20 Frequently Asked Questions for Transitional Pastor Searches

1. **We just found out our pastor is leaving. What happens next?**

No doubt you have a lot of questions! Some we can take care of right away, others we can address in more detail a little down the line. At this time, the Committee on Ministry (COM) will come alongside you to help you begin your search now for a transitional pastor to fill the gap between your outgoing pastor and your next installed pastor. It might not be a bad idea to have about a month of pulpit supply scheduled just in case there are delays. Your pastor will be focused on finishing well, so should not be involved in giving input about the selection of candidates.

1. **Why do we need a “transitional” or “interim” pastor?**

The shared wisdom across all denominations is that there needs to be a transitonal buffer period after a pastor has made their mark on the congregation. There is a psychologically healthy period to let go of your current stage of the congregation’s life, and turn the page into a new chapter that you will decide together, so that not only your immediate needs are covered, but the next full phase of your church’s life. A transitional pastor is a pastor there between a period of no less than six months and no longer than two years who can help you in that page-turning process. This is a time to take a step back and look at your changing community, your most up to date gifts and identity, your current strengths and vulnerabilities, your finanical realities, and address any other conflicts or sacred cows that need to be worked on in order to clear the way for your next chapter. Typically, a mission study is a way to document your shared learnings along the way and a record of what you’ve been able to achieve in this time, and from it you will be able to call the pastor you need NOW, not based on your story of your minstry from ten or thirty years ago. Being without a pastor can also be a time of anxiety for a congregation, which can make a congregation vulnerable to rash decisions that can affect your future ability to minister effectively. Having an intentional transitional period lets you ask the questions and impactful decisions under the care of a pastor specifically trained for these moments so your whole congregation can choose the best pastor you need who will serve you well.

1. **Do we need to form a PNC (Pastor Nominating Committee) from the congregation?**

No. A transitional pastor is hired by the session, so doesn’t need the full representation of the congregation. You can decide to work on this as a session-as-a-whole, or delegate this to a smaller transitional search team. We will need one “point-person” who can take the lead. After that however, much of the search process may be similar to a full installed pastoral search. Keep in mind that the COM (Committee on Ministry) will need to be involved to process background checks and also approve final terms of call so we can confirm that whatever terms your session decides is fair to both the congregation and the pastor.

1. **Is there specific training that an interim pastor has?**

Yes. They have two separate weeks of intensive training, upon which a pastor will receive a certificate. Our presbytery requires that transitional pastors must have completed as least week one, with plans to complete week two. The Presytery of Great Rivers will pay in full the tuition and single room expense (where appropriate) for minister members of the presbytery. We will also pay for training for commissioned ruling elders serving a congregation, with approval from the COM.

1. **Where can our session get a list of interim candidates?**

It used to be the practice that congregations could come to expect to receive a shortlist of candidates from the executive/general/lead presbyters and chair of COM. This practice was from a time when there were many more transitional pastor applicants, and when long-serving presbytery leaders and synod leaders knew who was available across the Midwest. This practice might be described as “hook fishing,” where every few people put in a few lines to see who bites, while the whole congregrations simply awaits the result.

We have shifted to a “net fishing” model, where the Lead Presbyter and COM ministry partner will assist your session in sharing the work of the search by casting a net as wide as possible across the country. We will use the PCUSA bulletin board for matching new calls called the CLC (Church Leadership Connection system). While that system is still being used primilarly for installed pastoral call searches, many presbyteries have increased its use for transitional pastors, and it will still help get your search up and going more quickly than our previous “hook fishing” practice.

1. **Do we HAVE to use the Church Leadership Connection (CLC) to search for a pastor?**

If you would like assistance in finding candidates for your transitional period, then this is most expediant way we can help you. The alternatives could become cumbersome, take too much time, upon you up to unknown, unvetted, or unqualified candidates, or can lead to some unwelcome mixups and miscommunications. Completing the form that goes on the CLC helps assure too that all information is in the same place and readily accessible, and gives you the broadest possible reach for your search so you have as many options as possible.

1. **What info do we need to gather to get up and running on the CLC?**

We use the SAME form for called and installed pastoral positions, but for transitonal pastors, we refer to this as a “MIF-lite” which does not need to answer all the narrative questions on the MIF. You would need to check the biographical information of your church, provide relevant links, insert references, contact information, and provide some other information on what you are searching for.

1. **Where can I find a blank Ministry Information Form (MIF) for a “MIF-lite” to get our search going?**

Here is a link for a Ministry Information Form (MIF) and also instructions. <http://www.greatriverspby.org/mifs--pifs.html> Also, our Committee on Ministry Handbook has AMPLE step by step guidance for pastoral nominating committees, which can have some useful information for your transitional pastor search (just follow the table of contents!) <http://www.greatriverspby.org/uploads/2/4/5/6/24561669/manual_of_operations_com_handbook.pdf>. It is the most familiar option that pastors are accustomed to.

