

How a trained interim pastor can improve a pastor search

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I've noticed some things about interim ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic, learned from pastor search teams and interim pastors.

First, the rate of churches losing their pastors slowed. Pastors ready to retire bit the bullet and stayed. They couldn't leave their beloved churches as the crisis started and then grew. Others who thought they were ready to start looking for their next pastoral assignment decided against it—for the same reason pastors delayed their retirements.

I see some signs searches are starting again, but will this continue, or will we experience *déjà vu* with the huge new surge in infections among the unvaccinated?

In addition, churches already in the interim period—with interim pastors in place—often found their search processes stalled. Interim pastors agreed to stay on until “things got better” and the search process could be restarted and completed.

Finally, some pastor search committees pushed on, but their work has been challenging. For instance, churches that would have received 175 resumes before the pandemic have found the number now is just a few dozen. “We don't really like any of them, but I guess we have to settle for one,” mourn some pastor search committee chairs—although that's not true.

This is a tough time to be in an interim period. It's weird out there.

The first step

What should a church do in these days to find a new pastor? I want to focus on just one step: the first step. My answer is the same I would have given *before* the pandemic: Start with calling an interim pastor.

Some churches start by planning to host a different guest preacher every Sunday for the entire interim period. That's a mistake. It gets old, fast.

Most Baptist churches, however, plan to call an interim preacher who will "preach to us, love us, but leave us alone." Good preaching is wonderful, of course, but it's not enough. In fact, having the interim pastor do nothing but preach actually can hurt a church.

A better understanding of what a church should expect from a good interim pastor starts by searching for one who is (1) called and (2) equipped.

A called interim pastor

A called interim pastor understands an interim church needs someone who will be the temporary shepherd, or the "pastor-during-the-interim." This person willingly takes on pastoral duties, usually part-time—such as pastoral care, supervision, leadership and outreach, among others—so those tasks don't pile up on the next pastor's desk. Helping with these pastoral duties also helps relieve other church staff from doing them.

Called interim pastors also don't try to sneak their way into the permanent pastor position. That's not their calling from the Lord. Instead, they want to help the church work on improving its health before the next pastor arrives. They want to address issues that can trip up the next pastor and "do the next pastor a favor."

Called interim pastors are willing to help without fear something they do

will mess up their candidacy for permanent pastor. The Baptist General Convention of Texas' interim network pastors sign a covenant stating they will not accept a call to pastor where they currently are the interim pastor—under any circumstance. This commitment removes the conflict of interest present when the interim secretly, or boldly, campaigns for the pastor position.

Equipped interim pastors

Equipped interim pastors already have ministerial experience. Interim pastoring is not for the novice. It needs a level of competency and expertise to navigate the difficult scenarios of church life today. One already should have experience in preaching and pastoring, a background for understanding the basics of how churches operate, a network to reach out to for assistance, and some natural instincts in how to “herd cats.”

In addition, an equipped interim pastor will have participated in special training. There are key differences between installed and interim pastors rarely apparent to the novice. The BGCT offers such training for traditional interim pastors and for Intentional Interim Ministry pastors.

An essential role of equipped interim pastors is to resource the pastor search committee. This includes helping to:

- Guide the church to use a healthy method for selecting a search team,
- Lead a pastor search committee retreat that includes team building and spiritual foundations,
- Teach a proven search process for finding a new pastor,
- Resource the development of a church profile,
- Resource the development of a pastor profile,
- Introduce the pastor search committee to a network of trusted people and partners for finding good candidates, and
- Consult with the pastor search committee as they discern which

candidate is God's will.

Further benefits of interim pastors

Interim pastors don't recommend candidates and need not sit in on every pastor search committee meeting. Hopefully, however, they will continue to assist the pastor search committee until a new pastor is secured.

There's no need to pay additional money to headhunters or outside agencies when the same assistance is available within the duties of a qualified interim pastor.

Texas Baptist interim pastors are committed to assisting the BGCT's family of churches stay healthy through the interim period, and they can help pastor search committees understand the important issues that trip up search teams who do not utilize the expertise of their interim pastors.

For help with finding an interim pastor, or for information about training to become an interim pastor, contact the Interim Church Services office of the BGCT at karl.fickling@txb.org or 214-828-5191.

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