

Time's up: When the pastor is a lame duck

by [Bradley N. Hill](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

My contract as “intentional transitional pastor” or interim with East Bay Community Church (not its real name) had expired, and I was working on a month-by-month “fire at will/quit at will” agreement. By the grace of God, the church and I had moved through the five developmental tasks hammered home by the Intentional Ministry Network: we’d come to terms with church history, clarified our identity, embraced leadership changes, renewed denominational links and committed to new directions. Substantial healing had taken place, and a sharpened vision statement had been clearly communicated. I was feeling affirmed by the church and knew that its leaders valued my expertise and contribution, as well as me as a person. My wife and I felt at home at East Bay and loved being there. We had made friends with other couples. I continued to teach and preach . . . and wait.

Then one morning I heard the news: the pastoral candidate would preach the next month, with a congregational vote to follow on the same night.

Suddenly everything changed. Even before the formal vote, the “overlap of the ages” began. The congregation experienced relief. “Finally! Now we can get going! The long wait is over!” The comments sounded like Advent liturgies. The people were eager to start a new life together, and their expectancy grew as “prayers were answered!” All this was right and good.

I too celebrated that the end was in sight and was genuinely excited for the congregation. But I felt other emotions bubbling too. As if a signal had gone off, my e-mail volume decreased by 70 percent (most of those messages were cc-ed e-mails). I was away for a few days, and when I walked into my office I was surprised to see no red lights flashing on my phone. Then I discovered that the congregation’s worship planners had gotten together without me and brainstormed about future services. One church member organized a series of special prayer events in anticipation of the pastor’s arrival—without consulting me.

Part of me celebrated this, but part of me was sad at being excluded. I reminded myself that it was that time again: time to release, let go and ride off into the sunset. “Who was that masked interim?” members would ask sometime later.

I know these are childish, egocentric and emotive responses, but most interims experience them. We invest a lot of ourselves in our work. We come to know the people. We’re present at bedside and at casket-side. We baptize, marry and celebrate communion. We enter into the private, sacred sanctuaries of marriages and addictions, encourage those being downsized, and give hope to families experiencing loss. Interim pastoring is not just a consulting job; we interims are pastors who love the people “in principle” as we go into a job, and love them “in reality” as we minister to and with them.

Fundamental changes take place during this odd transitional time, and during the last weeks of my interim ministry at East Bay, I found these changes especially difficult. For one thing, the decision-making loop morphed and went around me. Decisions continued to happen without me. Some elements in worship were changed. A change in adult Sunday school was announced—and I was the teacher. A special offering was taken, an agenda item for the staff meeting added—and I was surprised by all of these things.

At the same time, staff members began to orient themselves toward the new pastor. Leaders and staff members regularly asked, “What might he think about a particular question? How can we welcome and support this pastor? How might our whole dynamic change?” Anxiety over future changes rose.

Some decisions were deferred pending the new pastor’s arrival, even though his actual start date was still months away. Staff members decided that they didn’t need to plan the summer program yet . . . they didn’t need to decide about the Holy Week schedule yet . . . they didn’t want to restructure staff meetings yet. After all, the new pastor would change all of this.

People sought my advice and counsel less often. Up to now, many matters had been routinely discussed with me even though I was not always the decision maker. Now there was no more “What do you think about the seniors luncheon?” or “What is the best time for our Santa Lucia Festival?” The previous year I’d sometimes wished I hadn’t been included in all of these conversations. Now I was not consulted and wished I had been!

Invitations to do coffee or lunch or talk dried up. At the beginning people wanted to get to know me—after all, I might be there for a year or more. But once the end was in sight, interest shifted to the incoming pastor. Sure, the close friends I had made during the year continued to check in, but further relational development coasted to a stop.

I admit that I contributed to the awkwardness. As a result of the congregation's new orientation, I began shifting my attention. I began to think more about my future, to plan my exit and think about the next calling. As I did I made mistakes. I forgot things and dropped the ball on some administrative matters. When pastors drop the ball, people are often hurt or confused, so I contributed to an ending that was less than ideal. I also missed opportunities that were still there in front of me.

The vote to affirm the new pastor was nearly unanimous. He would arrive in three months. There would be a gap of about a month between my departure and his arrival. I counted down the weeks. I cleaned my office, and as the last books went home and my hard drive was scrubbed (I deleted 12,000 e-mails), the loss hit me hard. On my last Sunday the church threw a nice good-bye party, and we all laughed hard and cried openly. Then I turned in my key, took the "Rev. Bradley Hill, Interim Senior Pastor" sign off the door and made my last commute home.

I trust that in God's sovereign timing there will be another interim ministry for me. But before I take that next assignment, I'm determined to reflect on how I and other interims can thrive during the sea change that is transition. How can we interims continue to minister effectively when we're assigned a lame-duck status?

First, I believe that when the permanent pastor is named, I must shift more abruptly and dramatically to a new perspective. Perhaps this transition time is an opportunity for us interims to minister more with our pastoral side and perhaps less with our administrative side. In my case, I shifted from crisis management and a healing focus back to teaching and preaching. In this way, the sea change in the church was allowing me to minister according to what have always been my primary gifts. I realize now that in spite of my sense of loss, it was a relief to begin to relinquish the burden of administration and management.

Second, next time around I hope to be more articulate and open in acknowledging my sense of separation. At East Bay I tried to put a happy face on all of the changes. "Time for us all to move on!" I said. But as I began to be more honest and express

how I was experiencing loss, people responded with feelings of their own.

Next time, I'll remember to encourage staff to talk through their apprehensions. While the congregation is using words like *anticipation* and *expectancy* as the start date nears, the staff is using words like *anxious*, *confusing* and *fearful*. Are their jobs at stake? What will the inevitable reorganization mean for them? How will the now comfortable staff culture change? There's work here for the interim pastor.

I will help the church prepare for the arrival just as we prepare for Advent. This goes beyond planning for welcome and giving support. Welcome involves get-to-know-you functions, a new pastor information packet and assistance in moving the new pastor in. Support includes an ongoing and active pastoral care committee.

An even more important part of preparation, however, is internal work. I can help lead efforts to prayerfully discern the congregation's openness to how God will lead. I can hold "holy conversations" about people's readiness to change—not just technical changes but adaptive changes; holy conversations about unholy vows that have been made in reaction to various past issues ("we will never again . . ."); holy conversations about unrealistic expectations of the new pastor; holy conversations about the congregational members and their intent to grow in faith and action. These kinds of preparations during a transition will bless both the church and the new pastor and bring glory to God.

We interims live by the passage, "For everything there is a season." The time between pastors is not just vacancy time—a period that should be made as short as possible. Even for healthy missional churches, the time of leader shifting brings out feelings of anxiety and grief, confusion and even bewilderment. Some people will explore other church options. Vacuums are created and filled.

The time can also be one of renewal and invigoration. When the vote is taken and the date for the advent of a new pastor is set, the interim and congregation can celebrate the journey together, giving thanks to God for God's faithfulness and looking ahead toward God's preferred future for them.