciples time to process their grief and confusion and transition into a new understanding of the resurrected Christ.⁴

Coach Nigel Hetherman once said, "The race is about the baton, not the runners. The baton must always remain the fastest member of the squad."⁵ Anyone who has lovingly labored, discipled, and prayed for their church longs for a smooth transition from one leader to the next. It is no wonder Moses prayed about his own transition,

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Whether they realize it or not, every pastor is an interim pastor. Planning for that succession may be the biggest leadership task a leader will ever face. History will ultimately show whether destiny found them ready and prepared for what could be their finest hour.



Chapter 3

Benefits of an Interim Pastor

An interim pastor benefits the church in several ways. Following are a few of the most advantageous benefits that have been confirmed by experience:

- A. Preaching consistency.** The church has consistency in the preaching and teaching ministry as well as the economy of resources in not having to search, secure, and host weekly speakers.
- B. Board focus.** An interim pastor gives the Board the freedom to focus on the pastoral search instead of providing for weekly ministry.
- C. Guest consistency.** An interim pastor provides weekly consistency, leadership, and exposure to regular attendees, visitors, and returning guests.
- D. Seasoned leadership.** An interim pastor gives the Board, staff, and church members the assurance of seasoned leadership.
- E. Board monitoring.** An interim pastor gives the Board hands-on representation in the office and day-to-day operations of the church.
- F. Minimizing loss.** An interim pastor can help minimize the loss of momentum, decrease in attendance, and the stagnation of giving that are commonly experienced in pastoral transitions.
- G. Providing stability.** Because interim pastors are usually semiretired ministers with a lot of senior pastoral experience, they can give members a sense of confidence that wisdom and restraint will be applied to the managing of the church during the interim time.
- H. Neutrality.** An interim pastor is able to interact with the outgoing pastor concerning needed information without seeming insensitive. They can help with postdeparture interactions regarding things like file locations, keys, historical documents, and other items overlooked by the best planners.
- I. Staff focus.** An interim pastor allows the staff to focus on keeping existing ministries running and effective instead of being distracted by additional duties that were once carried out by the lead pastor.
- J. Change preparation.** The interim pastor gives the people, staff, and Board a chance to increase their capacity for change. Concerning his experiences serving as an interim pastor, Justin Tull said, “I was astonished that in the midst of chaos and high anxiety that so many positive changes could take place, changes in many cases unrelated to the major sources of the crisis situation. In the midst of transition and even chaos, the church is often more open to change than in times of

status quo.”⁶ Instead of the church being pushed into the cold water of change all at once, they are exposed to interim leadership that helps them wade into the pool slowly. Because interim pastors have minimal concern about being fired or voted upon, they are in an ideal position to confront systemic causes of decline in the church.⁷

Justin Tull is a respected and experienced interim pastor who chronicled his observations in his book, *Interim Ministry, Positive Change in Times of Transition*. Tull said in concluding his observations, “An interim pastor has, I believe, a greater ability to affect real change in the life of the church than a new minister whose every move will be evaluated at the onset.”⁸



Chapter 4

Qualifications of an Interim Pastor

Wally Weber is a seasoned minister who has spent much of his retirement serving as an interim pastor. He has developed many helpful resources for churches and recommends that the interim pastor have the following characteristics:⁹

