

A Study of the Effectiveness of Interim Pastors

The Association of Presbyterian Interim Ministry Specialists asked Research Services to conduct a survey that would help them do the best job they could as interims. Research Services constructed four questionnaires—one each for the following four constituencies: (1) presbytery executives, (2) chairs of presbytery committees on ministry, (3) clerks of session in congregations that had had an interim pastor, and (4) pastors who followed an interim pastor.

The list of pastors and clerks of session in congregations that had had an interim pastor was constructed by identifying all congregations that had an interim pastor at the end of 2004 but no longer had an interim at the end of 2006. Congregations that had interim associate pastors were not included. This procedure resulted in a list of 318 congregations. In each of these congregations, both the current pastor and the clerk of session received a survey by mail. Presbytery executives and chairs of committees on ministry were invited by email to complete Web-based surveys.

Response rates for the four samples were: presbytery executives, 55%; chairs of committees on ministry, 59%; clerks of session, 61%; pastors who followed an interim, 65%. Appendices A to D present statistical summaries of the results for each sample separately. Appendices E to H present responses to open-ended questions from each sample.

Results

Having an Interim is a Good Idea

When clerks of session and pastors in congregations that had had an interim pastor were asked if, in general, it was a good idea that the congregation had an interim, 69% of both groups responded, “yes, a very good idea,” and another two in ten responded, “yes, a good idea.”

The comparable questions for presbytery executives and chairs of committees on ministry (COM) were not as straightforward. These respondents were given a list of pastoral transition situations and asked how beneficial it is for congregations to call an interim pastor in each. Table 1 gives the responses for these eight situations. It is clear that most respondents in both samples believe having an interim pastor is beneficial in most situations.

Table 1
Pastoral Transition Situations When Calling an Interim Pastor is Beneficial

	Percentage Responding “Always Beneficial”	
	Presbytery Executives	COM Chairs
When a pastor leaves under duress	74%	84%
When a congregation is experiencing significant conflict.....	70%	74%
When a pastor who served the church for many years retires	68%	72%
When the senior pastor of a multi-staff congregation leaves	66%	61%
When the pastor dies unexpectedly	65%	79%
When a pastor who served the church for many years accepts another call.....	58%	72%
When a congregation needs to or wants to re-examine its mission.....	36%	47%
Whenever there is a pastoral vacancy.....	18%	28%

No more than 2% of presbytery executives and chairs of COMs responded “never beneficial” for any of these situations. These results indicate strong support for interim ministry from all four samples.

Image and Role of Interim Pastors

Presbytery executives and chairs of COMs were asked to indicate their agreement with a series of statements about interim ministry. Table 2 (next page) shows these statements in order based on the percentage of presbytery executives who “strongly agree” or “agree” with each. There is considerable agreement between the executives and chairpersons.

The largest percentages in both groups agreed with the statement: “It requires many years of experience in ministry to be effective in interim ministry.” Similarly, large majorities in both groups believe “interim pastors help congregations deal with the grieving process when a beloved pastor leaves.” More chairs of COMs than presbytery executives believe “interim pastors help to empower the congregation’s laity.” While 86% of COM chairpersons “strongly agree” or “agree” with that statement, only 70% of executives do.

Responses regarding the last few images listed in Table 2 reveal that few presbytery executives and COM chairs believe that, in general, interim pastors drag out the search process, having an interim leads to a drop in congregational membership, and interim pastors often alienate members for no apparent reason.

What Type of Pastor is Preferred as an Interim Pastor

Executives and COM chairpersons were given descriptions of five types of interim pastors and asked to indicate to what extent they prefer each when helping a congregation find an interim. A majority of executives (55%) “always” prefer an “interim pastor with education/training in interim ministry.” Another 39% “usually” prefer a pastor with such education or training. Responses of COM chairpersons were similar. This might seem to contradict the results in Table 2, in which less than half (40% of executives and 37% of COM chairs) “strongly agree” or “agree” that “it requires specialized training to be effective in interim ministry. These results can be interpreted to mean that specialized training is preferred, but that pastors can be successful in interim ministry without this training.

