



When a minister leaves

Guidance for a pastoral vacancy



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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Phases of a pastoral vacancy	2
3. Concluding the present ministry	3
4. Enabling the church to function without a minister	4
5. Guiding the church to the appointment of another minister	7
6. The Baptists Together Settlement Process	8
7. Key people throughout a pastoral vacancy	9
8. Useful further documents	10

1. Introduction

This guide aims to support you as your church prepares for the departure of a minister. Although it is written with the assumption that you will eventually seek to appoint another minister, much of its contents will be useful even if circumstances are less defined and certain.

A period of time without a minister – what we call a pastoral vacancy – is a significant time for a church, containing both challenges and opportunities. Every local church is unique, and the circumstances leading to a minister leaving will also be different. But what all churches have in common is that the departure of a minister will affect the shared life of the church and the individuals within it. Your role as leaders and officers is vital to the church finding an appropriate way forward.

This might be a good moment to remind yourselves of some-overarching realities. Jesus reminds his followers:

I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.
(Matthew 16:18)

**I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate
to help you and be with you for ever.**
(John 14:16)

And the Psalm writer observes:

**The Lord is good and his love endures for ever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.**
(Psalm 100:5)

Christ remains the head of his church, and no matter how significant the ministry that is now being concluded may have been, it is Christ who remains as the master builder. Jesus has promised to be with us through his Spirit and will continue to be present through your season of challenge and change. And it is but a season. God's purposes have been expressed and experienced through centuries of history; it is helpful to see your own circumstances in the light of this.

It may be helpful too, to remind both yourselves as leaders and the rest of the church community that changes of minister are part and parcel of local church life. There is a significant amount of experience and advice available to you. Your Baptist Association and our Baptists Together Specialist Teams are willing and ready to help you.

2. Phases of a pastoral vacancy

Any change of circumstances will often be accompanied by an increase in anxiety. During a pastoral vacancy this can be related to questions such as who will lead your services; who to turn to in moments of personal crisis; or how you will continue your outreach.

However, it can appear in less obvious ways. When a minister moves there is a sense of loss, a 'bereavement'. Relationships of depth will have been formed with her or him. Care will have been given and received. A pastoral vacancy will disrupt these and may give rise to a sense of unease. Remember too that different individuals in the church will have had different experiences of the minister and you cannot assume that everyone's feelings will be the same.

Recognising this will check rising anxieties. It is important for leaders in the congregation to manage their own anxiety. Your calmness and confidence in God, his presence and his care will give reassurance to others and help the church to remain faithful and forward-looking.

You can consider the period ahead as having three distinct phases. There may be some overlap between them, but it is important that you recognise and appropriately navigate through each.

1. Bringing the present ministry to an appropriate conclusion.
2. Enabling the church to function without a minister
3. Guiding the church to the appointment of another minister

3. Concluding the present ministry

There is an inevitable tendency to begin to think about finding a new minister as soon as you receive news that the present one is leaving. This is understandable, but you must first ensure that the present ministry is appropriately concluded.

Some immediate tasks are:

Celebrate what has been done. Arrange some sort of event to recognise the departing minister's service to the church. This may include other community organisations with whom the minister has been involved. You may also want to arrange a leaving gift.

Verbalise feelings and concerns. Provide space and opportunity for church and congregational members to express any concerns they have about the forthcoming vacancy. Church leaders should offer reassurance that support is available and that yours is not the first church to experience a pastoral vacancy. It can also be helpful to communicate arrangements for the vacancy as they are put in place.

Reflect on the minister's experience. Listen to your departing minister's views about the future, but do not be bound by them. Wait until their ministry is ended until you start to think about a new one. De-brief them in order to find out what tasks need to be done, whilst recognising that not everything they have done will automatically be continued. For example, she or he may be a governor at a local school. The church may or may not want to offer someone else for the school to consider.

Remember the minister's family. If your minister has family members living with them, remember that they too will be impacted, especially if they have played a significant role in the life of the church. Do not overlook this, but make sure it is appropriately recognised and appreciated. Do make clear to the church community that they should not assume that any family the next minister has will adopt the same roles.

Address the practical issues. You should identify a mutually agreed finishing date, taking into account any outstanding holiday, and ensure stipend and expenses are paid accordingly. If the minister lives in a manse, you should discuss when they will vacate it, which is likely to be different to their finishing date as minister. Please note that if your minister is a member of the Baptist Pension Scheme it is **vital that you [contact the scheme](#)** once you have an agreed finishing date. Members of the pensions team will advise you on the necessary steps you need to take.

Be generous. Often when people move jobs, they anticipate a higher salary, so are more able to absorb moving costs and so on. This is seldom the case for ministers. Demonstrating a generosity of spirit is a good way to honour the minister as they depart.

