



Interim Ministry: Supply or Transitional Pastor

I. Introduction

Interim ministry is not new to the Mennonite constituency. We have used this term to describe pastors who have served congregations in a temporary capacity between longer term permanent pastorates. There are two types of interim ministry. One is short term and the pastor is called either a “supply pastor” or an “interim pastor”. The short term pastor typically provides preaching and on-going pastoral care, but does not engage the church and its leadership around issues of vision or congregational process. A congregation may choose this plan when there is a very brief time before the long term pastor is to arrive. Supply pastor works best if the congregation is in a healthy place.

The second type is a transitional pastor who comes for a year to two years. This pastor is trained to assist a congregation to make good transitions from one pastor to the next. **There are times when the congregation must stop and reflect on their attitudes, their behaviors, and their structures. It is a good time to make changes under the leadership of a trained transitional pastor. One of these important congregational moments is during the transition from one pastor to another.**

II. When is a transitional pastor most essential?

Some form of interim ministry can be helpful in almost every pastoral transition; however, there are some situations in which a longer-term transitional pastor is almost essential. Your area conference minister can help you determine what would be best for your congregation.

- A. In congregations that have experienced the ending of a long-term pastorate, a transitional pastor can assist the congregation in dealing with its grief over the loss of a pastor. The transitional pastor can help the congregation look at its history and how it deals with change. Then the congregation can begin to plan for new leadership by having a new vision and a new identity that is owned by the congregation.
- B. A transitional pastor can also assist a congregation when there has been conflict present which the church has not been able to resolve. Conflict that is not dealt with will make it difficult for a new pastor to have a good beginning or a successful ministry. The well-trained transitional pastor may help address conflict issues in a way so as to guide toward reconciliation and unity.
- C. A transitional pastor is almost essential following a significant congregational crisis such as the death of a current pastor or following the dismissal of a pastor for ethical and moral violations.

III. Goals for the Transitional Period

The Transitional Ministry Network has projected the following eight goals for the transitional pastor and a transitional congregation:

A. To maintain the viability of the church

The ongoing vital program that is expected of a lively congregation consists of pastoral duties plus the Christian activities of the laity. Continuing the needed programs already underway and efforts to help make them more meaningful are the responsibility of a transitional leader. (An exceptional case would be a congregation that is not viable and where the role of the transitional pastor is to help it close down. This may be determined before or during the transitional pastorate.)

B. To resolve feelings of grief and loss

Pastoral visitation and group meetings will involve personal, direct contact with individuals. Intentional expression of interest in feelings usually provides healing catharsis. Prayer can bring God's healing to the experience, and counsel can redirect energies to future endeavors.

C. To reinforce the ministry of the laity

Encouragement of participation and leadership by lay persons is vital. The transitional period is a particularly apt time to develop lay leadership. A member of the laity may accompany the pastor when home communion is administered. Many responsibilities in the church may be carried out by lay persons rather than by a pastor.

D. To clarify the mission of the church

Congregations need to be reminded that Christians are here to serve, not only to be served. The transitional pastor may be the voice of the larger Christian community at a time when the church is turned inward to its own needs. The minister teaches by example, by preaching, and by formal teaching.

E. To deal with special needs of the church

Every church is different. As a result of careful observation and discernment, the transitional will learn of specific problems in the congregation. Through knowledge of techniques in conflict management and tactful suggestions by the "outsider" (the disinterested person, the transitional minister and other assistants) beneficial changes may be effected.

F. To emphasize fellowship and reconciliation

Opportunities for informal socializing offer important settings for interaction across the congregation and between the congregation's sub-groups. Seeing one another outside formal reconciliation sessions can build trust and cooperation between conflicted individuals and groups.

G. To strengthen denominational ties

The transitional minister personally maintains a good relationship with the denomination and encourages the local church to participate in denomination-wide activities and program.

H. To increase the potential for a successful ministry by the next regular pastor

The transitional minister is future-oriented. The transitional minister is concerned with the coming of a new pastor and is helping to prepare the congregation for the arrival. In addition, he or she communicates to the new pastor any information that might be helpful.

IV. The Agreement

There should be a covenant of understanding between the area conference, the congregation and the transitional pastor. This covenant should define the issues that should be addressed. Usually it is helpful when the congregation has a consultant to assist them in defining the issues and make recommendations. Then the transitional pastor can assist the congregation in working at the recommendations. The covenant should also define the necessary skills and ministry expectations of the transitional pastor. The agreement should also note that the transitional pastor must not be considered for the future permanent pastor position.

V. Qualifications

Transitional ministry is a specialized area of interim ministry that many congregations are requesting.

- A. The transitional pastor should have previous pastoral experience and have a sense of call to this form of ministry. The person will need to have some flexibility and be able to move frequently.
- B. The transitional pastor should receive training to serve in this capacity. There are some training workshops sponsored by Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, as well as training programs offered by the Transitional Ministry Network.
- C. The transitional pastor should have training in conflict resolution, crisis intervention and an understanding of how to work with congregational systems. The pastor must be able to assist a congregation in working through grief, looking at their history, and working from feelings of hopelessness to a new identity and vision for the future.
- D. The transitional pastor will also need to preach, teach, and carry out the ministries of pastoral care and administration.