

In defense of the interim

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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An interim ministry position is a funny gig. The Interim is not *called* but *hired*. S/he is not installed, not permanent, and often not paid as much as the “permanent” (or “settled”) pastor. I knew early on that interim work is viewed as a second-tier career track when a guy at a nursing home said, “You’re a pretty good preacher. I’ll bet you could be a real minister.” I didn’t bother to tell him I’ve been a “real minister” for 25 years.

An interim minister is always learning new names, always learning to call it the “consistory” or the “council” or the “cabinet,” and always about to lose his/her job. We often lovingly compile data that our successors don’t pay attention to. We learn that we will not be able to change much about the churches we serve, and we have to sit on our hands and bite our tongues when it comes to being “change agents,” because there is only so much you can do in a year or two.

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood things about interims is that we are not “placeholders” who simply keep the congregation treading water until the new guy or gal comes along. We actually have a unique perspective as the outsider sent in to engender trust quickly and help a group of people do some hard soul-searching that they usually do not want to do. Sort of like a family counselor.

Interim ministry as a model has come under question recently. Some churches prefer a “succession” model where another member of the pastoral staff takes the senior pastor’s position. Some churches like to hire quickly and get by with pulpit supply in the meantime so they don’t lose momentum. There may be a place for these other models, but the one-to-two-year interim—tailored to helping a congregation re-examine its character and discern God’s direction—is still, I think, a good idea, especially in these times of rapid change. I like to see congregations ask interim questions like these:

How has the makeup of our congregation changed in the last five to ten years?

How have our community demographics changed?

What church programming has become outdated or ill-suited to who we are now?

Where is our revenue coming from, and where will it be coming from in five years?

What happens in our church when we try doing something new, or doing something old in a new way?

And the all-purpose transition question: **What is God leading us to do and be in this time and place?**

[Here's an article](#) by Tony Robinson that I've been passing around at my current interim assignment. I think it gets at why interim ministry is changing in character, but may be needed now more than ever.

I find interim work to be both humble (you won't make a big "mark") and courageous (you must say things no one else will say). I am lucky to have been mentored by some great interim ministers, like [this clergy couple](#). And so far, I've found it to be very, very *real* ministry.

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