Sadly, there are rare occasions when a ministry comes to an end in sudden or less than ideal ways. It is particularly important in such circumstances that the church is supported in bringing closure to this experience. We encourage you to work closely with your Association team, who in turn will work in partnership with our Baptists Together Specialist Teams to advise and support you.

4. Enabling the church to function without a minister

It is usual in Baptist churches for there to be a period of vacancy between ministry appointments. This can often be beneficial as it gives you time to consider carefully what ministry you are seeking next.

We recommend that you prepare for a vacancy of 12 months, and then continue always to plan 12 months ahead until it is clear that another minister will be appointed. It is easier to cancel arrangements than to make them at the last minute. Begin at a practical level by thinking about the key roles that your current minister fulfils and which should be maintained during pastoral vacancy. You may have to consider how leadership will be provided in some or all of the following areas:

Preaching

There may be those within your own church community who can preach, or you may wish to ask ministers and preachers from other local churches to serve and support you. Do not overlook the fact that preaching exercises influence over a congregation, so think about what your key priorities are. Try to invite visitors who can contribute to that purpose, or prepare your own themed plan and invite visitors to speak into that.

We also encourage you to use the opportunity to increase the diversity of those that preach by inviting those with different experiences or backgrounds. This can help the church to broaden its vision of who the next minister might be.

You may find it helpful to appoint someone to be responsible for booking, welcoming and organising preachers, which frees the church secretary or administrator for other tasks. They should book well ahead, especially for seasons such as Christmas and Easter when it can be more difficult to find suitable people. Please also make arrangements to pay visiting preachers appropriate expenses and fees.

Leading of worship

If your church tends to ask the preacher also to lead worship, be aware that visiting preachers may lead in ways that the congregation is not used to. While it can be enriching to be introduced to new resources and approaches, there is a balance to be struck. It is not helpful for a congregation to be confronted by uncertainty and unfamiliarity week after week. Any guidance you can provide a preacher in these circumstances will be helpful. If the musicians have a particular style or repertoire, you can share a list of regular songs with the invited preacher. Be clear when you wish to receive details of hymns and songs so that your musicians and any technical team have time to prepare.

If your church tends to ask a different person from the preacher to lead worship, make sure there is good and timely contact between them. Their mutual understanding will create a balanced and more appropriate pattern for the whole congregation.

Mission

Your church's engagement in mission does not cease when your minister leaves. Mission is not an optional extra of church life, but the outworking of one of our core values, as expressed in the Baptist Union's Declaration of Principle:

It is the responsibility of every Christian disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.

It is important that you consider as a church how God continues to be at work in your community and how you may participate together in the work of his kingdom. Whilst it may be impossible to maintain every initiative during a pastoral vacancy, we encourage you to see ongoing mission as one of the priorities for your church even as you seek another minister.

Pastoral care

Your departing minister is likely to have carried significant responsibility for the pastoral care of the church congregation. It is wise to appoint someone to oversee this during the vacancy period. Make sure that their role and responsibility is clearly indicated to the rest of the church community. They should liaise with the outgoing minister to make sure that no immediate needs are missed, particularly identifying those who consider themselves as part of the congregation but can no longer physically attend. A team of pastoral visitors might be set up to undertake regular visiting, who may benefit from some supportive training. Some may require more specialised care and counsel from other churches or agencies. Your regional team or moderator (see below) should be able to help with training and finding specialised help if needed.

It is also important for elders or deacons to care for the leaders of the various groups in the church.

Welcoming and including people

The minister is often a key person in recognising and engaging with anyone who is new to the church, not least because they had a view of who is who as they led worship. In their absence, you could consider the appointment of a weekly duty deacon who can support the regular welcomers by engaging with newcomers in particular. This needs to be undertaken with an appropriate balance of enthusiasm and sensitivity.

External relationships

As a local church, you will have key relationships with other congregations, local groups and the wider Baptist community. Often the minister will be a key point of contact with many of these. Seek to identify who these groups are and why your relationships with them are important. This in turn will help you to consider how these will be sustained during a period of vacancy.

Funerals, marriages, baptisms and infant dedications

Consider and plan in advance the arrangements for significant life events. It is particularly important in the case of funerals to be clear about who is the point of contact and what actions are needed. This will enable you to implement a plan at short notice in an atmosphere of calmness and certainty. Make sure updated contact details

have been passed to any funeral directors that you work with regularly. If you have a moderator (see below), they will often be willing to lead funerals at relatively short notice when needed.

Check with your current minister whether any weddings are booked and make sure that all parties are clear about any revised arrangements. If the minister has any formal role in the registration of marriages as an Authorised Person, make sure that appropriate changes have been properly made and registered with the relevant authorities.