- A. Recommended.** It is strongly recommended that the interim pastor be one who is experienced in pastoral ministry and have served as a senior pastor, interim pastor and is recommended by the district superintendent or other denominational leaders.
- B. Unbiased.** The interim pastor should be one who can be unbiased in all matters pertaining to the selection of a lead pastor, the management of the church, and personal preferences. They should also be willing to voluntarily waive the right to submit a résumé or be considered as a candidate.¹⁰ Because many interim pastors can be retired ministers who miss the opportunity to lead, they should be individuals who are secure in themselves at their particular stage of life. They should not view their role as an opportunity to introduce sweeping change, start ministries, implement new operational procedures, or seek the loyalties and affections of the congregants.
- C. Communicator.** The interim pastor should be one who can preach on a weekly basis, if need be.
- D. Experienced.** The interim pastor should be one who has prior management skills and staff leadership abilities adequate for a medium- to large-sized congregation.
- E. Pastoral.** The interim pastor should be one who is spiritually gifted in practical pastoral ministry and exudes a pastoral heart. It is preferred that they have decades of pastoral experience in the local church—not an associate, home or foreign missionary, or parachurch leader.
- F. Diplomatic.** The interim pastor should be one who is able to facilitate dialogue, resolve conflict, and address sensitive matters with grace, diplomacy, and clarity. Pastoral transitions can be inviting to strong personalities who seek to take advantage of the leadership vacuum. The four most common instances are:
 - 1. Church leaders and members who seek to use the leadership vacuum as an opportunity to advance their personal agenda or ministry preferences.
 - 2. Ministers within the congregation who want to be considered for the position, influence the Search Committee, recommend friends, submit résumés and fill the pulpit.
 - 3. Individuals who privately lobby Search Committee members on behalf of friends, relatives, or associates.
 - 4. Missionaries, parachurch leaders and businesses that desire to raise funds during the interim.

- G. Flexible.** The interim pastor should be one who is capable of being flexible and understands that each church has different needs. They cannot just try to recreate the same structures used in other interim situations and should seek to understand the culture of the church and community.
- H. Cooperative.** The interim pastor should be one who can have a good relationship with the Board and be willing to carry out their desires.
- I. Motivated.** The interim pastor should be one who has sufficient energy levels to cope with the mental, physical, and emotional stresses of interim ministry.
- J. Optimistic.** The interim pastor should be one who has a positive attitude and can create organizational trust and anticipation for the next pastor.



Chapter 5

Responsibilities of an Interim Pastor

The responsibilities of the interim pastor depend upon the situation at hand. They should reflect the needs of the church and be placed in writing. Following is a draft of responsibilities that can be customized for unique situations:

- A. Teach/preach.** Is part of the Sunday morning teaching/preaching team with others approved by the board. The frequency will be determined by the Board.
- B. Respond.** Answers correspondence, phone calls, emails, and emergencies that would normally be addressed by the lead pastor.
- C. Pastoral care.** Manages the “on call” schedule and provide pastoral care to members of the church (counseling, hospital calls, prayer for the sick, communion, funerals, weddings).
- D. Resolve conflict.** Resolves conflict to ensure the new pastor’s early days are not consumed with unresolved issues and neglected priorities.
- E. Recuse.** Removes themselves from consideration for the lead pastor position.
- F. Worship services.** Gives leadership to coordinating the weekly services with the staff.
- G. Collaborate.** Attends finance meetings and a portion of the monthly Board meetings.
- H. Empower.** Frees the existing staff to remain focused and productive in their appropriate portfolios.
- I. Assist.** Assists, counsels, and resources the Board when requested.
- J. Cooperate.** Works within the framework of the job description approved by the Board.



Chapter 6

Dimensions of an Interim Pastor

The role of an interim pastor is determined by the Board and the unique needs and culture of the church. Following is a list of the most common models in order of the time, skill, and involvement necessary:

- A. Preaching only.** The interim pastor's sole responsibility is to give the church a consistent preaching ministry during the duration of the search. Their role is preaching and building morale to sustain the search process. In this case, the interim pastor arrives each week and preaches according to the order of service.
- B. Pastoring only.** The interim pastor's sole responsibility is to provide pastoral care in the form of hospital calls, counseling, weddings, baby dedications, funerals, and care for the elderly. Preaching and teaching are provided by others.
- C. Preaching and pastoral care.** The interim pastor's role consists of preaching each week and giving attention to pastoral care (counseling, hospital calls, weddings, baby dedications, funerals, care for the elderly).
- D. Preaching, pastoring, and coaching.** The interim pastor's role consists of giving the church a consistent preaching ministry, pastoral care (see above), and being a resource to the Board in their pastoral search efforts.
- E. Interim executive leadership.** The interim pastor maintains office hours, leads the paid staff, does the majority of preaching (teamed with guests and staff), provides pastoral care, and serves as a staff liaison with the Board. In reality, they serve as an acting lead pastor. This ensures that the ministries of the church function but in a way that keeps the Board informed and ensures the staff is not launching new ministries, changing direction, or neglecting normal functions. It also helps provide continuity with the search process.
- F. Specialized interim ministry.** It should be mentioned that the situation in some churches may warrant a prolonged interim period to resolve systemic problems, organizational dysfunction, or debilitating obstacles before a new pastor can be secured. Examples of these kinds of obstacles may be deep-seated division, moral failure, unexpected death of the pastor, church split, unforeseen tragedy, or recurring turnover in short periods of time. There is even a specialized group of interim pastors called "intentional interim pastors" who are highly trained in helping a church address and move beyond these types of problems. The scope of their unique ministry is outlined in the book, *Between Pastors*, by Cam Taylor and Alan Simpson.¹¹ It should also be noted that advocates of the intentional interim model recommend postponing the pastoral search until other dysfunctions and obstacles are successfully addressed and overcome.

