What Is a Transitional Pastor, and Why Use One?

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*"Our pastor of fifteen years is retiring, and we need help preparing for a new pastor."*

*"Our pastor left us under difficult circumstances. We are hurting and need help."*

*"We can't seem to keep a pastor longer than two or three years. "We want to find out why and what we can do to keep a pastor longer."*

The stories are similar, but the needs are the same.

The transition between pastors

Churches transitioning from the leadership of one pastor to another often need help. The average time a church spends without a pastor is between 6 and 18 months. So much can happen during that time that could affect the church either positively or negatively. Whenever a church is without a senior pastor, several options exist for filling the leadership role that has been vacated by the former pastor.

A church can choose to let staff members fill the pulpit. However, the preaching ability of the staff may not always be what the church body expects.

A church can choose to schedule multiple preachers to fill the pulpit. The positive side is the opportunity to hear a number of different preachers. On the downside, the congregation isn't able to develop a relationship with the speaker on an ongoing basis.

Many churches choose to secure an interim pastor. Often it is a local retired pastor. The interim is able to fill the pulpit and assist the search committee in their process of searching for a new pastor. The skill set, experience, and expertise of the interim pastor will determine if he can lead the church through a helpful and healthy process to prepare for the next pastor.

A better option?

A better option for most churches is a transitional pastor. A transitional pastor has been trained to help the church stay focused on its mission and prepare them for more effective ministry under the leadership of a new pastor.

Some churches without pastors have smooth transitions because of the effective ministry of the former pastor. These churches often need help in dealing with grief resulting from the loss of a helpful and trusted pastor, overcoming fear that accompanies the uncertainties of change, or developing trust in a new pastor who has personality and style different from those of the former pastor.

Other churches have rough transitions because the previous pastor left behind damaged relationships and trust.

Some churches have crisis transitions because of the circumstances surrounding the previous pastor's departure. A variety of circumstances can render church leaders spiritually unprepared to guide the church through emotional healing and preparation for a new pastor.

Churches going through the transition between pastors may be well served by the ministry of a transitional pastor who can make the transition a time of a new beginning for the church. Many churches without pastors need transitional pastors with experience, training, and ministry gifts that assure high-quality transitional leadership. Transitional pastors are prepared to lead churches through smooth transitions, rough transitions, and crisis transitions. They may serve effectively as preacher, pastor, and consultant.

What is a transitional pastor?

A transitional pastor differs from an interim pastor. The role of the interim pastor is often viewed simply as someone who will preach when a church is without a pastor. A transitional pastor does more than simply "fill the pulpit."

The transitional pastor ministry is a guided process that prepares the congregation to receive a new pastor. The transitional pastor process is a proven path that builds unity, heals hurts, promotes fellowship, and focuses on the mission of the church.

Objectives and goals of transitional pastor ministry

The focus of the transitional pastor ministry is to bring transformation to churches' ministries and members. The goal is three-fold.

1. Lead people to become more like Christ.
2. Lead churches to act more like the body of Christ.
3. Lead communities to reflect more of the kingdom of God.

The qualifications of a transitional pastor

Can't just any interim pastor serve as a transitional pastor? Transitional pastors have been trained in this process and for the purpose of preparing the church for the ministry of the new pastor. Transitional pastors are to be experienced pastors who are capable in the pulpit and have effective relationship skills. They have the leadership skills to lead the church staff and lay leaders in the direction they should go in order to be ready for the arrival of the new pastor.

In many cases, they are able to deal with problems in the church body, so that when the newly called pastor arrives, he doesn't have to deal with them. Those problems might include confronting church conflict, making a difficult change, organizing a ministry structure, strengthening the church's stewardship, and more.

Finding a qualified and proven transitional pastor

LifeWay Christian Resources partners with several of the Baptist State Conventions to assist churches by enlisting, training, and providing resources for transitional pastors to serve during the period between pastors. For more information on how to secure a transitional pastor, contact your State Convention Pastoral Ministries area or LifeWay Pastoral Ministries at dan.garland@lifeway.com.

Compensation and expectations

The transitional pastor will develop a covenant agreement with the church in which he will set a schedule of office hours and ministry times for the church. He and the church will agree on a salary that is usually a percentage of the previous pastor's salary package determined by the amount of time involved leading the church through the time of transition. In the covenant agreement, he will state that he will not be considered for the position of senior pastor.

By agreeing to a covenant with a clearly defined job description, schedule, salary, time limits, and agreement for non-consideration, he enables the search committee to be able to proceed without worry about someone causing division in their church. He also is able to provide strategic leadership to the congregation during this time of transition and hopefully gain momentum for the future.

An overview of the process

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| 8 weeks | Preparing to lead through the stages of transition |
| 4 weeks | Stage 1: Viewing the church's history through the eyes of Christ |
| 4 weeks | Stage 2: Assessing the church's current reality |
| 4 weeks | Stage 3: Affirming biblical principles for church growth |
| 4 weeks | Stage 4: Focusing on spiritual transformation |
| 4 weeks | Stage 5: Establishing church practice |
| 8 weeks | Stage 6: Examining the mission of the church and developing a mission statement |
| Open | Stage 7: Finding a pastor to lead in fulfilling God's future for the church |
| Open | Stage 8: Helping the pastor get a good start in the church and community |

The transitional pastor facilitates spiritual transformation by leading a process with the following outcomes and objectives in mind.

* The church learns from past experiences, frees themselves from hindering traditions, and replaces discord with harmony.
* The church develops more effective church practices.
* The church, if it is experiencing decline or a growth plateau, gains insights into where they are, how they got there, and how to move forward in faith.
* The church grows in its understanding of pastoral ministry and in appreciation of pastors and their families.
* Church members discover and celebrate their spiritual gifts and passions.
* More members become personally involved in the church's ministries.
* Energy previously spent dealing with conflict issues will be redirected to expanded ministries.
* A longer tenure for the next pastor.
* Increased ministry effectiveness.
* Clarification of the church's mission.
* Development of an effective mission statement as a process for disciple making.
* Enhanced pastor-church relationships, improving the church's image in the community and encouraging more people to seek spiritual guidance from the church.

Regardless of age, size, or location, churches will benefit from wise counsel and experienced leadership through the stages of transition between the end of one pastor's ministry and the beginning of another's. That is the work of a transitional pastor.