Think too about how baptisms and baptism preparation will be arranged. Check whether the minister has any particular knowledge about keys, filling the baptistry and so on, that needs to be passed on.

Chairing of meetings

In many churches, the minister chairs church meetings, deacons' meetings and other key gatherings. Chairing will often be undertaken by a moderator, but this is by no means always the case. Again, spend some time considering who has the skills to fulfil these tasks during the vacancy period.

Manse

If your minister has been living in a church-owned manse, you should consider how the premises will be secured and maintained. Remember that if a house is obviously empty, it is more susceptible to vandalism or trespass, so make arrangements for the gardens and exterior to be maintained. This is an important part of your witness to the local community. If the manse will be empty over the winter period, make sure there is some background heating.

A pastoral vacancy is often the opportunity to engage in maintenance and refurbishment, and you should ask your current minister to identify any issues before they leave.

If you are considering renting the manse out during the vacancy period, this should be undertaken thoughtfully and with appropriate legal and technical advice. The Baptist Union Corporation provides a [leaflet \(PM04\)](#), that offers some guidelines.

In addition to their leadership of the roles above, a minister is often a general point of contact. People often go to them about anything from a leaky pipe in the toilet to news of an illness or bereavement, whether or not it is their responsibility to follow up. It is vital to the ongoing cohesion of the fellowship that church and congregation members know who to go to in various circumstances. Remember that it is not just a matter of appointing someone to each job; you must also make that sure everyone knows who they are.

There may well be other matters and concerns to which the minister has given attention that need to be considered going forward. Take time before they leave to ask them to identify these.

Experience has taught us that it is important to get the church used to functioning without a minister before you start looking for a new one. **This has often been shown to speed up the**

overall search process. A pastoral vacancy can be a very creative time in the life of a church. Those who are willing to rise to the challenges that it presents will often discover new gifts or see their present abilities being significantly developed. This is not a time for simply keeping things ticking over, but to continue moving forward in mission and ministry.

And, once again, please remember that your church is not alone in this experience. As well as supporting you through the search for another minister, your regional ministers and Association team will often be able offer practical support during the vacancy or put you in touch with others who can help.

5. Guiding the church to the appointment of another minister

Once other appropriate arrangements are in place, your church is likely to want to consider future ministry. Often this will be through the appointment of another minister, though in some cases it may be necessary to consider and explore other models of ministry. Your Association team has experience of supporting churches in varied contexts and is a potential resource, whatever direction things take. These notes have been specifically prepared to guide you towards another ministry appointment but be assured that support is available should you take a different path.

The task of discerning that God is calling a minister to your church lies primarily with the church itself. A prospective minister will make a prayerful response to such a call, but your church has the duty and joy of determining what you believe God wants for you. We believe that God makes his will known to his people and so we enter the process of settlement in faith.

Prayer

Prayer launches the process of reflection and discussion. It is also the way we continue to pay attention to what God is saying.

The Scriptures establish the principles of our search. They encourage us to listen to each other's concerns and thoughts as we seek to discern what God is saying and doing.

Through regular and informed prayer, as well as reflection and discussion together, we discern God's purpose and open our lives to his power. The key thing in all of this is a genuine desire to bring about God's will within our human circumstances.

So, at the outset of a vacancy, remember to call your church to prayer. Likewise, throughout the process, maintain that prayerfulness as information is shared and updates are published.

Vision

The priorities and approach of your departing minister will have inevitably shaped the life of the church. During the vacancy, it is important for you to consider, as you look to the future, whether to develop these priorities further or whether a new direction is called for. So, before you seek to define the kind of minister you may be looking for, take time to discern and define the kind of church that God is calling you to be. Determining this future vision should be seen as the responsibility of the whole congregation and not simply a task to be done by a few on the

church's behalf. Whatever pattern future ministry might take, it is vital that the church comes together to seek God's purpose for its future.

If you are working towards a further ministry appointment through the Baptists Together Settlement Process (see below), a core task is the development of a church profile. This is a document that is made available to all prospective ministers. It outlines something of the identity and composition of the church, its history, its place in the local community and its vision for the future. It is more than simply a means to engaging in the settlement process. Its preparation offers an opportunity to discern, intentionally and prayerfully, God's vision for the church. Working on the profile together can be vital to your church's ongoing life and purpose, irrespective of how and when a minister is appointed.

In addition to outlining the present reality and the future hopes of the church, your church profile should also make clear the attributes and skills you hope for in a new minister. This portrait should not be merely a list of every desirable gift you can possibly imagine. Rather, it should focus on the experience and skills that will enable you to pursue your church's vision. Please remember of course that you cannot replace your previous minister with one who is exactly the same, nor with one who will perfectly make up for any of their predecessor's shortcomings.