It would be reasonable for the Board to request résumés, interviews, recommendations, and preaching tapes of those being considered to serve as interim pastor.¹² The interim pastor should be given a short job description and offered a generous salary in proportion to their responsibilities.



Chapter 7

Selecting an Interim Pastor

It is important to select an interim pastor who has both training and experience in their field. The fact that a person may be a retired minister/missionary does not mean they are qualified to be a good interim pastor. As a matter of fact, an inexperienced or untrained interim pastor can do more harm than good. The following considerations should be made when selecting an interim pastor:

A. Identifying potential leads. There are several sources to acquire leads for a potential interim pastor.

- 1. District superintendent or network pastor.** District superintendents are much more experienced in the art of pastoral transitions. While most churches only experience transition once or twice a decade, a district superintendent may see this occur 15-20 times in any given year. It is not uncommon for a district to see 27 percent of its churches experience a pastoral transition in a three-year period.¹³ Repeated exposure has given district leaders a unique perspective on everything from the most regrettable mistakes to the most effective practices. The network pastor knows who has both the experience and track record to serve as an interim pastor. Meeting with them for a consult is well worth the time.
- 2. Interim Pastor Ministries (IPM).** IPM is an organization dedicated to formal training and certification in interim pastoral ministries. Membership with IPM requires a thorough vetting process, considerable experience, advanced education, and high view of Scripture. Only those who have successfully completed the membership process are eligible to serve with IPM. Although they are nondenominational and unfamiliar with Assemblies of God governance and doctrine, they may have a qualified person who is perfect for your church. Their contact information is available in the endnotes.¹⁴
- 3. Professional search and placement organizations.** There are a few professional search organizations and placement consultants that can be subcontracted (hired) to provide interim pastors, manage the search process, and select candidates for you. However, it is my opinion that the disadvantages of using these organizations outweigh the benefits. They are very expensive and can charge between 30-50 percent of the previous pastor's salary. Because they can receive payment both from churches looking for pastors and pastors looking for churches, they have a conflict of interest. It has been my experience that the candidates they recommend are usually the same people they are under contract with to help find a future job. Others believe their success rate is actually less than that of a well-planned, board-led, and locally inspired succession process. A board-led process has boots on the ground and a better understanding the church's culture; and the results are more likely to be owned by church members. These consulting groups can be beneficial, but caution should be exercised in using them.

B. Needed qualities. The following qualities are required for successful interim ministry:¹⁵

- **Spiritually mature.** The person should be seasoned and have a deep love for God, people, and local church ministry.

- **Interim experience.** The person should have both served and been trained in interim ministry.
- **Local pastoral experience.** The person should be capable of performing the general duties of a pastor.
- **Preaching/teaching.** The person should be a competent communicator and feel comfortable teaching and preaching.
- **Administrative ability.** The person should assist the church by setting up structures and policy when needed.
- **Management skills.** The person should have prior experience overseeing and managing paid staff and volunteers.
- **Collaborative.** The person should be able to recognize the Board's authority and be willing to work with and through existing leaders.
- **Wisdom.** The person will need to ask probing questions, listen well, be objective, understand issues, discern the source of problems, and recommend solutions.
- **Motivated.** The person should be a person who has initiative, energy, and is physically able to be engaged in the process.
- **Humility.** The person should subordinate their own preferences and seek to serve the interests of the church.

