

# Building Bridges During the Interim

*A Workbook for Congregational Leaders*

John Lepper

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Several other individuals offered guidance at various stages. These include: Israel Galindo, James Stillwell, Ron Higdon, Bob Johnson, Greg Alexander, Guy Futral, Jonathan Parks (son-in-law), and Al Lepper (brother).

I am particularly grateful for leaders in congregations where I've served as an interim pastor or provided a bridge to the interim.

# Introduction

## *A Message from Your Interim Guide*

Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus is my prayer for your church: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (Eph. 3:16, NIV).

I look forward to helping guide your congregation through the important interim period. Having served numerous congregations in this capacity, I have sought to help lay leaders build bridges during the interim.

An interim is a time of transition. Transitions are never easy and are often full of feeling and anxiety. Times of transition provide us with numerous challenges, some of which are:

- Saying goodbye to former leadership and to the past
- Coming to terms with the church's history
- Discovering or rediscovering the identity of the church
- Rediscovering and affirming the church's mission
- Dealing with shifts of power
- Dealing with conflict and how decisions are made
- Evaluating links to the denomination and similar groups
- Making decisions about procedures on selecting a new pastor
- Making a commitment to a new leader and a new future

## Notes

The Big Four Bridge has been a Louisville landmark for a century. This half-mile span crosses the Ohio River connecting Louisville, Kentucky, and Jeffersonville, Indiana. In past years, hundreds of trains carried passengers and freight. Then, in the late 1960s, the bridge was no longer needed. But what do you do with such a huge bridge?

Owners disassembled and demolished each end, eliminating the approaches to the bridge. So for almost a half century, the Big Four Bridge has not really been a bridge at all.

Located in full view of many commuters and interstate travelers, near what is dubbed “spaghetti junction,” local residents hardly notice it. But for those who see it for the first time, heads turn and comments are made: “Would you look at that! A bridge with the ends knocked off.” Or, “Look! A bridge that goes nowhere.”

The Big Four Bridge will soon see use again, but this time as a pedestrian bridge. Workers have now built an approach to the Kentucky side of the bridge.

The approach from the Indiana side must be constructed, and the deck of the bridge must be replaced to make a solid roadbed for cyclists and pedestrians. Once the bridge is open, those who cross will use various means. Some will walk, some will run, some will ride bicycles. Small children will be wheeled in strollers while others will be carried in arms.

Guardrails will be installed to protect those who use the bridge. Some seats along the way will allow pedestrians to rest or have leisurely conversation.

When the refurbished and converted bridge opens, it will not be the quickest way to cross the Ohio River. It will, however, provide a more personal connection between Louisville and Indiana.

The Big Four Bridge provides a kind of metaphor for the church’s interim, or the time between pastors. Every interim needs an approach, or a beginning place, and a descent, or ending place. And just as the bridge over the Ohio River must be substantial and provide support for those who cross, the bridge between pastors must also be substantial. Perhaps the bridge between pastors also needs guardrails for protection and places to rest; places to have conversation and reflect. A parallel also exists in the slow movement of people on a pedestrian bridge with the slow, methodical pace needed to transition between the departure of one pastor and the arrival of the next.

The closing of another bridge in Louisville caused major disruption. The Sherman Minton Bridge, a double-decker bridge that spans the Ohio River between Louisville, Kentucky, and New Albany, Indiana, carried an average of 90,000 cars each day prior to its closing. It was deemed structurally unsound, so officials decided to close the bridge.

All drivers going east or west were rerouted around the city to a north-south interstate and bridge. With only two other bridges, there was no precise solution to this months-long commuting nightmare. Suddenly what was a twenty-minute morning commute lasted an hour, sometimes several hours. To cope, many people arose early in order to miss the traffic bottleneck. Some simply avoided the trek between Kentucky and Indiana; but for many, the commute was unavoidable. Thousands of people lived in one state and worked in the other.

