

APPENDIX

INTERIM MINISTRY

(Prepared by Rev Eddie Germiquet based on an article by Ds Helen Dekker-Keller and discussions with Ds Howard Du Toit and the Ministerial Marriage Committee)

In considering the forces that impact of the well being and health of a Minister the **Ministerial Marriage Committee** together with the **Ministry Committee** have identified the period of vacancy between two ministries as a critical time in the life of a congregation. Although it may appear odd to consider the well being of a minister at the point when the congregation is experiencing a ministerial vacancy, it is nevertheless what happens in the life of the congregation during the vacancy that will have a direct impact on the wellbeing of the new minister when he/she is Inducted. Greater care and attention to this period of transition would contribute greatly to a more successful and conflict free ministry that follows.

INTERIM PERIOD IN A CONGREGATION

Interim time means the time between two called ministers. It is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the chapter of the congregation's history just concluded and to seek to understand where God is calling it to go in the future. This is the time to create an understanding for the future through a shared vision. A vision is a picture of the future, it describes the congregation as it will appear in 10 to 20 years depending on how far ahead one is looking. In these days of rapid change, visions often describe short time horizons, for example 3 to 5 years.

Many people are apprehensive about knowingly entering a period of change. Generally people prefer the security of the well known. Particularly in the church, during the vacancy of a minister, one has to be mindful of not simply preserving the status quo. Change is growth; change is healing and change is challenge! The early Christians were described in Acts with the dynamic name: "The Followers of the Way" (Acts 22:4). Primarily: God is action, God describes Self using a verb: to be. "I AM". God is change. As a Reformed Church the phrase "always reforming" has deep significance.

What might this mean for a congregation when the minister leaves? The congregation enters a new phase of its journey. It is called "*the interim time*" or "*the in-between time*"; the time between two inducted ministers. It can be a wonderful and unique time of reflection and review. It can be a time to understand the significance of a congregation's heritage and history. It can also be a time where the issues that need to be resolved in order to move freely into the future with a new called minister, can be tackled.

After a minister has left a congregation, change is inevitable. Along the road of change, the congregation may well give expression to various forms of grief and frustration. If these are not dealt with during the interim period, they can impact negatively on the new minister. Like the people of Israel, a congregation can pass through a wilderness experience. There could well be anxiety with regard to the change and uncertainty concerning the future which gives rise to grumbings and expressions of futility. Phrases that could be expected are: "We have never done it that way before!" or "We don't have the skills or money or time or (fill in the blank) to do that!" or "We are sick of change, can't we just rest for a while?" An intentional Interim Minister is trained to guide a congregation through this wilderness experience, to accept the grumbling as well as the joy.

When an incumbent minister leaves, the congregation enters a critical moment where deep relevant ministry can take place. With the understanding that crisis and change carries with it fear and the opportunity for renewal, the agenda of the intentional Interim-Minister ought to be carefully planned. The agenda must be planned to direct the congregation away from the dangers of an emotional reaction and toward the opportunities for reasoned response. A definite period of work is needed for this critical moment of ministry without which the congregation's new day cannot be fully realized. Neither the outgoing nor the incoming minister is positioned to guide this critical time of healing.

Grief has many faces.

- 1) There might be grief because a beloved minister has left. Whether the ministerial tenure has been brief or long, it has nevertheless come to an end.
- 2) There can be grief because the ministry wasn't good and the minister has left because of it (or was asked or forced to leave).
- 3) There is grief where the departure of the Minister is linked with sexual misconduct. It is not only the victim but also the whole congregation that experiences pain and anger.

- 4) There is grief where financial mismanagement by the Minister has occurred. The bonds of "trust" which are so important in a congregation have been broken.
- 5) The grief of leaving the well-known and getting an unknown in its place.

When a minister leaves, often a congregation reacts by wanting to call a new minister as soon as possible. The view is that the time between two ministers is unproductive, fallow and wasted time. There is a fear that the congregation will lose members or financial giving will drop. It is a common experience that if the congregation did not use the interim period creatively, several short ministries often follow a long ministry. Such ministers could be called **UNintentional Interim-Moderators**. More often than not, the essential grief work had been brushed aside which resulted in the new ministry being compromised from the outset. The high hopes for the newly called minister can rapidly turn to disappointment. The emotional, economic, spiritual and psychological costs for these "Unintentional Interim-Moderators," their families and the congregation are high. A congregation choosing to use its interim time constructively will shape the congregation's growth, sense of identity and health for years to come.

