

## **Interim Ministry: introduction**

**By Bob Young**

### **The Concept of Interim Ministry**

Typically in church work, there is not overlap between ministers, that is, one minister leaves before the next minister arrives.

What should a church do after one minister leaves and before the next minister arrives?

- The church needs stability and confidence, and can accomplish this by arranging competent interim ministry which helps the church recover and move to the next level of ministry.
- Interim ministry gives the church a reason to “move on” in ministry, since the outgoing minister has been replaced (by an interim minister). Interim ministry also gives the outgoing minister a reason to “move on.” Outgoing ministers are “lame ducks” and should leave as soon as practical and possible.<sup>1</sup> If the transition comes under duress or stress (or is forced), early departure is especially important. In severely conflicted changes, some churches limit the minister’s role to no more than one or two weeks—enough time for an effective “good bye”. Ministers who really care about the future of the church will not run down or belittle the church. Once the decision has been made, it is time to seek healing and health, not more wounds and actions which one may regret in the future.
- Interim ministry should begin as soon as possible and practical once the decision to make a ministry change is in place.
- Interim ministry is designed to help a church “fill the gap” between the ending of what existed before and the beginning of something new. Interim ministry helps a church end well, so it can begin anew. You have the end before you can begin!
- The “gap” mentioned in the previous paragraph is usually uncomfortable but is a wonderful time of transition and development. The gap can be a time for creativity, self-identification for the church, a time for renewal, and a time to help people adapt to new realities. People go through transition at different speeds; interim ministry allows everyone to work through the challenges of change.
- Interim ministry can help churches find new resources and strength during a ministerial change since most churches run a “transition deficit.”
- Interim ministry can help a church have “breathing room” as it seeks a new minister, so that the church has time to do an effective search.
- The length of interim ministries varies depending on the needs of the church. Some interim ministries may be no more than two months, but other times it may require up to six months to work through the ministry transition. In special cases, interim ministry may be extended even further.

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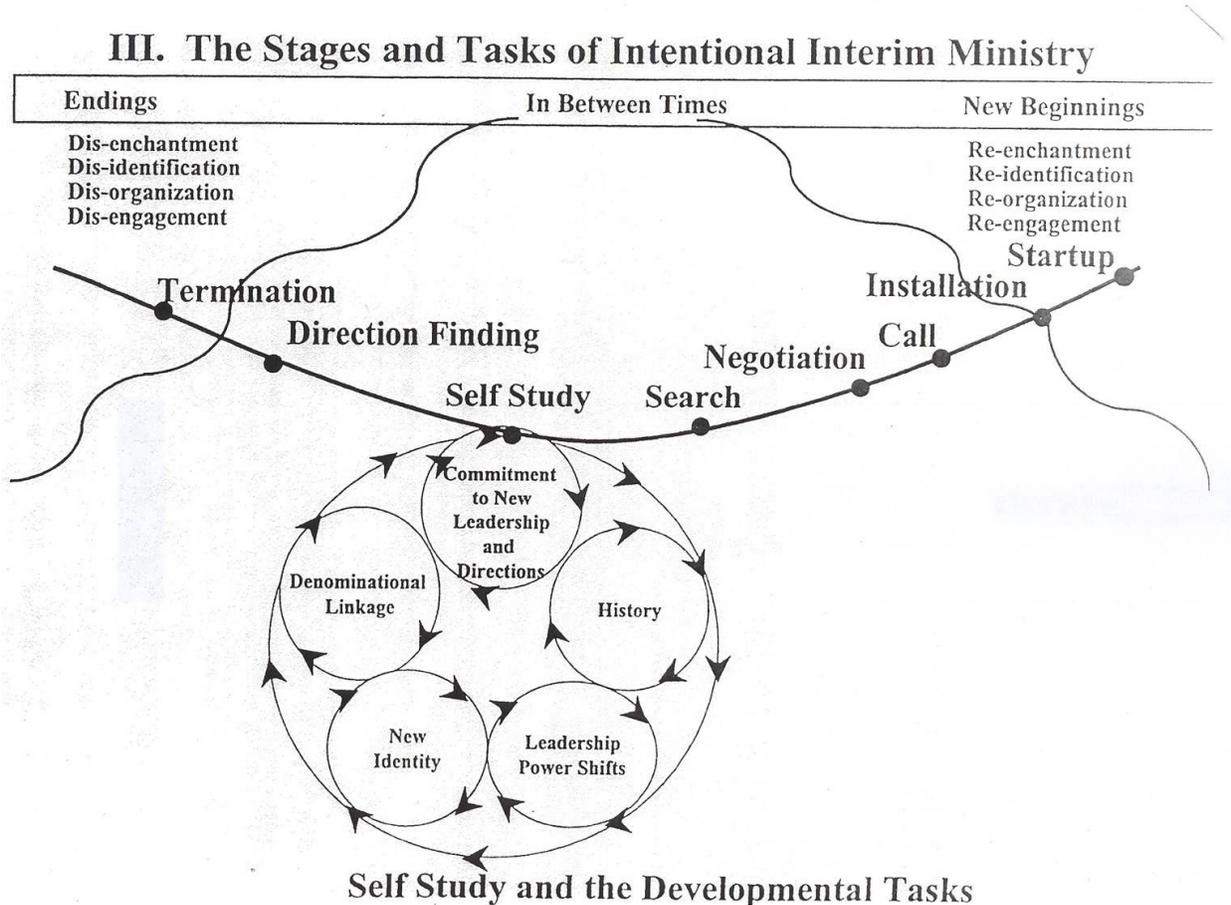
<sup>1</sup> In my own experience, I made ministry transitions in 2 weeks, 6 weeks, 6 weeks, and 4 weeks in my early ministry changes. When working agreements became more common to govern the minister-church relationship and transitions, I made transitions in 90 days, 90 days, and 60 days. As I prepare for retirement, we are working through an overlap transition which will cover about 5 months, but I have accumulated leave time which makes the actual overlapping work period closer to 3 months.