You can find a [guide to writing a church profile](#) on the Baptists Together website.

Pastoral vacancies can be times when certain individuals, groups or even factions in a church may try to promote their own enthusiasms. Your leadership team has a particular responsibility for listening to all voices, rather than those of just a few, as you guide the church through its decision-making.

Again, your Association team has resources and experience to help you through a process of vision setting.

6. The Baptists Together Settlement Process

Once your church profile is completed, you are ready to enter the Baptists Together Settlement Process, or BTSP. The BTSP provides the opportunity for your church to advertise the vacancy throughout the Baptist Unions in Great Britain (BUGB), Scotland (BUS) and Wales (BUW). This is done by listing your church details and a link to your profile on the Pastoral Vacancy List, or PVL, an online directory that is managed nationally by the Ministries Team at Baptist House. Accredited ministers have access to the PVL and can choose to which churches they wish to send their details.

An introduction to the BTSP as well as links to full guidance for churches can be found on the Baptists Together website at www.baptist.org.uk/btsp.

Please note that the full guidance strongly encourages you to think broadly about the type of minister you might appoint. In identifying those who have the gifts and experience you are seeking, please do everything you can to avoid disqualifying any prospective minister purely on the basis of other characteristics. This might be their age, gender, race, disability, background,

education, marriage or family status; or anything else that might consciously or unconsciously cause you to be biased against them. This fairness of approach is of great importance to us as a Baptist family and we would ask you to read through the BTSP guidance for churches carefully.

Regional ministers for each Association work in close collaboration with the Ministries Team and they can address any concerns or needs that arise. It is vital that you remain in touch with your regional minister throughout the process and make them aware of any difficulties or issues that you experience. It is through the feedback and observations of churches and ministers engaged in the settlement process that we are able to make the process work the best for everyone.

7. Key people throughout a pastoral vacancy

Regional ministers and Association teams

Your regional minister is the first person to contact when a minister announces that they are moving on. Throughout your planning for the pastoral vacancy and your search for a new minister your regional team will be available to advise and discuss options, in at least the following ways:

- Meeting with your leadership team to give them confidence they can manage the pastoral vacancy well.
- Discussing how best to nurture the life and mission of your church when there is no minister.
- Facilitating a day to explore your church's vision with the whole church.
- Helping you in your search for a suitable moderator.
- Offering guidance and advice for the appointment of a minister.
- Acting as a link to those who oversee the Baptists Together Settlement Process.
- Guiding your church through the appointment of a minister and the arrangements for an induction service.

Interim moderator

It is usually very helpful for a church to find a moderator to walk with them through pastoral vacancy. Typically, a moderator is an experienced minister who at the very least guides you through the process of searching for, meeting with and appointing a new minister. This is likely to include chairing the special church meeting that decides whether to call a particular minister or not.

Some moderators are also able to offer some preaching, pastoral cover for emergencies, help with life events such as baptisms and weddings, as well as pastoral advice and care to the leadership team. Where the moderator gives significant time and support, they are sometimes known as an interim minister. You should make sure there is clear agreement between you and the moderator about what they can and cannot cover in your initial discussion with them.

A moderator can also liaise with the regional minister about the settlement process, although your church secretary (or equivalent) should remain the regional minister's primary contact.

A moderator is appointed by the church meeting on the recommendation of your leadership team. They will not normally be a member of your church. Your regional minister can help you find a suitable person but does not appoint them.

You should pay a moderator the usual preaching fees and reimburse them for all expenses. You should consider giving them a worthy love-gift when the task is finished. If the vacancy becomes lengthy, some interim gift(s) would be appropriate.

The church secretary

Remember that during a pastoral vacancy, considerably more work is likely to fall upon your church secretary, so please look for ways to support them. Try to share out aspects of their responsibility. You might, for example, appoint a separate person to look after membership applications and changes, and another to organise and communicate with all visiting preachers and speakers. Engaging with the BTSP and all its paperwork can also be done by a separate person if necessary who might report to a specially convened search team, as explained in the churches guide to the BTSP.

8. Useful further documents

As mentioned throughout this guide, there are a number of other relevant documents which may be found at www.baptist.org.uk/btsp. These include, among others:

- [Baptists Together guide to creating a church profile](#)
- [Baptists Together Settlement Process – an introduction](#)
- [Baptists Together Settlement Process – guidance for churches](#)
- [Terms of appointment – full time](#)
- [Terms of appointment – part time](#)
- [Ministerial remuneration guidance](#)
- [Ministerial remuneration spreadsheet](#)



This version June 2021