C. Interview questions. A Board should not assume someone has the unique qualities, temperament, and experience for their needs. They should interview potential candidates for this role. When interviewing potential interim pastors, it is important to listen with three ears: to hear what candidates are saying, for what candidates are not saying, and for what candidates would like to say but cannot put into words. Following are a few suggested questions that can help determine situational fit:

1. Tell us about your conversion, call to ministry, summary of ministry experience, and the reason why you enjoy interim ministry.
2. How many times have you served as an interim pastor? Can you briefly summarize those experiences, what size churches they were, and the result of the ministry there?
3. What kind of training have you had for interim ministry (formal, experiential, reading)?
4. Please elaborate on your past involvement in any of the following capacities of interim ministry:
 - **Preaching only.** The interim pastor's sole responsibility is to give the church a consistent preaching ministry during the duration of the search.
 - **Pastoring only.** The interim pastor's sole responsibility is to provide pastoral care in the form of hospital calls, counseling, weddings, baby dedications, funerals, and care for the elderly.
 - **Preaching and pastoral care.** The interim pastor's role consists of preaching each week and giving attention to pastoral care (counseling, hospital calls, weddings, baby dedications, funerals, and care for the elderly).
 - **Preaching, pastoring, and coaching.** The interim pastor's role consists of giving the church a consistent preaching ministry, pastoral care (see above), and being a resource to the Board in their role as the Search Committee.

- **Interim executive leadership.** The interim pastor maintains office hours, leads the paid staff, does the majority of preaching (teamed with guests and staff), provides pastoral care, and serves as a staff liaison with the Board.
5. Are you more of an introvert or extrovert?
 6. What topics do you usually address from the pulpit (teaching and preaching) during a pastoral interim?
 7. How do you handle situations when the Board does not take your advice?
 8. Are you willing to remove yourself from consideration as the lead pastor?
 9. How do you manage people who try to insert their influence in the selection process, lobby for church-wide change, or actualize their personal preferences?
 10. How do you respond when you become aware of divisive behavior among church members?
 11. Have you ever left an interim assignment before the new pastor was elected or appointed? If so, what was the reason?
 12. Are you able to make a commitment of three to eight months as interim pastor?
 13. What kind of remuneration or unique accommodations would you require?
 14. What are three of the most important principles you have learned concerning interim ministry?
 15. Will your spouse be attending Sunday services with you? Although the spouse would not have an official role, the purpose of this question is to see if members of the church who share their gender will have access to seasoned leadership for pastoral care, advice, or prayer.
 16. Could you give us a list of references from churches you have served as interim pastor?
 17. What questions do you have for us?

Right now, the task of securing an interim pastor and then selecting a new lead pastor may seem intimidating. However, it should encourage you that over 60,000 churches go through a leadership change every year.¹⁶ You are experiencing something uncomfortable and challenging but very normal. You've got this!



Chapter 8

Remuneration for the Interim Pastor

An interim pastor should be remunerated generously and in accordance with their capacity of service. As a general rule, the most extensive capacity should be between half and two-thirds of the previous pastor's salary. For smaller churches, that may not be possible; but neglecting remuneration may cause an unsettling transition in the interim pastor as well.

Although it is not possible to know exactly how long the process will take, succession planning expert William Vanderbloemen says that most pastoral searches take 12-24 months from start to finish.¹⁷ It would seem wise to prepare for at least 8 months to a year of interim pastoral services.

Following is a sample remuneration agreement that may be helpful to use as a template and customize for your particular situation:

Your Church Remuneration Package for Interim Pastor Approved by the Board on _____ with Motion #?	Annual	Monthly	Total Annual
Cash Remuneration			
Salary (cash benefit paid on 1 st and 15 th of each month)	\$	\$	
Housing (cash benefit paid on the 1 st of each month)	\$	\$	
Total Cash Remuneration			\$
Health and Medical Benefits			
Medical (noncash benefit for individual and eligible family)	\$	\$	
Dental (noncash benefit for individual and eligible family)	\$	\$	
Life Insurance (noncash benefit for individual and eligible family)	\$	\$	
Total health and medical benefits			\$
Other Benefits			
Cell Phone (noncash benefit)	\$	\$	
Car Allowance	\$	\$	
State Taxes Paid by Church	\$	\$	
Federal Taxes Paid by Church	\$	\$	
Retirement Contribution	\$	\$	
Disability Insurance	\$	\$	
Total Other Benefits			\$
TOTAL REMUNERATION PACKAGE			\$