1. **What do we pay a transitional pastor?**

Ordinarily, the COM and most transitional pastors expect the same salary that your previous pastor received (page 40 in COM Handbook), as anything substantially different could have the effect of turning some candidates away (be mindful that interim ministry is a specialized kind of ministry that requires a specific skillset, training, and experience!). Also, deciding compensation is usually a product of exploring your finances, your strengths and mission, or your current ministry needs in a formal way, so decisions to change compensation as a cost-cutting measure now might have the effect of limiting your ability to successfully navigate the transition period. Most transitional pastors have come to expect approximiately the same compensation as the previous pastor, with changes happening upon the search for your next installed pastor.

Also, you may want to feel the need to have a range of what you’d be willing to pay based on experience. The MIF will ask for a minimum effective salary (effective salary includes salary and housing) so a pastor can consider if you are offering enough for their needs to be met. Too low, and you might lose interest in pastors, but be sure that whatever your minimum is that you do not ultimately offer below that number because that could be understood as a kind of bait-and-switch that might have a pastor wonder what about them is making you pay lower than you said you could, which isn’t the best way to start off a pastoral relationship. You can keep in mind a range amongst yourselves, so you can accommodate based on needs and experience. Remember that this isn’t a typical salary negotiation that we see in much of the corporate world—it’s seeking a fit, where a pastor communicates their needs to do well, and a congregation communicates what they can do, so that both may thrive.

1. **What if we can’t afford a full time transitional pastor?**

The COM will work with you on exploring the different possibiliites, which may include a commissioned lay pastor/commissioned ruling elder, a yoking situation with a nearby congregation, or other models.

1. **OK, I’m filling out the “MIF-Lite”. What do we put for the narrative questions?**

You actually don’t need to answer these questions for a MIF-Lite interim search. You might want to put the same answer for all the questions: “*We hope our transitional pastor will guide us in conversation around how best to answer these questions for when we are ready to form a PNC.*” It’s probably better to put SOMETHING in there like that instead of leaving it blank, otherwise people might think you just forgot to answer the questions. Remember this form is the default form for a full pastoral search, and as such these responses would draw on the insights you would have gained from your mission study led by your transitional pastor. Since you haven’t done that work yet, any responses you provide would come from your past sense of identity based on the previous chapter of your church life, instead of moving forward. You can save yourself some work on that for this form at this time!

1. **How are we supposed to pick just ten leadership competencies? We want a pastor who has all of them!**

Of course! The ten you pick will assist the automated system in matching you with pastors who have the strongest possible fit with you. On Personal Information Forms (PIFs) that pastors fill out, they too need to choose their top ten strengths, even though they may be skilled in all of them. By you picking your top ten needs, you will see a report that says a given pastor matches, for example, 8 out of 10 of your highest needs, or 1 out of 10. This wouldn’t prove a match nor rule a pastor out, but it does help guide the search and give you a sense of what is out there.

1. **Okay, we finished our MIF-lite. What is the approval process?**

It would be great to have a record that your session approved the search and the MIF-lite so there are no miscommunications or mixups. To make this process run quicker, the COM as a whole would *not* need to approve a MIF-lite (they WOULD if it was a full MIF for a full PNC. Remember that COM would still need to approve terms of calls after you select your interim or installed candidate). The chair of COM and Lead Presbyter would need to approve your MIF-lite. Your clerk of session would get an automated email from the CLC requesting confirmation, which they can do with their unique log-in CLC credentials. This would need to be done before your MIF-lite goes live on the system. (This is to prevent a disgruntled church member from posting a call for a new pastor against the pastor, congregation’s, or presbytery’s knowledge!) The COM chair can provide unique CLC log-in credentials to the pointperson of your search team and also the Clerk of Session if they need it reinialized.

1. **What happens next if we run a match and get some names that we like? Is there a background check process?**

Yes. Based on lessons learned across all denominations, there are three background checks that happen at different points in the process that we need to run before a candidate can set foot (metaphorical or other) in our presbytery. All of these are paid by our shared per capita giving.

