

# Central Church reached out to nonprofit to steady roiling waters

By [Jane Roberts](#)

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Once a megachurch, Central Church in Collierville went through two pastors and lost several thousand members before deciding to bring in an interim pastor with a national nonprofit that specializes in turning around evangelical churches. (Daily Memphian)

As executive pastor of Central Church, Gene Sauls has seen some change.

Once a mega institution in Hickory Hill large enough to accommodate 6,000-plus church members and Crichton College, the church moved east to Collierville in 2003. In the past 15 years, it has lost thousands of members, their pledges, and it's become a turnstile for senior pastors.

The church hired nonprofit Interim Pastor Ministries to help reset its course.

Three Sundays ago, about 900 remaining members stood and clapped loudly for its representative, interim pastor Dan Werthman. Over 2.5 years, he sorted through layers of mistrust and hurt in the congregation, helped rewrite its constitution and guided the pastor search committee for a congregation that now says it has a clear vision of what it wants to be.

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***Abigail Warren: Central Church names lead pastor***

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“There’s a great sense that Central owes IPM for what Dan did while he was here,” said Sauls, talking on his cellphone on his way to a weekday funeral at the church, 2005 E. Winchester Blvd.

“We owe him a great debt. IPM basically saved this church.”

Using a model of concerted listening and mediation, while also filling the role of senior pastor, nonprofit Interim Pastor Ministries helps a mix of mostly evangelical congregations find their footing in the rocky times between pastors.

IPM doesn't leave until the church has conducted a search and called its next pastor.

The business model has been around roughly three decades. IPM, based in Michigan, is the largest provider. Seven years ago, it had interim pastors assigned to 39 client churches.

"We're serving 90 today at any one time," says executive director Tom Harris.

"We're hearing more and more stories of churches looking back with thankfulness and expecting fruitfulness. Sometimes, those churches even grow while the interim is there."

IPM has served congregations as small as 30 and at least one with an average Sunday attendance of 2,000.

"We try to serve every church that calls us, provided we have someone who can serve them in their region or the compensation is sufficient to travel across the country," Harris said.

The company is set up to eventually reach 125 congregations a year.

Harris doesn't talk about specific clients, but he does say Central's situation raised flags.

"I have never seen a church so grateful for the services of IPM and more specifically, Dan."

Between 2013 and 2016, the church had gone through two senior pastors, a definite warning sign to IPM. By tradition, the elders were to have a year off after serving three on the board, but it wasn't uncommon for board members to serve uninterrupted for decades.

Werthman, who has served 15 churches and also is a practicing attorney, arrived in the summer of 2017 when the rapid attrition helped the congregation realize it could not go on as it was. He stayed until late in December 2019, a year longer than the average IPM assignment.

"I had no expectation other than the fact we needed to let him do all the things he did," said Jim Lee, chairman of Central's board of elders. "Some churches have things that are resolved more quickly. He did what was necessary to help us, by God's grace, get to where we are today."

Several, including Lee, say the biggest change he made was rewriting the constitution to include clear language about when elders must take a sabbatical year off. They may return to the board with the

approval of the shepherding board of elders, which includes other elders also on sabbatical.

“Our original (constitution) dated back to when we were part of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The church functioned well with an ancient constitution,” Lee said with a laugh. “Dan helped us write a modern version and embedded in it the term limits and also the idea that elders serve in perpetuity as long as they meet the requirements.”

Trying to create an opportunity for younger men to have a voice on the board of elders, Werthman a year ago asked five of the most senior members to take “emeritus” status. The idea was they would be honored as church leaders but would no longer have a vote on the board.

The move caused anger and hurt. Four of the five left. In some cases, family and friends followed.

“My goal is to work with the existing leadership,” Werthman said. “The number one preference is that all the existing leadership will stay and buy into the change and be part of the process. That is the healthiest way. But some are not going to be able to make that transition.”

David Olford was among the elders asked to shift to emeritus. He says he understood the need for change and did not leave the

church.

“Dan was seeking to establish a younger board that had not gone through the last so many years where there had been some conflict.”

Sauls doubts Central could have solved its problems without the intervention.

“Based on the place that we were in our leadership structure, the necessary changes probably would not have occurred without an outsider coming in to lead the change,” he said.

“These men are all good men, all godly men, but it was time for Central to have fresh leadership.”

The board now has eight sitting elders; three more will come in 2020. The average age, Sauls estimates, has dropped from 73 to 63.

Thirty years ago, no one was making a living helping churches figure out how they were going to survive. While mainline denominations have hired IPM, those churches for the most part have hierarchies that often include bishops and regional offices that can offer help to congregations in transition. But, even those networks are now smaller and often farther away.

Its largest constituency are evangelical churches and free churches, nondenominational groups usually governed at the congregational level.

IPM steps in with its brand of “intentional” interim pastors, male clergy who are at least 50, have track records of running successful congregations and are willing to be itinerant. Part of what makes them intentional is their training to help congregations work through layers of troubles or frustration and find their next pastor. One of the biggest adjustments may be the realization that the church the members love no longer exists.

IPM pastors use a five-stage plan to help congregations look at their past and where they want to go, including what outreach there may be in the surrounding neighborhood, which may be remarkably different than what it was.

