

Interim Ministry

May 24

Mr. _____,

Earlier this week _____, who takes care of speaker arrangements here at _____, forwarded to me your letter requesting information on interim ministry. Since coming to the faculty in 1977, I have been involved in interim ministries in Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri almost constantly for sixteen years. Earlier while teaching at The Cincinnati Bible Seminary (1971-1974), I did this kind of work in several churches in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. On the accompanying pages I have noted some values that I have seen come to the **congregation** from those kinds of experiences.

Most of the time the efforts have lasted about six months--though some have been shorter. The normal time has been between six months and a year. Five or six months is the normal minimum for locating, choosing, and moving a new worker to the field. In one instance the work lasted about a year and three months; in another case it ended up being two years and nine months. Needless to say in the last case, my involvement started taking on the character of a permanent part-time ministry, a result that neither the congregation nor I originally intended; they simply could not locate anyone for their relatively new work that had too limited a budget for supporting a full-time arrangement, and a bi-vocational minister could not be found. The church eventually moved to a permanent, part-time arrangement. Actually it is reassuring to a church just to know that six to twelve months is a normal time period for finding a minister; otherwise the people may think that their progress is slow, that they are having a harder time than other churches have, and therefore that something is wrong with them.

As called on and as needed, I have tried to help in recommending how best to go about searching for a new man. Unlike other public businesses, most churches do not "hire" someone for this job frequently enough to develop wise procedures or the distinctive required. I have suggested sources of information and certain procedures that are more liable to produce desirable results, raised cautions about unnatural mixes between potential ministers and this church's setting, reminded them to ask certain questions they might not think of, and so on. Because of my general awareness of the brotherhood in this area, I believe I have helped churches avoid some bad experiences by suggesting contacts that should be made beyond the references given in some letters of application. Being available to assist as called on gives the local leadership added confidence in fulfilling their responsibility in this crucial matter.

In some cases, out of natural appreciation for what I did "on the side" for them, churches have begun financially supporting **the college where I teach**—though I have never raised that point with any of them. They ask for suggestions about missionary efforts and voluntarily contribute to projects like buying Russian Bibles, which they come to know about because I happen to mention the need. Being around someone from the "brotherhood" at large tends to widen people's horizons and therefore their breadth of kingdom interest. That is a healthy thing for a congregation. It turns the people outward and encourages them to do something because more progress is being made in the kingdom at large than the limited progress they can see in their immediate circumstance. In effect, then, I have been able to sow some good will, not only among congregational members themselves, but between the congregation and outside agencies, including this school. They see the school as providing them

with a needed service instead of picturing it and other parachurch agencies as coming to them only to get something.

There are some values to **the interim minister himself** that are also not indicated on the other pages. I gain a great deal of satisfaction from helping churches buy some time in order to find good men. In several cases the preacher they hired has stayed ten or fifteen years. In Ohio one minister remained twenty years. I would like to think that my involvement helped create a positive atmosphere that enhanced the likelihood of a longer subsequent ministry, not only because the congregation obtained a better minister, but because they were a better church. Keeping the spirit up--or getting the spirit back up--contributed toward his inclination to stay with that more positive situation. That is a fulfilling thing to me.

There have been some financial considerations as well, although I hope that has not been a prime motive for doing interim ministries. For one thing, the added resources have supplemented the sometimes unstable financial support that Bible colleges can give teachers. Aside from that, I have used those funds for buying book, for underwriting at least partially some short-term missions efforts, for financing writing projects and travel expenses I incur in other forms of ministry, and for contributing more to other people's needs in their ministries.

In my situation I cannot hold down a full-time preaching ministry and at the same time teach in Bible College. Being able to involve myself this way in preaching and other forms of local work gives me an outlet for some things I would not otherwise have much opportunity to do. It increases my skills in public presentation and other local-ministry responsibilities. Interim ministry also improves my work in preparing other people for ministry because it keeps clearly before my eyes what the "real ministry" faces. As a consequence my instruction in Bible content courses, Greek, Hebrew, theology, and ministry classes is more easily connected with local ministry. It has brought into focus what I have come to call "education for use," education and learning that is always thought of in connection with application to the life and witness of Christian people. There is a world of difference between a "church theologian" and a "professional theologian" because of this precise point. The church theologian intentionally teaches in a way that connects information with application.

In effect these interim ministries should help **my students** as well because class members should be learning in a way that connects information with application. Hopefully they do not see me simply as an academician. Recent illustrations from church settings enliven the doctrinal and exegetical material I teach. Students should sense that what they and I are doing in the classroom is relevant to the "real" ministry and that their education is not an academic rite of passage they must complete before a church will hire them.

I trust that these comments serve the purpose you had in mind when you wrote. I remain

Virgil Warren

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