

Interim Ministry: A Primer for Congregational Staff

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the purpose of interim ministry?

The interim period following the end of one relationship and preceding the beginning of another provides the breathing space during which a congregation can review its goals, assess its programs, consider the quality of its life in common, and “tune up” for a new era. The one- to two-year period it usually takes for a congregation to grow into and own its new identity, independent of both positive and negative feelings about the ministry that has come to an end, can be exciting, even transformative, when devoted to self-examination and institutional renewal – a palate cleanser, one might say.

How is interim ministry different from settled ministry?

There is no single “recipe” for interim ministry and, of course, each minister brings their unique strengths and style. But generally, in addition to carrying out customary ministerial duties, interim ministers help congregations explore five areas, called focus points:

- **HERITAGE**– Reviewing how the congregation has been shaped and formed.
- **MISSION**– Defining and redefining sense of purpose and direction
- **LEADERSHIP**– Reviewing member needs and the congregation’s ways of organizing and developing leadership
- **CONNECTIONS**– Discovering and nurturing the relationships a faith community builds outside of itself
- **FUTURE**– Preparing for the next era of leadership

Interim ministry is “systems” work. The interim minister is likely to be quite deliberate about how they join the system – and how they leave it as they prepare to conclude their service to the congregation. Since it is about the whole system, it is a team effort. Congregational openness and readiness for interim work greatly impacts how the interim minister and staff work together during this time.

Because interim ministers are intentionally temporary, they are well-positioned to shine light on difficult truths and to effect changes that help move a congregation toward greater health, readying them for a new ministry.

As a staff member, how can I support the interim process?

By seeking to understand it, you are already on a good path!

An interim minister strives to ensure that a congregation is poised for a successful search and a fruitful new ministry. With an eye toward the present and future health of the congregation, your interim minister wants to ascertain that staff members:

- Are mature, capable, and adaptable
- Are clear about their roles and responsibilities
- Have what they need to do their jobs well
- Have healthy relationships with the minister, staff colleagues, and congregation members
- Understand their identity as staff members and maintain appropriate professional boundaries

Exhibiting a spirit of curiosity and openness to change will help you thrive during the ministerial transition – and it will be great modeling, as staff members are tone-setters for congregants. Supportive staff teams are key to the success of the transitional period.

At their best, transitions provide wonderful opportunities for congregations to live into our aspirations of healthy shared ministries and welcoming, inclusive faith communities. As a staff member, you have an important role to play in this work.

I've heard that interim ministers try to "clean house" so the new settled minister can hire their own staff. Is this true?

In a word, no.

An interim minister would love nothing more than to enter a congregation where staff do their jobs well, are in healthy relationship with each other and the congregation, and demonstrate their openness to new ministerial leadership and expectations. Interim ministers have no desire to disrupt a strong staff system that is well-positioned for new ministerial leadership.

That said, interim ministers are likely to detect problems or weaknesses that went unnoticed or uncorrected during the previous ministry. This is a very natural result of a new leader stepping in with a fresh eye – a leader who begins by seeking out wisdom from lay leadership, staff, regional staff, the previous minister, and perhaps others. One of our interim ministers compares her work to that of a real estate agent walking through your house with you before you put it on the market – allowing you to see it more objectively, and helping you fix things that don't work quite right.

The interim period is a good time to address staff-related concerns so that they are resolved before the new settled minister arrives. This includes behavioral and performance issues among staff, as well as structural problems such as unclear job descriptions or unreasonable job scopes.

The interim minister, like any staff supervisor, can use a range of strategies to address concerns about staff. Firing a staff member is almost always a last resort.

But it does seem that ministerial transitions often lead to other staff changes. Why is that?

The interim period is a time for the whole congregational system to "practice" adapting to a different ministerial leadership style and new expectations. This can be exciting, energizing work – and hard work. It's very common for a variety of leadership shifts to take place as people respond to changes in the system. Longtime active lay leaders may decide to step back or shift roles, while others step up as they see new leadership opportunities emerge.

This is also an adjustment period for you, as staff, as you become accustomed to a new supervisory relationship and other shifts. Again, the mindset of practicing adaptation may be helpful and will ensure that you are poised for change once again when the settled minister arrives. You may feel newly invigorated by fresh challenges, grateful for certain changes while struggling with others, or even in discernment about whether you want to remain in your position. Indeed, sometimes staff ultimately decide that the time is right for them to move on. Unfortunately, sometimes a staff member may act out in some way – perhaps without realizing how or why their actions are inappropriate, failing to grasp the consequences for the congregation as a whole. The end result may be a negotiated departure.