The in-between time is the best time to talk about and clarify the hopes and questions relating to the life of the church. There are important developmental tasks that can be tackled by the congregation. This has to be skilfully guided by an intentional Interim-Minister gifted with the graces to stay in the emotionally heightened leadership pocket, moving the people forward towards their goal. The trained Interim-Minister should help the congregation to face conflict intentionally; to work within a problem-identification process while identifying their own unique leadership style requirements. From the beginning the Interim-Minister works within a covenantal agreement made with the congregation and Presbytery. Clear plans are drawn up with which to begin and terminate the interim period.

Briefly, what is being envisaged in the *in-between* time is: "Coming to terms with history". Congregations experiencing leadership change should not ignore this work. The kind of questions that need to be asked are: "Have we been resisting change in the past?"; "What do we need to change?"; "Where do we need to change?" "How do we bring about the change that we see as necessary?"

The congregation's identity has to be discovered or re-discovered without the presence of the previous minister. It also has to be remembered that an identity of a congregation changes over the years. Its identity may have changed without the congregants realizing it. There are times when a congregation has to catch up with its own identity. The question to such a congregation could be: "Is your perceived identity in keeping with the reality of your true identity?" From a new identity one can work towards a new future.

An interim minister has to be the *non-anxious presence* in the congregation. It is more about guiding the process and not so much on its actual content. An Interim-Minister comes for a short period of time (24 months at the most). There can be a lot of freedom within the boundaries of an Interim Ministry because he/she is not going to be the called minister. Even when congregants do not like the theology or worship style of the Interim, they can tolerate it because they know that it is only temporary. It does give the Interim-Minister the opportunity to challenge the congregation to think outside of their box. It can be a breath of fresh air for the congregants to hear theology being presented in a different way and to experience worship in a fresh style. An Interim-Minister does not establish long term relationships in the "*in between*" time, but is the minister who is preaching, doing the administrative duties, leading meetings, counselling members, funerals, baptisms, and learning people's names.

The Interim-Minister should not fear hearing complaints about him/her, because growing pains are frequently part of the process. Tensions will occur and complaints will be audible. It is good to realize that although the complaints appear to be targeting the Interim-Minister, they are in fact the result of the process of change.

It is to be clearly understood that the Interim-Minister faces limitations. The relatively brief time with the congregation means he/she must be a "faster pastor". Consequently the goals for this interim ministry need to be clearly stated. **The goal of interim-ministry is to facilitate the future of the congregation.** To achieve this, the leadership and congregation need to engage themselves in the process. The success of an interim-ministry is not determined by the popularity of the Interim-Minister, but by what happens after he/she has left and when the ministry of the new incumbent begins to blossom with a life of its own.

Intentional interim-ministry has been practiced in the PCUSA for over 25 years. As a result of their experience, five areas have emerged as requiring serious attention in the *In-Between-Time* of a congregation.

- 1) Coming to terms with history.
- 2) Discovering a new identity
- 3) Leadership changes
- 4) Rethinking Denominational Linkages
- 5) Commitment to new leadership and to a new future.

1. COMING TO TERMS WITH HISTORY.

The Interim-Minister is the facilitator for the congregation that has to answer questions like: "How do we value our past? What have we incorporated into our story of being a congregation from our

successes and crises and from our failures? How did we evolve into our current set of norms and values? How do we determine our way of being a faith community? Have we been enriched or imprisoned by the events of our history? Has there been sufficient closure from bad experiences? If not we will be limited by our shame regarding those experiences and the fear of repeating them.

It is important to put the tenure of former ministers in perspective. The congregation has to decide what is worth carrying into the future and what is no longer relevant. It is essential to ventilate feelings, to take time for grieving before deciding to move on.

Ways of helping a congregation come to terms with its history can include the following:

- a) Story telling. Tell the church's story; make a timeline of the church, and update written history. Allow senior members to share about personalities and events that were significant at a former time.
- b) Identify and celebrate watersheds in the congregation's life, significant moments and accomplishments.
- c) Bring out old church magazines and discuss the events and people depicted in photos.
- d) Were there any commissions or enquiries in the congregation and what the consequences were?
- e) Take time to grieve and have a safe environment for those who need to talk about their feelings.
- f) Small group meetings to reminisce
- g) List the strengths and weaknesses of previous ministries.
- h) Listen and teach listening skills.
- i) Update files and records.
- j) Maintain healthy traditions, while questioning others.

