

Equipped to Serve Anew

Guidelines for Pastoral Transition in the Philadelphia Baptist Association

Now that Your Pastor is Leaving

There comes a time in the life of every Baptist congregation when a settled (permanent, “called”) pastor leaves and the search for a new pastor must begin. The time between settled pastors is called the “transition” or “interim” period. Baptist polity entrusts the responsibility for calling pastoral leaders with the congregation; as autonomous faith communities, we have both the freedom and the responsibility to do this important work. While this can be a very unsettling time for a congregation, it can also be a time of reflection, healing, envisioning, and preparation for the new pastoral leadership that will come. These guidelines set out the best practices for a fruitful and engaging transition period in the life of a congregation as it seeks to be faithful to its past and to God’s future.

This document offers direction and support to members of Philadelphia Baptist Association (PBA) churches as they navigate a pastoral transition. For more than 300 years, our Association has been accompanying churches in transition. Regardless of which official board or committee your congregation has charged to oversee this process, you are encouraged to use the resources found here to plan and implement a successful transition. Additional resources can be found by calling the Regional Executive Minister as well as exploring the ABCUSA website for transition ministry.¹

The transition or interim period can be a transformative season in the life of a congregation. No two congregations will chart the journey in the same way; we hope that by trusting the process outlined here, and honestly choosing what best fits your congregation’s reality, you will find yourself open to God’s Spirit in a new and empowering way.

Why Do We Need a Transition?

Some congregations assume that there will be an interlude between settled pastors but not all have this practice; some wonder why a transition is necessary at all! Wouldn’t it be more productive and less disruptive to move from one settled pastor to the next? While this is tradition in some congregations, and a policy in some denominations, the interim period can be very beneficial to both the congregation and the new pastor who will be called when this period is complete.

Experts in the area of transition ministry (Mead², Nicholson³, Keydel⁴) agree on **five general focus areas** for a congregation during the interim period:

1. Celebrating Our Heritage: Where We Come From

- Recalls the defining stories of a congregation's past
- Explores the past as a key to shared traditions, meaning and values
- Allows congregations to acknowledge, grieve and heal as necessary to move into the future
- *Without a transition*, patterns, traditions and communal stories go unevaluated; grief and healing, if necessary, are unresolved, making new direction/attachments more difficult

2. Mission and Core Values: Who We Are

- Identifies current congregational values in order to articulate call and purpose (What's important to us? What are we called to do and be?)
- Assesses the demographics of age, gender, race/ethnicity, orientation, wealth, resources (inside and outside the church), structural and spiritual life as starting points for envisioning new ministry (Who we are)
- Informs the congregation about themselves in order to prepare for thinking about what is needed in a new pastoral leader (What will we need?)
- *Without a transition*, congregations presume self-awareness, operating on assumption, not fact; they reflect the past, not the present or future

3. Leadership

- Identifies congregational leaders and how they function within the changing congregational system
- Reviews leadership and organizational needs and resources
- Explores new styles of leadership as personal and programmatic experiments, adjustments, and discovery occurs
- *Without a transition*, systems evaluation doesn't happen, skills may not match needs, old leaders remain entrenched, and new leaders have difficulty gaining access to leadership positions and finding support to serve

4. Connections: Relationships Beyond Ourselves

- Connects congregations with Regional and National denominational offices for support (i.e. American Baptist Churches USA, Philadelphia Baptist Association, etc.)
- Utilizes resources to guide the transition period and equip leaders in the search process with the level of denominational support they require
- Updates communication/connecting tools (technology and communication processes, websites/web pages, social media usage, etc.)
- Recognizes local/regional relationships (i.e. organizations, agencies, schools, other congregations with whom the congregation shares ministry)
- *Without a transition*, denominational and other relationships remain static and resources for growth and change can be overlooked

5. Envisioning the Future

- Encourages congregations to live out their core values following the direction of God's Spirit
- Invites experiments with new ministries allowing churches to call leaders with gifts to match their vision for the future
- *Without a transition*, ministry assessment is unlikely; new ideas are pushed aside in an effort to maintain the past

Dare to see the transition period as an opportunity for reflection, growth and opportunity; prepare yourself for a strong, vital relationship with your new pastor!

Defining the Roles of Temporary Pastors

There are a variety of terms used to describe the person and role of the temporary (not settled, not "permanent") pastor; below are the most common used in American Baptist life. You are encouraged to read and understand the distinctions of each and then **chose the model that best fits your congregation** and its goals for this season in the life of your church.