If you keep in mind that a congregation is a system of interconnected programs and relationships, you can appreciate how one change may lead to others.

How does anti-racism, anti-oppression work intersect with interim ministries?

Considering matters of equity, diversity, and inclusion is a natural fit with interim work – part of the process of self-reflection and renewal.

Your congregation's unique history and culture, combined with the gifts and personalities of your congregants and staff, result in doing things in a certain way. Our congregations were founded on the principles of our country, those that center white, male, cisgender, able-bodied, neuro-normative voices. How your congregation operates has the potential to work better for some people than for others. Who feels a true sense of belonging? For whom is it easy to get things done? Whose voices are heard? How do formal policies, coupled with informal patterns, favor some individuals or identities over others?

In [Widening the Circle of Concern](#), the report from the Commission on Institutional Change, Unitarian Universalists (and therefore congregations) are being called in to widen the circle so voices that have been marginalized are centered. This is a time to open hearts, to live into our values, to explore norms, assumptions, and unconscious biases that are getting in the way of the truly inclusive welcome you strive to provide.

REFLECTION ON INTERIM MINISTRY AND STAFF RELATIONS

Rev. Joel Miller

I have arrived (usually) as the Interim Minister in August, just as staff returns from summer vacations. It's often been a rough spring for the congregation – the minister may have left suddenly, or has been such a presence that everyone knows that big change is ahead. Board, staff, members, even friends of the congregation are feeling anxious, perhaps afraid.

After I have keys and the alarm code, the first thing I do is schedule meetings with each staff member: office staff, educators, musicians, maintenance, special program staff, support staff, and, in a larger congregation, associate or assistant ministers. We all feel pretty vulnerable – I do, anyway. I've arrived to be the "Interim Minister," yet I don't know by myself how I can best serve the congregation. I am, however, very certain that I will need to be a good partner with each of you on staff as well as with the congregation's lay leadership. So I listen and collect from you all the wisdom I can.

After I've met everyone on the staff, we have a staff meeting. In every congregation I've served (all seven), I've found at staff meetings that there is confusion about how to best do our work. Sometimes we might even wonder what it is, exactly, we're supposed to be doing! Typically, we're soon talking together about how the Music Director hears constant complaints about too little or too much classical music in the service. The Religious Educator hears that the RE program is "too Christian," "too Humanist," and "too New Agey" – sometimes from the same person. The Office Administrator receives continual member-requests for new pages on a website with almost 200 pages, gets pressured for free use of building space by groups that have nothing to do with the congregation, and is expected to shop for committee potlucks.

Hopefully the staff learns to laugh when I say (for the millionth time after a year of staff meetings) that the only thing worse than complaints and crazy requests is no complaints or crazy requests. We on staff need each other as partners to do our ministries well – and together we can serve as an example of how the congregation can best partner with us. I ask a lot of questions about how things are done and encourage staff to let go of much-loved but ineffective practices. I'll suggest, and sometimes insist on, new ways of doing things. I rely on your patience and your openness as we explore different ways of being, doing, and leading.

By the time my Interim Ministry ends, I deeply hope that your congregation will have learned more effective ways of using your skills and talents, that you will feel both challenged and joyful in your work, and that you are excited about the next phase of your congregation's journey.

RESOURCES

In addition to this Primer, consider using one or more of these resources as a common read for staff.

[*In the Interim: Strategies for Interim Ministers and Congregations*](#), 2nd ed., Barbara Child & Keith Kron, Editors

[*Transitional Ministry Handbook*](#), UUA Transitions Office

[*Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*](#), William Bridges

[*Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference*](#), Roberta M. Gilbert

See case studies on pages 5 and 6.

CASE STUDIES

Any resemblance to actual congregations is purely on purpose. (But really, these are composite scenarios.)

Scenario 1

The Interim Minister arrives and discovers a Music Director who had a close working relationship with the settled minister of 20+ years, although technically the Music Director reported to the Board. The previous minister and the Music Director both enjoyed classical music. The interim minister requests more varied musical offerings but is met with an emphatic no. "That's not the kind of music I can do." And indeed, the interim minister discovers that the choir primarily sings only one type of music. There is no job description for the Music Director and, according to UUA salary guidelines, the Music Director is overpaid significantly.