The next important preference was experience serving as an interim pastor: 21% of executives and chairpersons “always” prefer an interim with such experience, and over 60% in each sample “usually” prefer such a minister. Relative few “always” or “usually” prefer interim pastors who are newly ordained, retired ministers, or “anyone available in the presbytery.”

COM chairpersons and presbytery executives were asked to note anything else they look for in an interim pastor. These comments (tabulated in Appendices G and H) cover many areas. A number mentioned: loyalty to the PC(USA) and to the presbytery, a good fit with the congregation, and previous success as an interim pastor or as an installed pastor. Many other comments can be summarized generally as a desire for “a pastor with a healthy personality.”

Table 2
Images of Interim Ministry

	Percentage Who “Strongly Agree” or “Agree”	
	Presbytery Executives	COM Chairs
It requires many years of experience in ministry to be effective in interim ministry	92%	92%
Interim pastors help congregations deal with the grieving process when a beloved pastor leaves	76%	80%
Healthy congregations usually do not need an interim pastor	72%	80%
Interim pastors help to empower the congregation’s laity.....	70%	86%
Interim pastors are helpful in preparing a congregation to accept change that inevitably comes with a new pastor.....	70%	78%
Interim pastors provide stability during pastoral transitions	70%	74%
Interim pastors help congregations understand who they are.....	65%	68%
Interim pastors improve the chances that the next pastor will have a harmonious stay	64%	67%
Interim pastors are needed to break self-destructive patterns of congregational leadership	63%	63%
Interim pastors help congregations value their past before moving forward	61%	62%
Interim pastors help congregations see their potential	60%	62%
Interim pastors help congregations prepare for the next pastor.....	58%	54%
Interim pastors help congregations let go of the past so they can move forward....	56%	60%
Interim pastors help strengthen the connectionalism between the congregation and the larger church	54%	54%
It requires specialized training to be effective in interim ministry	40%	37%
It requires a special type of person to be effective in interim ministry	9%	7%
Congregational membership usually drops during an interim period	8%	12%
Unless it is a troubled congregation, interim pastors only drag out the search process.....	6%	6%
Unless it is a troubled congregation, having an interim pastor weakens a congregation because congregational membership drops.....	6%	3%
Interim pastors too often alienate members for no apparent reason.....	4%	4%
Interim pastors tend to be pastors who have not been successful in the parish.....	3%	7%

What the Interim Pastor Did

Clerks of session of congregations that had had an interim pastor and pastors who followed an interim pastor were asked to indicate to what extent their interim pastor did each of nine tasks common to interim ministry. The responses of clerks were, in general, more positive than those of pastors—more clerks than pastors indicated the interim pastor had done each task. For example, one-half of clerks (54%) responded “to a great extent” to: “helped us get ready for the change that comes with a new pastor.” Only 33% of pastors gave that response regarding that task.

Table 3 shows these activities in order based on the percentage of clerks who indicated the interim pastor had done each task “to a great extent” or “to some extent.” The activity with the largest

percentage responding “to a great extent” or “to some extent” is listed first. With the exception of the task “helped the congregation clarify its identity,” the order is similar in both groups.

Table 3
Tasks Performed by Interim Pastors

	Percentage Responding “to a Great Extent” or “to Some Extent”	
	Clerks	Pastors
Helped the congregation get ready for the change that comes with a new pastor	80%	65%
Helped the congregation identify problem areas	80%	64%
Helped the congregation review the needs of the congregation	80%	59%
Helped the congregation clarify its identity.....	75%	38%
Helped the congregation successfully deal with problem areas	69%	50%
Helped the congregation discard old expectations, wounds, patterns, and baggage from the past	65%	49%
Helped build the congregation’s connectionalism with the larger church	56%	40%
Helped the congregation clarify its role in the community	51%	13%

Written Comments

If responses to open-ended survey questions and telephone calls to Research Services are ignored, these results indicate a very positive view of interim ministry. Normally telephone calls and responses to open-ended questions are taken into account and often support the other information that has been gathered. This time many do not support the results just presented, and sometimes contradict the previous information.