Pulpit Supply or Supply Pastor

- Definition: A pastor who preaches and leads worship on a week-to-week basis
- Best used to bridge the gap between the out-going pastor and the start of a temporary pastoral leader and again before the new settled pastor begins
- Gives flexibility, but does not provide for necessary pastoral care for the congregation or pastoral leadership of boards/committees

Interim Pastor

- Definition: A pastor who serves the congregation during the transition time "Interim" means "provisional" and is synonymous with someone who is filling a gap, a caretaker
- Preaches and leads weekly Sunday worship and attends to basic pastoral needs of the congregation
- Additional responsibilities, including worship services/bible studies as well as more extensive pastoral care (i.e. visitation, counseling, meetings) as assigned
- Can be full or part time; responsibilities negotiated in an agreed upon contract
- Establishes continuity and relationships but not responsible for leading significant reflection/change.

Transitional Pastor/Intentional Interim Pastor

- Definition: Transitional/Intentional Interim pastors view their work not simply as "filling the gap" between settled pastors (see "Interim Pastor") but as intentionally moving congregations forward in ministry
- Skill sets include enabling healthy reflection, conflict transformation, and envisioning

- Preaches, provides pastoral care and engages the congregation in intentional reflection, assessment and envisioning in preparation for a settled pastor
- Can be full or part time; responsibilities negotiated in an agreed upon contract

Minister-At-Large (MAL)

- Definition: Retired pastors matched by American Baptist Churches, USA with congregations seeking temporary leadership
- The Regional Executive can facilitate a relationship between a congregation and the MAL program
- Maybe trained as an interim or as a transitional pastor
- Can be full or part time; responsibilities negotiated in an agreed upon contract
- Because these pastors are not usually local, provision for housing is often required

Boundary Setting During the Transitional Period

Healthy relationships are guided by appropriate emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual boundaries that protect both congregations and pastors as each seeks to live with integrity.

- The Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders in American Baptist Churches⁵ directs American Baptist clergy in setting and maintaining boundaries that encourage personal and professional health
- Congregations can support this commitment to right relationship by establishing and maintaining their own healthy boundaries, especially during the interim period

Boundaries in Relationship to the Temporary Pastor

A foundational principle in transitional ministry agreed upon by experts and all major denominations is that the temporary pastor may *not* be a candidate for the settled pastoral position.

There are several factors for *why* this prohibition is maintained. Hiring the temporary pastor as the settled pastor:

- **Inhibits objectivity** in leading the congregation through the necessary work of the transformation process
- **Creates conflict** (sometimes hidden) in the congregation
- **Provides an unfair advantage** over other qualified candidates
- **Serves short terms goals** (reducing congregational anxiety, shortening the search process) but does a **disservice to the intentionality** of a longer search process
- **Prevents** the congregation from fully exploring its past, coming to grips with the present reality and broadly imagining the future.
- **Violates the boundaries and ethics of both the clergy and congregation**

You should **expect** that an experienced, respected temporary pastor will gain the affection of the congregation so much so that some wish to call the temporary pastor as the settled pastor! Neither the temporary pastor nor the congregation should give in to this impulse. **Calling the temporary pastor hijacks the transformative work of the transition and shortcuts the Pastoral Search process.**

Your contract with your temporary pastor should include a clear statement that **“the temporary pastor will not be a candidate for the installed position.”** Both the clergy and the congregation should enter into this agreement and communicate it at the outset (and repeatedly as necessary) to the congregation.

Boundaries in Relationship to the Previous Pastor

In addition to the boundaries between the temporary leader and the congregation, during the transition period it is important that both pastoral leader and the congregation understand and **maintain appropriate boundaries between themselves and the previous pastor.** While the Clergy Code of Ethics sets clear boundaries on the previous pastor, it is also the responsibility of both the temporary pastor and the congregation to understand and maintain those boundaries so that healthy closure and new relationships can occur. To support this effort:

- Both the previous pastor and the temporary pastor should have **no contact with the congregation for at least one year after the call of the *new settled pastor*.**⁶ This gives the congregation time to complete closure with the pastors who have departed and enter into a new relationship with the newly called settled pastor
- Exceptions to this understanding during the transition period should be negotiated by the temporary pastor and subject to their discretion
- Exceptions to this understanding after the arrival of a settled pastor should be negotiated between the new settled pastor and any previously called clergy who wish to remain in the congregation (i.e. Pastor Emeritus)

Making Choices: What Does Our Congregation Need?