### **Eight Goals for Interim Ministry**

- Keep the church lively and involved, confident and active
- Resolve feelings of grief and/or guilt
- Reinforce and re-envision the work and ministry of the church
- Clarify the identity of the church and its mission
- Deal with any special needs of the church
- Emphasize fellowship and recommitment to one another
- Emphasize recommitment to the church
- Increase the potential for successful ministry in the next ministerial cycle

### **The Tasks of Interim Ministry**

The tasks of interim ministry have been variously defined. One excellent description of the endings, "gap" or in-between time, and new beginnings is in the chart below.



**My own description of the interim ministry tasks has five steps.**

Memory. This is a time to review the history of the church, the review former times of difficulty and healing. Memory helps make this a time of challenges and celebration.

Membership. This is a time to re-involve the member, making certain that they are assimilated and integrated into the work as new beginnings are anticipated.

Modulation. This word suggests that things must be adjusted. This is a time of reconnections, both in the vertical relationship with God and in horizontal relationships within the church and also to the community.

Mission. This is a time to re-identify so that a new vision of the purpose and direction of the church can provide the impetus for the next step.

Ministry Momentum. The final step in interim ministry is to establish a time of recommitment and a new vision for the future so that the new ministry begins with momentum.

### **Proposal**

I am available to visit a church interested in interim ministry to present a workshop or series of lessons to assist with understanding the interim task and possibilities. Depending upon the needs of the church and other factors such as distance, I can be available to do this over a 2-3 weekend period, either continuously present or with weekend visits.

Such a workshop or series is designed to build confidence in the future and to help the church understand the transition and the tasks which will make the next ministry more effective. It provides a time for consultation with the elders and church leaders about the future of the church.

The series helps the church to consider its best options and to answer important questions.

- How soon can we or should we hire a new minister?
- What kind of minister do we want or need?
- What are our best options during this interim period?

Generally, the ministry hiring process should begin as soon as possible after the departure of the previous minister, although some churches may find it desirable to delay the initiation of the hiring process due to internal factors. Interim ministry is a way to effectively fill the gap between the now and the then, but generally time is of the essence if a minister is to be in place within a reasonable time.