Meanwhile, the interim minister feels that the Membership Director doesn't have enough hours to get done what needs to be done as expectations of the position have expanded. The congregational leadership drags their feet at the interim minister's request for help with a review of job descriptions and salaries for all staff. (Whether they would admit it or not, they recognize the potential for a bumpy road ahead on this project, given the informal power of the Music Director in the congregation.)

While the job review stalls, the Board does move forward with shifting staff supervision from the Board to the interim minister – an effort that had been named up front as a goal for the first year of the interim ministry. This shift goes very smoothly with the fairly new religious educator, who appreciates the increase in direct guidance and is enjoying a more collaborative approach to the Time for All Ages in worship. The Administrator and Membership Director adjust to the change and see how regular staff meetings are leading to improved communication and collaboration among the staff. But things go poorly with the Music Director, who engages minimally at staff meetings, misses scheduled supervision sessions, and speaks openly to congregants about waiting for the new settled minister so that things can get back to normal.

What would you do if you were in each person's shoes?

What are some ways that this scenario might play out?

Scenario 2

The Music Director (MD/they) and the Director of Religious Education (DRE/he) were both long-term employees who'd had good relationships with the retiring minister, so they were both somewhat nervous about the interim period and the changes ahead. The DRE picked up a copy of *In the Interim* (Child/Kron) and shared it with the MD. He also checked out the credentialing program and considered how it might be helpful if he were to move on, while the Music Director noticed themselves contemplating their professional "bucket list."

The Interim Minister (IM/she) knew that she was entering a system with strong, established staff. She invited the DRE and MD to lunch at General Assembly and listened to their stories about the church with curiosity. She expressed her hope that they would be a resource for her and for the congregation as it moved through the interim process. She was happy to hear that they'd done some reading about interim ministry and that they were expressing interest in understanding the process.

Soon after the IM began, she met with the whole staff and reviewed the interim tasks. The staff met regularly to check in and to learn about systems, adaptive leadership, and other resources for leading through change.

Some staff wondered why they needed all these meetings and chafed to get “back to work.” Others were intrigued and eager to see how this intentional study would help them as the interim time progressed.

The IM asked for some changes to the order of service because worship services were running long. These changes included shortening the Time for All Ages and eliminating one hymn. The DRE and the MD started to commiserate over coffee...but quickly checked themselves: at a recent staff meeting, they’d discussed the hazards of triangulation and committed to practicing direct, honest communication. So, while they were tempted to “unload” on one another, they agreed instead to talk to their respective professional organization Good Officers to help them figure out how to raise their concerns appropriately.

When the DRE went to talk to the IM about the Time for All Ages, he found himself choking up. Surprised by the DRE’s emotion, the IM gently noted that it must be hard to be out of touch with the former minister. The DRE admitted that he had been so focused on helping the congregation say good-bye well that he hadn’t acknowledged his own grief. This new recognition about himself helped the DRE put the order of service changes in perspective, and he and the minister had a constructive conversation.

The MD (they/them) was accustomed to being a pastoral presence for the choir. But this piece of their role took on an awkward dimension when choir members began using the break time during rehearsals to complain to them about new “rules” that the interim minister had put in place. Inwardly, the MD was sympathetic to some of the objections, but they simply acknowledged the choir members’ discomfort as part of the interim process and encouraged people to speak to the IM directly. Sometimes the MD was able to share a perspective that helped a congregant make sense of the changes.

As the staff got to know the IM better, they felt freer to tweak their long-established routines. The MD took a jazz improvisation class and began to expand the style of the musical offerings. The DRE began the credentialing program and found his studies of UU history deepened his sense of connection to the wider faith, which led to stronger UU identity content in the religious education program.

Congregational anxieties ebbed and flowed throughout the interim period, and challenges within the staff team arose upon occasion. Through the tensions and the resulting conversations, the staff came to understand the critical role they played in modeling openness, trust, and emotional health during a time of change.

Why do you think the DRE and MD were thinking about possible next career steps at the beginning of the interim ministry?

At what points in the story is there the potential for something to “go wrong”?

What would you do if you were the interim minister and you found out that a staff member had complained about one of your new “rules” to a congregant? To another staff member?

What would you do if you were a staff member who was being pressured by a congregant to talk to the interim minister about one of the new rules (because the congregant knew the interim minister would listen to you)?

The MD and the DRE both chose to engage in learning opportunities and to try out new program ideas – of their own volition – during the interim time. What motivated them?

Why do you think that interim ministers sometimes make changes or “rules” that are hard for the congregation (and/or the staff) to understand?