One possible reason for this is that the closed-ended questions were answered in terms of generality. The written comments dealt with specific incidents. The idea of interim ministry is supported, but for some, it too often does not seem to live up to its promise. This clearly to be the thinking of many pastors who followed an interim pastor. While 90% of these pastors think that, in general, it is good to have an interim pastor, just over half were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the work of the interim pastor they followed.

Another possible reason for two pictures of interim ministry is that interims serve at a period in a congregation’s life when some may see the congregation as particularly vulnerable. Some also have higher expectations of interim pastors. They are seen as specialists in helping congregations through transitions. When congregations don’t get the help they feel they need the process may be judged negatively.

Responses to open-ended questions indicate that interim ministry can generate strong emotions. Given that about 20% of presbytery executives “agree somewhat,” “agree,” or “strongly agree” with some of the negative statements about interim ministry (e.g., “interims drag out the search process”), it is not surprising that a number of negative comments were received.

The few telephone calls that Research Services received were from persons very upset with their presbytery for allowing someone who was involved in sexual misconduct to serve as an interim pastor and, in a couple of cases, to continue to serve. The Association of Presbyterian Interim Ministers was blamed in one case for allowing this to happen. This person thought the association should do more to uphold the standards of interim ministers.

A New Problem

The number of presbytery executives and chairs of COMs who said they “usually” or “sometimes” prefer interim pastors who are newly ordained (executives, 16%; COM chairs, 13%) or “anyone available in presbytery” (18%; 12%) to serve as interims seems to ensure that there will be a number of less than desirable persons in interim ministry. After expressing this idea to an interim pastor, the comment was made that presbyteries do not have much choice in finding interim pastors for most small congregations. Few small congregations can afford to call an interim pastor.

The difficulty that small congregations face in affording interim pastors may explain the drop in the number of interims serving congregations. In 2000, 621 PC(USA) ministers had a call as an interim pastor. This number dropped to 484 in 2005. One presbytery executive said, “I believe that presbyteries in areas of moderate- to low-density population are going to have to create interim teams to work with smaller and midsize congregations—teams involving clergy and elder leaders in different functions. If we really had a vision for this, we would already be doing it.”

Lessons from this Research

There is still strong support for the use of interim pastors, but the number of small congregations that cannot afford an interim and the number of persons that have questions about the usefulness of interims does provide challenges for the association.

Based on the comments made to open-ended questions, which may not be representative of the views of all respondents, “my way or the highway” and “just held the congregation’s hand” could summarize the two situations that caused the most trouble for congregations with interim pastors. Some interims were forceful in implementing “their plan,” with the implication that if members didn’t like it they could leave. The other extreme also caused problems when interims let a congregation coast until a new pastor is called.

The Association of Presbyterian Interim Ministry Specialists may want to emphasize to their members the importance of the following activities:

- Help the congregation identify problem areas
- Help the congregation successfully deal with problem areas
- Help the congregation review the needs of the congregation
- Help the congregation clarify its identity
- Help the congregation clarify its role in the community
- Help the congregation discard old expectations, wounds, patterns, and baggage from the past
- Help build the congregation’s connectionalism with the larger church
- Help the congregation get ready for the change that comes with a new pastor

These tasks were listed in the questionnaires sent to pastors following interims and clerks of session in those congregations. For two of these tasks, more than 50% of pastors said the interim pastor only did so “to a slight extent” or “not at all”: “helped the congregation clarify its identity” and “helped the congregation clarify its role in the community.”

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