The concept of intentional interims has been around three decades, says Joe Caldwell, dean of the Memphis College of Urban and Theological Studies at Union University.

“But, it’s taken about 20 years to catch on,” he says, because churches historically were in a hurry to find their next pastor.

“The thinking used to be ‘let’s get a pastor in as soon as possible,’” Caldwell said. “Most of the churches felt like ‘we want to wait and let the new pastor set the vision. We don’t want to take time to evaluate where we are; let’s let the new pastor evaluate.’”

That was back when church affiliation was a cultural expectation, he said. It no longer is.

“There’s been a definite decline in church attendance, membership and giving since the ’80s,” Caldwell said, noting that churches now have to be cognizant of what their future is, particularly when neighborhood demographics have changed. It requires knowing what kind of a pastor they need to call next, not just continue but often to survive.

Churches now also tend to hire laterally, he says, which means it’s less common to hire a minister from a small church to lead even a medium-sized church. And the hiring process can take longer because it’s harder to get a minister to uproot his whole life for what may turn out to be an incremental pay raise.

That can leave churches vulnerable longer.

“There’s a real vacuum in free churches as to who leads in that scenario. Without a designated person guiding the process, it could become very difficult,” Caldwell said. “There is a real need for what IPM is doing.”

Its model says that churches that don’t do their homework between pastors may be in for a series of “unintentional interims,” ministers who accept a call but don’t or can’t stay.

The reasons are many; it could be the congregation feels paralyzed by that loss of a beloved minister, or unresolved conflict or both.

“If a church loses its pastor due to conflict, and it is not addressed in some way through intentional interim pastorate, there will be issues,” Werthman said. “People do not like to be in a conflicted situation where it does not look like there will be resolution. They sense it.”

Central, which started in Memphis in the 1890s at Dudley and Linden as a Cumberland Presbyterian Church, is an example of what can happen to even prosperous churches when the winds change.

The church moved east to Massey and Poplar in the early 1970s. Out of space 15 years later, it built a large campus at Kirby and Winchester and moved east again to minister to large swaths of Memphians moving into new subdivisions and infrastructure.

Central’s membership surpassed 6,000 in the Hickory Hill days.

But by the late 1990s, the neighborhood was changing, and church leaders noticed it was harder to get members to come to Hickory Hill.

Central bought property on East Winchester and Bailey Station in Collierville and began building. It sold its Hickory Hill property to World Overcomers, a nondenominational megachurch with satellite campuses in Jackson, Tennessee, and Holly Springs, Mississippi.

For numerous reasons, Central’s membership never recovered. Some members were unhappy with the move and the cost to build a new church home. Then, it lost Pastor Jimmy Latimer, who had served Central for 40 years.

The congregation hired Ernie Frey as an interim and promoted him to senior pastor “after the congregation fell in love with him and his family,” Lee said. “They were with us for seven years.”

Then came Pastor Matt Surber, who stayed about 18 months. He was replaced by Rick Gehring, who stayed 16 months.

“It was a big red flag,” Werthman said. “I knew I would need to do a lot of intervention. It was really a number of issues that caused the upheaval.

“If you were a member at Central and saw that the last two senior pastors, neither one of them stayed up to two years, how hopeful would you be that the next is going to stay? The leadership wisely listened to the congregation. ‘We have to do something different.’”

Central heard about IPM from D. Jim Fleming, founding pastor of Collierville Bible Church, where he served from 1989 to 2013. He is now an IPM interim at Autumn Ridge Church in Rochester, Minnesota.

Werthman worked to facilitate conversations between sides that were estranged. He interviewed close to 400 people, including members, staff and those who had left. He also followed IPM’s plan for church healing.

“You can’t come in and dominate or assert power,” he said. “You have to build trust and credibility. You have to help the church come to its

own decisions. I lead a process so they can make their own decisions.”

Central paid Werthman less than its last senior pastor because its finances were dwindling, which he notes is not uncommon.

“Anytime you have a church in transition, you have to recognize the stresses that brought you to where you are,” said Central’s board chairman Jim Lee.



“No one in ministry sets out to create problems, but over time ....” he says, his voice trailing off. “It’s how you manage all manner of situations and deal with them. The good, the bad and everything in between.”

**Matthew Shackelford**

The new minister, Matthew Shackelford, will be installed in a special service at 10:30 a.m. on Jan. 19.

Shackelford comes from Grace Bible Church in Canal Winchester, Ohio, where he was senior pastor for four years. He started serving in church leadership roles in 2000 when he was a college student. He has led churches in Oklahoma, Texas and Southern California.

Olford says there is a palpable sense of hope at Central now.

“What you have is longtime members and others who have bought into the transition, the process that Dan was overseeing, and are very

hopeful and very supportive of the growing through the process we have just completed.

“Ministry can be messy. People’s lives can be messy. Church life can be messy. The way I like to view it is the people who remained are very hopeful. I was on the search committee for the new pastor. I have very high expectations for him.”

## TOPICS

JIM LEE

CENTRAL CHURCH

DAVID OLFORD

GENE SAULS

TOM HARRIS

DAN WERTHMAN

INTERIM PASTOR MINISTRIES



### **Jane Roberts**

Longtime journalist Jane Roberts is a Minnesotan by birth and a Memphian by choice. She’s lived and reported in the city more than two decades.

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