Bridges are important, even during an interim. Bridges take work to build and to maintain. Crossing takes energy. Congregational leaders can construct a suitable bridge between one pastor and another, providing the structure that allows themselves and others to cross.

I have not been involved in building or maintaining any of the physical bridges I've spoken about, but I enjoy the fruit of others' labors when I point my car in the direction of the bridge. When the approaches on both ends are complete on the Big Four Bridge and the surface has been replaced, I will use my energy to walk across the bridge. After the Sherman Minton Bridge has been repaired and reopened, I'll enjoy crossing the Ohio River with much less hassle than is currently possible.

While I haven't been involved in building bridges of iron and steel, I have been involved in helping congregations build bridges between pastors. To date, I've served more than twenty-five congregations as an interim pastor or as a "bridge to the interim."

I've learned that congregations in an interim are in a kind of crisis, not necessarily in the sense that it is a time of intense difficulty or trouble, but rather in the Chinese sense of the word. The Chinese symbol for "crisis" is really two words: one symbol stands for "danger," and the other for "opportunity." It is the intention of this book to help congregations during the interim avoid the dangers and capture the opportunities.

An interim is a crisis in the sense that it is a time of decision. The Greek word for "crisis" means "decision," and the Latin root means "to decide." The interim is a decisive point. It is a fork in the road. A

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decision—in fact, many decisions—must be made about the direction of travel. And it is not enough to take the advice of Yogi Berra who is credited with saying, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” Sometimes decisions are more complex; transitions can have many variables.

From the time a pastor resigns until the next pastor steps into the pulpit, the congregation experiences a critical period. Some have called this period a kind of wilderness experience. It’s a kind of chasm that needs to be spanned with a well-constructed bridge.

Some congregational leaders wish to build a bridge quickly and move forward to call a new pastor. Other congregations seem to wander, as in a wilderness, knowing they want to go toward the promised land but not really sure what steps to take.

### **A Book for Lay Leaders**

As I think about the readers of this book, numerous names come to mind—Henrietta, Paul, Hugh, Jack, Gene, Janie, Sara. These names represent leaders in congregations where I’ve served during an interim. The target audience is congregational leaders. They may or may not serve on the search committee. They may or may not serve as deacons or elders. They are all lay leaders in their respective congregations, however. These congregations run the gamut from small country churches to larger city churches. Some have no ministry staff other than the pastor, and others are multi-staff congregations. Lay leaders who might find this book useful include:

- Church Council
- Elders
- The Session (Presbyterian)
- Consistory
- Leadership Team—by whatever name
- Deacon Body
- Personnel Committee



## Purpose

The purpose of this book is to help lay, congregational leaders understand the dynamics of congregations during the interim. Lay leaders can make a difference in guiding their respective congregations through the interim. They can lead the way in building a substantial and healthy bridge between pastors.

Many years ago while sitting in a seminary class I made an observation about the path to a pastorate. My professor, Dr. Walter Shurden, replied: “Lepper, you can never predict what a pastor search committee will do.” It’s been almost four decades since I heard that comment, but I have repeatedly affirmed its truth.

Each search committee is different. The same is true of congregations during the interim. Interims are different for different congregations. Yet, most congregations during the interim have similarities. Interims differ in different congregations because each congregation has its own polity, history, demographic, size, and leadership.

This workbook seeks to help you, a lay leader, answer two questions regarding the interim:

1. What can I expect?
2. What can I do?

This resource will help you discern answers to these questions and provide helpful leadership during this critical time in your congregation.

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“*Building Bridges During the Interim* calls for congregations to find their spiritual center for a journey across a potentially dangerous stream of transition between pastors. This book is a gold mine of spiritual wisdom, practical astuteness, and systemic understanding. It provides realistic acceptance of the dangers of interim periods between pastors for a congregation while offering step-by-step blueprints for ‘building a substantial and healthy bridge between pastors.’ John Lepper artfully guides congregations to let go of their past, discover their identity, and build toward a place where by the power and grace of God, a congregation and pastor become ‘one in the bond of peace.’ *Building Bridges* is a call for spiritual renewal through congregational self-assessment and faith formation. This is a must read for church leaders of all denominations charged with shepherding a flock across the tumultuous transition between pastors.”