Deciding what kind of pastoral leader your congregation needs during a transition period is the first of several important decisions necessary for a positive experience. Carefully consider the following:

Choosing the Temporary (not Settled) Pastor

- Decide who will be responsible for choosing the temporary pastor; your congregations by laws, covenant, or constitution may inform this decision
- Consider the best direction for your congregation: choosing the temporary pastor may become the task of the official board, the Diaconate, or the Pastoral

Relations Committee; when the Pastoral Search Committee is tasked with this, the process is delayed until that committee is constituted

- Give priority to finding the temporary pastor; with a temporary pastor in place, the congregation is equipped to carry out its ministry and begin to find a settled pastor

Assessing Congregational Needs

Each congregation is unique, and each pastoral leave-taking contains its own set of circumstances; the conditions under which the pastor leaves (i.e. retirement, relocation, dismissal, etc.) and the congregation's response to that leaving makes assessing pastoral needs crucial. Identifying the need allows you to meet it.

- Before you chose a temporary pastor ask, "What do we need most during this interim period?"
- Consider how the congregation feels about the prior pastor's leave-taking; there are important differences between a beloved pastor retiring or moving on (leaving feelings of gratitude/grief) and a contentious, conflicted pastoral relationship ending (leaving feelings of hurt/anger/regret). You will need skills in a temporary pastor to guide the congregation through the process of moving ahead.
 - If your congregation is generally without conflict, is engaged in ministry relevant to its members and community, and is equipped to carry out that ministry during the transitional period, you could be best served hiring an **interim pastor**
 - If your congregation finds itself in a changing ministry context, or not effectively engaged in its neighborhood, or lacking vision, you could be best served with a **transitional pastor** with skills that include, but are not limited to, envisioning and organizational development
 - If your congregation is experiencing conflict, or has not had a pastoral leadership change in many years, or is struggling financially, you could be best served with a **transitional pastor** with skills that include, but are not limited to, conflict transformation, grief work, organizational development and discernment
- A brief, but thoughtful assessment will enable you to choose someone who can best prepare your congregation for the future

An in-depth congregational self-assessment is an essential starting point for Pastoral Search Committees in the process of finding a new pastor. This assessment should consider congregation size and vitality, financial status, available resources (human--clergy and lay, property, talents/giftedness), specific challenges (i.e. conflict, misconduct, congregational division) and potential for newness. Resources are available from the Philadelphia Baptist Association, and the Transitional Ministry Network to facilitate this process. They are detailed in "Calling an American Baptist Pastor," obtained from PBA.

Characteristics to Look for in a Temporary Pastor

Roger Nicholson, in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministers*, outlines the qualities of a successful temporary leader, and understands those who possess these traits as called to this particular, specialized ministry. The temporary pastor should be someone who is:

- An experienced pastoral leader with a well-developed sense of personal as well as pastoral identity;
- Flexible and adaptable, especially in the presence of varying theologies, congregational life and history, denominational relationships, family and lifestyles choices
- Healthy spiritually, socially, emotionally, physically and psychologically
- Able to live with and serve in a situation of uncertainty without anxiety
- Able to self-manage time, energy, resources, support, rest
- Knowledgeable in the normal, developmental tasks of the transitional period in congregational life

Skills and knowledge that add to the temporary pastor's resources to assist congregations include, but are not limited to:

- Conflict transformation
- Systems theory
- Organizational development
- Crisis intervention

Remember that the interim period is a potentially transformative time in the life of a congregation; a called, skilled pastoral leader experienced in transition ministries can maximize results.

Sources for Pastoral Leadership for the Transition Period and Beyond

In American Baptist life, autonomous congregations chose and call their own pastors.