Mileage: Reimbursement for ministry use of personal vehicle.			
Vacation: Accrued 25 days (not to exceed 4 Sundays)			
Ministry Enrichment: As approved by the Board			
Weekly Day Off: As communicated to the Board			
Employment Effective:			



Endnotes

¹Thom S. Rainer, "Six Reasons Pastoral Tenure May Be Increasing," 2016 6.0 years LifeWay Research/GuideStone/Comp Study, March 2016. Retrieved from www.thomrainer.com. The study concluded that since 2012, the median tenure of a pastor in America is only six years. Other studies, show averages as low as four years. That means there are many churches that may have experienced between two to three pastoral transitions in a decade.

²David L. Bittinger, "A Model of Interim Pastoral Coaches for Ohio Assemblies of God Churches in Pastoral Transition," DMin diss., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri, 2007, p. 2. Bittinger quoted David Fink, an interim pastor in the North Texas District, who shared how the Holy Spirit spoke to him about the critical value of his interim ministry through a PBS television story on interesting jobs, specifically the valuable work of a "harbor pilot" who pilots large cruise ships through the local, narrow, and treacherous waterways of the harbor—getting the ship in and out of the harbor, and then turning the ship over to the captain.

³This position description was formulated after reviewing material from various sources and several conversations with Wally Weber. Wally has spent his retirement serving as an interim pastor and is a wealth of practical wisdom.

⁴David L. Bittinger, "A Model of Interim Pastoral Coaches for Ohio Assemblies of God Churches In Pastoral Transition". DMin diss., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri, 2007, p. 29.

⁵Jeff Myers, *The Race of Life: What a Real-Life Relay Coach Can Teach Us About Running to Win*, September 30, 2018, retrieved from www.bible.org. Dr. Jeff Myers interviewed coach Nigel Hetherinton, the National Manager of Sprints and Hurdles for Scottish Athletics, on success in relay races. This quote was from that interview.

⁶Justin Tull, *Interim Ministry, Positive Change in Times of Transition*, Published by Justin Tull, 2012, p. 2.

⁷Michael Durall, *Don't Wait until the Pastor Leaves: Planning for Ministerial Transitions Helps Ensure That One Successful Minister Follows Another*, Common Wealth, Golden, CO, p. 15.

⁸Justin Tull, *Interim Ministry, Positive Change in Times of Transition*, 2012, Published by Justin Tull, p. 47.

⁹Three-hour interview with Wally Weber on January 22, 2018.

¹⁰Warren D. Bullock, *Your Next Pastor: Guidelines for Finding God's Person for Your Church*, Gospel Publishing House, Springfield, MO, pp. 31-32.

¹¹Cam Taylor and Alan Simpson, *Between Pastors, Seizing the Opportunity*, Outreach Canada Ministries, 2014

¹²Warren D. Bullock, *Your Next Pastor: Guidelines for Finding God's Person for Your Church*, Gospel Publishing House, Springfield, MO, p. 30.

¹³David L. Bittinger, "A Model of Interim Pastoral Coaches for Ohio Assemblies of God Churches In Pastoral Transition". DMin diss., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri, 2007, p. 2.

¹⁴Interim Pastor Ministries (IPM) is an organization dedicated to formal training and certification in interim pastoral ministries. Their website is <http://www.interimpastors.com>, and their YouTube channel is <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqJDFBbX-gKh2txEWt-meHg>.

¹⁵Some of these characteristics are from Interim Pastor Ministries (IPM) under the page entitled, "Key Qualities of Today's Interim Pastor," at <http://www.interimpastors.com>.

¹⁶Tom Mullins, *Passing the Leadership Baton, A Winning Transition Plan for Your Ministry*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, p. 6.

¹⁷William Vanderbloemen, *Search, The Pastoral Search Committee Handbook*, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, p. 2.