1. *BEFORE FIRST INTERVIEW***:** The first is a presbytery to presbytery background check. We ask that you do these as early in the process with a candidate of interest as possible, perhaps after you have ascertained by quick email that they are still looking but before your first interview because these tend to yield excellent feedback that you would not be able to acccess by their record or internet. Presbytery leaders have a green, yellow, red flag system based on the kinds of impact they have left behind. This could be something we can share, like knowing that every congregation they served learned after the fact that the pastor hates traditional worship music, or that they are in the middle of a confidential judicial proceeding either facing complaints of misconduct or clearing their names, of course for which we would not be able to share all information. Often, if there are no immediate red flags, we will extend recommended questions based on discoveries with earlier presbyteries of service that you can slide into your interview questions (questions like, “How are you planning on making the culture shift from rural to urban ministry?” or “Can you tell us about your other job, and what role that might play on your ministry with us?” Know that presbytery leaders typically do not recommend candidates (that’s the search team’s job!), but we will try to make sure you have all the information you need so there are no surprises. Be sure to email the name and ideally the PIF to your presbytery leader and ministry partner to begin this search. Know that it can take a couple days as not all presbyteries have the available staff on-call to be of assistance right away. It is far better to do this check as early as possible, so that way we can save everyone time if a confidential red flag is intrepreted by the screeners based on the presbytery to presbytery background.
2. *WHEN FINAL CHOICE IS MADE BUT BEFORE FINAL OFFER***:** the second background check is the criminal background check, which happens once you have narrowed your search done to a final candidate. Here, simply contact your COM ministry partner with the candidate’s email and let them know you are ready for the final two background checks. The COM ministry partner will arrange with our office to process the check by email.
3. *WHEN FINAL CHOICE IS MADE BUT BEFORE FINAL OFFER***:** At the same time as the previous check, the third background check is a theological and fitness exam. This is done by a small team from the Committee on Ministry themselves, which for installed positions, would take the place of a full examination on the floor of presbytery so we can welcome new candidates into our presbytery faster. Questions are often based on ordination vows, basic Presbyterian theology and polity, and other context questions that every skilled PCUSA pastor should be able to address.
4. **A pastor candidate isn’t responding to my emails. What gives?**

This can be frustrating, but it’s hard to tell where a pastor is in the process of their own search. Sometimes it’s difficult to tell if a pastor needs another nudge, if they are in the middle of a week of funerals, or whether their lack of response is their answer. You might get a hint if you check their Personal Information Form (PIF) to see how long it’s been since they posted their information. Sometimes, when a pastor (or a church!) finds a call, in the whirlwind of celebration that comes, often the last thing on their mind is taking down their PIF and getting back to churches inquiring about them. It is appropriate to ask a candidate, “Hello, we saw your PIF in the system—are you still searching for a call at this time? Thank you.” (This is also a friendly reminder to you to be sure to take down your MIF once you have completed your search for the same reason!)

1. **What kind of experience do we want in an interim?**

This can be a tricky to know. There are professional interims that do this as their primary call. Others are entering into transitional ministry for the first time after a lifetime of leading cultures in transformation efforts. Keep in mind that if a skilled pastor has, for example, only 4 1/2 years of interim experience, it could be that they successfully faciliated three previous congregations to their next pastor right before you. Asking stories about their experience as transitional pastors could help give you a better sense about how invested they are in the unique work of transitional ministry.

1. **Do we need to do a neutral pulpit?**

While neutral pulpits were created before videorecording/streaming technology, it is still the practice of full installed pastor searches to conduct a neutral pulpit so PNC (Pastor Nominating Committee) can get a sense of how they manage the worship space. For an interim search, we wouldn’t necessarily require it, but you might want to be sure you have an idea of how the candidate preaches before you offer them a pulpit.

1. **How long does the search process take before we can settle on a candidate?**

Ideally you can get your MIF-lite up within a day of you composing it, and your search can begin immediately. Unfortunately, rare are the days now when we could match you with a candidate in a single day. You might get a satisfying amount of candidates, or you might get very few. Sometimes a transitional pastor is secured very quickly, or it might take a few months. In very rare cases does it go much longer than that, and if it does, it usually means there are other issues with your MIF we might want to address together. It is always wise to schedule about a month of pulpit supply just in case there are unexpected delays. There are many variables that can affect a search, and if you notice that candidates aren’t biting, the COM would be happy to take another look at your MIF to see if there is something there that is unintentionally signalling candidates to stay away.

1. **How long does the full transitional period take?**

Because the work of turning the page from one chapter of your life as a congregation to another chapter does take some time, reflection, rallying and even grieving, the consensus across healthy denominations is that this process ordinarily cannot be shorter than six months, and not go longer than two years. Most transitional pastors will plan for two years unless they can finish their work sooner. It is a fair question to ask of a candidate what your timeline together might look like, and whether it’s sufficient to do the critical tasks you will need to do in this time. Please trust us when we say it’s better to do it right, even if it takes a little more time, then to rush to find a pastor who will not serve you well, or even a great pastor that you are not ready for because you are still operating from the pre-transition time.

1. **If I have questions, where do I go?**

Your COM ministry partner is your go-to point person, and they are supported in turn by the COM and your Lead Presbyter. If we don’t know the answer, we can find it! Also, be sure to check the COM handbook which has step by step advice and best practices all about the search!

<http://www.greatriverspby.org/uploads/2/4/5/6/24561669/manual_of_operations_com_handbook.pdf>.