- The American Baptist Profile System is an extensive tool connecting congregations with potential pastoral leaders; congregations are encouraged to utilize this service
- The manual "Calling an American Baptist Minister" developed by ABCUSA and available from our Regional Staff, guides and supports congregations seeking pastoral leadership, offering the collective wisdom of leaders and congregations in the work of the search process
- Congregations can benefit from the expertise of Regional Staff during the transition period by contacting the office and requesting support
- Congregations are free to consider recommendations made by departing pastoral leaders as part of the exiting process; these observations/ recommendations may be included in the discernment process entirely at the congregation's discretion

- Congregations who do the work of the interim period will be best equipped to conduct a thoughtful pastoral search, matching congregational leadership needs to qualified candidates

Relationship Between Current Staff and the Temporary Pastor

The role and responsibilities of the temporary pastor is specialized; this person is trained to engage the congregation in the five areas necessary for a successful transition (see page two)

- Relationship to staff members should be negotiated in advance, with the understanding that the temporary pastor is the designated leader in the area of pastoral leadership and care
- While in most cases, current congregational staff members continue their responsibilities during an interim period, this can be a time to re-evaluate the roles, responsibilities and contracts of all staff persons and make changes as necessary to support the congregation's vision and future goals. Adjustments in administrative support in preparation for future work is also appropriate and should be enacted. An experienced temporary pastor will be able to help a congregation make these assessments

Creating A Contract

Creating a contract between the congregation and whichever kind of temporary pastoral leader you choose is an important step.

- The process clarifies expectations for both the congregation and the pastoral leader, giving each an appropriate sense of security and authority
- Sample contracts can be provided by the Regional Office and adjusted to suit each particular congregation's needs
- A one-year contract, with provision for adjustment and renewal, offers flexibility for both the congregation and the pastoral leader
- All contracts should include an agreement that the temporary pastor is not eligible to become the settled pastor (See more on this page 4)

Living into the Relationship

Calling a new pastoral leader, even a temporary one, requires living into a new relationship with that person, as individuals and as a congregation. Consider these things as you begin to do so:

Responsibilities of the Temporary Pastor

The specific responsibilities of the temporary pastor should be outlined in a written contract signed by both the interim and the appropriate congregational representatives. Areas of responsibility should include:

- **Preaching, pastoral care, and support** of the on-going ministry of the congregation is the primary focus of temporary pastor
- **Expectations for visitation** (i.e. crisis, potential members, homebound/institutionalized) and **education** (i.e. bible study, adult/youth education) should be negotiated
- **Administration** of staff, boards, or committees as negotiated with the congregation. The temporary pastor should have a board or committee to relate to directly for feedback/to express concerns
- **Maintaining healthy boundaries.** This includes setting and maintaining appropriate limits on relationships, time and information
- **Additional ministries/programmatic work** typically done by the settled pastor need to be evaluated and negotiated for the interim period. Decisions about what can and should be done by the temporary pastor will be informed by the number of hours contracted to work each week

Responsibilities of the Leadership/Congregation

As a new relationship is formed between the congregation and the temporary pastor, congregational leaders are responsible for:

- **Establishing a contractual agreement** between the congregation and the temporary pastor that defines the scope and details of the interim position. The contract should include:
 1. Number of hours expected each week
 2. Tasks required
 3. Salary package, including but not limited to salary/housing allowance, social security offset, retirement, local travel expenses, vacation, additional benefits
 4. A one-year, renewable provision, including a way for either party to terminate the agreement

Sample contracts are available from the Regional Office
- **Communicating the terms of the contract** with the congregation in order to establish appropriate expectations. Congregational leaders should handle questions about the negotiations and subsequent agreement
- **Maintaining appropriate boundaries** in relation to expectations of the temporary pastor. Delegate some tasks normally done by the settled pastor to other individuals/boards/committees in order to adjust to the limits of the temporary pastor's time and focus
- **Creating space in worship and in the programmatic life** of the congregation for the five areas of transitional ministry (celebrating our heritage, mission and core values, leadership, connections, and envisioning the future; see pages 2-3)
- **Generating and supporting willingness** within the congregation to address areas of specific concern/need identified by the temporary pastor. These might include, but are not limited to, conflict resolution, systemic dysfunction, boundary issues, and encouraging healthy leaders
- **Reminding the congregation** that the temporary pastor is not a candidate for the settled pastor's position. (See page 4)

- **Communicating with the Region Office** to share information and updates on congregational life and to strengthen relationships

Responsibilities of the Philadelphia Baptist Association

The PBA is eager to support each congregation during their transition between settled pastors. The Regional Office has responsibility for:

- **Educating congregations** about the resources available to them after the loss of their settled pastor. This includes providing a list of possible candidates for supply or temporary pastoral ministry
- **Introducing the Pastoral Search Committee** to the ABCUSA search process and accompanying them in a manner they determine appropriate as they seek new pastoral leadership
- **Providing sample transitional ministry contracts**, as well as current information regarding salary guidelines, benefit options and answering questions
- **Maintaining relationship** with the congregation during the transition

Welcoming and Leave-Taking with the Temporary Pastor

Welcome and introduce the congregation to the temporary pastor in order to establish support and authority for their leadership. Once the temporary pastor has been hired and a contract signed, you will want to introduce them to the congregation during worship, preceded or followed by an opportunity for people to greet and welcome the new pastoral leader.