*G. Wade Rowatt  
Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling  
Baptist Seminary of Kentucky*

“The heightened anxiety in times of ministerial transition and how it impacts congregations is the same in all faith traditions. Using a family systems approach, John Lepper provides us with a much-needed, well-annotated, step-by-step guide for congregational leaders leading through times of ministerial transition.”

*J. Gregory Alexander  
General Minister  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) In Kentucky*

“Rooted in solid research and the rich soil of his own experience, with this guidebook John Lepper provides able and wise guidance for congregations of a wide variety of denominations and traditions as they build bridges into the future and move forward in mission and ministry between pastors. Practical exercises and probing questions draw individuals and groups deep into exploration of congregational dynamics in ways that will both equip them for active participation in God’s mission as a healthy and energetic community of faith and to identify and welcome their next pastor into that moving stream.”

*William O. Gafkjen  
Bishop  
Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA*

“This is an important resource for church leaders who want to guide their congregation through the critical time between pastors. Dr. Lepper’s experience has given him a depth of understanding of this process, and he offers clear guidance for those who want to lead their church on a healthy path. Combining his experience in consulting and counseling, Dr. Lepper brings together valuable helps for leaders. You’ll be glad to have this resource at hand.”

*Guy Futral  
Leadership Development Team Leader, Retired  
Kentucky Baptist Convention*

“Lepper’s insightful work can guide congregational lay leaders in ‘bridging the gap’ between saying goodbye and saying hello to the pastor. In this concise workbook Lepper helps congregational leaders focus on the key determinative issues of the interim between pastors. He shares his many years of experience in guiding congregations during the critical interim period between pastors. He steps in as ‘virtual interim guide’ to help congregational leaders address effectively the pressing issues of transition, from saying goodbye, managing anxieties and uncertainties, reclaiming congregational identity, to starting right with the new pastor. Many congregations give too much influence to professional pastoral interims while abdicating the appropriate leadership of lay leaders during the critical in-between time bracketed by losing a pastor and calling the next. Lepper’s book both informs and empowers lay leaders to take responsibility for the critical work that can shape a congregation’s destiny.”

*Israel Galindo  
Dean and Professor of Christian Formation and Leadership  
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond*

“John Lepper has produced a most helpful ‘bridge’ for your congregation. He outlines a bridge from anxiety to trust, from an abrupt shift to a stable routine, from no pastor to a new pastor, from the wilderness to a new normal. Working through the pages of this book, your transition team will bridge the gap from what has been to what will be. And this bridge will be structurally and spiritually sound for moving into the next chapter of your congregation.”

“Pastoral transitions can be filled with fear, anger, ambiguity, and confusion. This workbook helps your congregation navigate the transition by being less anxious, more hopeful, more clear, and more intentional. This book is a ‘bridge’ that spans the ministries of your church from what has been to what will be.”

“Don’t read this book; DO this book. This is not a pleasure book; this is a WORK book! John Lepper has outlined the stages of interim ministry that will lead your congregation from the pain of transition into the promise of transformation. Working through the exercises on these pages, you’ll be ready to embrace your next pastoral leader with a deeper faith.”

“Working through the stages of an interim ministry is often filled with fear and loss. But that doesn’t have to be the case. John Lepper leads you across the ‘bridge’ from the fears of the interim into the faith for a bright future. The many exercises and guided conversations contained here will help you and your interim team build your own bridge from the pain of transition into the promise of transformation. This workbook will help your congregation move from resistance to readiness.”

*Bo Prosser  
Coordinator for Missional Congregations  
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*