

## The Interim Season of Ministry

There are generally two contexts in which a congregation will undertake a Mission Study.

### *Ongoing Renewal*

Just as regular check-ups are essential to monitoring and maintaining one's health, a healthy church makes a point of regularly assessing its own health.<sup>1</sup> The Mission Study is designed specifically for this purpose, i.e., to help guide a congregation through its own self-assessment. When performed regularly (e.g., every 5-6 years), it can readily build on previous studies. When the interval is longer, a Mission Study will require a more substantial investment of time, prayer, and effort.



**Consider tool maintenance for the woodworker. They regularly sharpen, true, lubricate their tools and check them for square. They do this not only before beginning a new project, but regularly throughout the process. If they don't attend to this important aspect of their craft, their tools will soon become less effective (and more dangerous), their work will take longer and require more effort, and their project will run a greater risk of being damaged. A skilled woodworker willingly invests time and effort into these activities because they know that if they don't, their performance will invariably suffer.**

### *As Part of an Interim Season*

When a congregation's pastor departs, the Mission Study can be a critical ingredient during the subsequent Interim Season. Unfortunately, it is often short-changed by Sessions and congregations who are anxious to call "the next pastor." A fruitful, faithful, and profitable Mission Study during this critical time requires that the Session exercise leadership in specific areas.

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## Understanding and Expectations of the Interim

In past years, Interim pastors were expected simply to “maintain course” until the congregation called its next pastor. Over time, however, it became apparent that more was needed. People and neighborhoods change and grow (or decline) over time. When interim pastors simply maintained the status quo, the subsequent called pastor often encountered difficulty and struggled under the burden of leading change. Not infrequently, such pastors ended up leaving after only 2-3 years – a phenomenon that soon came to be known as the “unintentional interim.” Interim training today is different. Interim pastors now are trained to help a congregation re-assess itself – its identity, its location, and its calling – so that its MIF faithfully reflects God’s call upon the church today, and not the congregation’s nostalgic ideals of the past.

One of the most important factors affecting an interim period is *managing expectations*. Many congregations today treat the Interim season (and pastor) as a hoop to jump through before they can call a “real” pastor. The unfortunate consequences of this approach include:

- By devaluing the process, they place themselves in a position where they are disinclined to learn or to grow
- They make the next pastor’s task both more difficult and more risky by not fully engaging the interim process
- They are less motivated to give time and energy to the Mission Study. Consequently, it becomes more of a burden than an opportunity for learning, it is less valuable to the PNC in writing the church’s MIF, and it is less likely to be useful to the next pastor.

On the other hand, a congregation beginning an Interim Season is much better positioned when it understands that:

- The Interim Season is a season for the church to deliberately reflect, pray, and discern afresh, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, its identity and God’s mission for today and the future. It serves no one to rush this season.
- The Interim pastor is indeed a “real” pastor. In fact, the interim has all the qualifications of a pastor, **plus** the training to do interim work. It behooves the congregation to take full advantage of this resource.
- A thorough and well-executed Mission Study will serve not only the congregation, but also the next pastor. A well-written report can be an invaluable resource for

understanding the congregation's past, and a solid foundation for moving forward with faith and understanding.

Finally, faithful engagement in the interim season does not hinder the ministry of the church in any way. People sometimes feel that the Interim Season somehow delays or pauses the forward progress of the church. Such an attitude sees the Interim Season as an add-on, or an appendage. The truth is that, for most churches, the Interim Season is as integral to good church health as physical therapy is to patients recovering from surgery. In both instances, one's circumstances have changed significantly. We all know that the more faithful we are in doing PT, the better equipped we will be to live in our new situation. At the same time, we know that if we try to shortcut our therapy, our bodies will pay a price (see also the box on the previous page on tool maintenance for the woodworker.)

**The Mission Study** is a structured and thorough means of engaging the Interim Season faithfully. It is not sufficient in itself; during this season the Session should also engage the congregation in directed prayer, reading, and/or discussions, which the Interim pastor is trained to help you with. The Interim pastor will also address dynamics specific to your church, e.g., a division, a tragedy, the "end of an era," etc.

The Session's role and responsibility during this Interim Season cannot be overstressed. In many respects, the Interim Pastor is an outsider. They likely do not know the departing pastor, nor have they experienced the congregation's recent history. They will bring unfamiliar suggestions and changes, and our natural instinct (particularly as Presbyterians) is to resist change. In order for the Interim Season to be fruitful and well-received, and to ensure maximum congregational participation in the Mission Study, the Session needs to visibly, positively, and frequently remind the congregation why this season and the Mission Study are important, and how they will help bring the congregation fully into the present. While their voices and input are important, the ultimate task is not to pursue what the congregation wants, but to discern and follow God's will.