- Creating a ritual in which the temporary pastor's role and responsibilities are outlined and the congregation's acceptance of such is affirmed is a meaningful way to begin your relationship
- This could take the form of a participatory litany, laying on hands with prayer, a formal commissioning, or the mutual signing of an agreement, to suggest a few
- This relationship should be highlighted for the congregation again if/when the contract with the temporary pastor is renewed

Ending your relationship with the temporary pastor is an important step and just as welcoming took the form of a ritual in worship, so might the leave-taking.

- On the last Sunday of the temporary pastor's service to the congregation, a litany of release of responsibilities is appropriate and moves the congregation's expectations for pastoral care from the temporary pastor to the incoming settled pastor
- Often the congregation expresses its gratitude with a reception that allows the congregation to say thank you and good-bye

The Time Between

- When the transition period is over, it is best if the temporary pastor leaves the congregation 2-4 weeks before the new settled pastor is to begin

- This allows the congregation to leave behind the interim relationship and turn their attention to fully preparing for engagement with their new pastor
- During this time, supply pastors can be used to lead worship and meet immediate pastoral needs

Preparing for a New Pastor

Congregations who have done the work of transition well are eager and excited to welcome a new settled pastor! You can prepare for this pastor in a number of ways:

- **Remind yourselves** of things you have learned individually and as a congregation during the interim period by providing an opportunity to share them with each other. Do this in small groups, board meetings, during a fellowship time or as part of a worship service. Celebrating the gifts of the interim season is a joyous and important occasion
- **Prepare your space** to welcome the new pastor
 1. Clean out the pastoral office
 2. Do necessary updates to paint, furniture, and infrastructure (internet, telephone, etc.) Ideally you will do this with the input of the new pastor so that they will feel valued and included in the preparations
- **Gather expressions of hospitality**, creating a basket or file of all the things a newcomer might need/want to know about your particular community. It can be great fun for the congregation to collect
 1. Menus from favorite restaurants
 2. Recommendations for local service providers
 3. Coupons/passes for community events
 4. Subscriptions to local newspapers
 5. Websites for local organizations that are appropriate for the new pastor/pastoral family. This compilation can be presented to your new pastor on the first Sunday of service as a welcoming to your church family and community
- **Update the Regional Office** on the date of your new pastor's arrival and first Sunday so that the Region might join you in welcoming your pastor. The Regional Executive will want to meet and orient your pastor to American Baptist life and resources in our area

The Transitional Journey: Equipped to Serve Anew

The goal of the interim period is to open your congregation to God's transforming Spirit as you prepare for new pastoral leadership. Your willingness to engage the process and to trust God's guidance through the leadership of a prepared temporary pastor confirms your desire to do all you can do to become all God wants you to be.

The Philadelphia Baptist Association and its staff are ready and willing to serve you in this endeavor. Each church is unique, each interim different, yet the transformative power of God can be at work in all.

¹ <http://www.abc-usa.org/transitionministries/>

² Mead, Loren. *A Change of Pastors...And How it Affects Change in The Congregation*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005.

³ Nicholson, Roger. *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*. Herndon, VA. The Alban Institute, 1998.

⁴ Keydel, John. "Focus Points and the Work of the Congregation," *Transition Ministry Today: Successful Strategies for Churches and Pastors*. Ed by Norman Bebdroth, The Alban Institute, 2015.

⁵ (<https://ministerscouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/CodeofEthicsEng2010correction.pdf>)

⁶ The Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches to which all ABCUSA clergy subscribe reads, "I will, upon my resignation or retirement, sever my ministerial leadership relations with my former constituents, and will not make ministerial contacts in the field of another ministerial leader without his/her request and/or consent."
(<https://ministerscouncil.com/resources/code-of-ethics-and-guide/>)