As an outsider with access to the inner circles, the Interim-Minister needs to reflect on the presence or absence of inner tensions and power groups within a congregation. Such issues may include:

- a) Unresolved relationship issues with the most recent previous leader.
- b) Repetitive patterns of relating to leaders over several previous ministerial tenures.
- c) The extent to which the informal lines of authority and boundaries are in line with the formal, constitutional patterns.
- d) The existence of secrets and the relative emotional power they have.
- e) Power groups and family alliances that subtly influence the decision making process of the congregation.

The Interim-Minister should bear such dynamics in mind as the future of the congregation is discussed and future leaders are envisaged.

2. DISCOVERING A NEW IDENTITY

A congregation will have to start by defining its contemporary reality before it can articulate a vision for a new tomorrow.

There are many questions that a congregation can ask of itself:

- Who are we as the "Body of Christ"?
- Do we create an atmosphere of caring and support?
- Is everyone welcome?
- How well do we employ our spiritual disciplines of prayer, study of scripture, meditation, worship and stewardship?
- What is the uniqueness of our church? How does the wider community define us? How do outsiders see our church? What would the answer be to the following: "This church is best known for....."
- How is the worship experienced? Are people bound by traditions or is there sensitivity to the needs of today?
- What does the financial statement tell us about our priorities?

However, a critical question is: "**Does the congregation have a shared vision?**"

(We read in Proverbs 29:18, "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint". ie people pull in different directions)

VISION = WHAT WE AS A CONGREGATION OUGHT TO BE

MISSION = WHAT WE AS A CONGREGATION OUGHT TO DO (to get in line with our vision)

A call to mission is a call to transform the vision into reality. No church can do everything, but each church is called to do something. It is the task of a congregation to exercise spiritual discernment in order to transform the vision into a mission. The mission then needs to be defined clearly. Universal and world changing mission statements may be overwhelming. Rather, it may be more realistic to define the mission in terms of the congregation's geographic proximity and the local community. A realistic

mission statement enables the individual members of the congregation to have a sense of ownership and engagement in the mission statement. How as individuals they can each **be the gospel?**

3. LEADERSHIP CHANGES

A leadership group which has been in power in a congregation for many years and which remains intact may unwittingly treat the new minister as an intruder. The result is that the new minister is pressurised to adapt and conform to the existing status quo. The interim period between two ministries can be a very useful time to review the leadership positions and roles of the Session and Board members. Although stability and continuity are necessary, discernment may reveal that the drawing in and empowering of new leaders would be beneficial to the implementation of a (new) vision and mission. Fresh leaders are also more likely to give the new minister enough space to exercise his/her own special gifts and to lead in a style with which he/she is comfortable.

4. RENEWING DENOMINATIONAL LINKAGES

The Interim-Minister needs to remind the congregation that it belongs to the wider UPCSA. The presence of the Interim-Minister is therefore a witness to the presence, concern and involvement of the wider church in the life of this particular congregation. The tangible presence of the wider church with its back up systems and personnel can be a source of stability and comfort to a congregation that feels vulnerable and insecure. The Central Office and local Presbytery are able to offer information regarding the Vision and Mission of the UPCSA as well as guidance on the procedures to be followed as outlined in the Manual. The Induction Service of the new minister can be a wonderful experience for the congregation of being part of the wider church.

Question: "What view/opinion of the wider UPCSA does this congregation hold?" Is it healthy?

5. COMMITTING TO NEW LEADERSHIP AND A NEW FUTURE

The Interim-Minister begins leaving from the first day of entering the assignment. He/she makes it clear that the role of the Interim is to prepare the congregation to move forward with a new minister and a new vision. He/she keeps the congregants focussed on their responsibilities and their role in determining the future of their congregation. The Interim does not create unnecessary dependence on him/her. Issues that need attention include:

- The leaders' understanding of their role and responsibilities
- The particular skills and experiences of the leaders
- Freedom for the leaders to know that within the denominational structures there is ample room for creativity and flexibility.
- The realization by the congregation that it is the Church and not the minister that is called to be Christ's witness in the world. (Eph. 4:12)

ISSUES THAT NEED CONSIDERATION

Retired ministers to be used?

The stipend of Interim-Ministers should not be entirely at the cost of the congregation lest they begin to feel that they own the Interim-Minister.

Workshops on empowering Interim-Ministers/Moderators (at Ministers' Conference or at Presbytery level).

The need for a Memorandum of Understanding between the congregation and the Interim-Minister (i.e. job description and estimated time in the congregation).

Consideration is given to the Mission and Discipleship to be drawn in to the Interim-Minister process?

Training is available on Interim Ministry under the auspices of the Centre for Contextual Ministry at Pretoria University.