

Pastoral Transitions: Ten Things Churches Need To Consider

1) *There Are Helpful, Biblical Examples of Transition*

While the Bible doesn't set forth a fully developed theology of ministerial transition, it does provide examples in which one spiritual leader succeeded another (e.g., Moses/Joshua [Dt 31], David/Solomon [1 Kgs 1], Elijah/Elisha [2 Kgs 2]). In some cases, the previous leader had served for many years. These transitions resulted in different outcomes, with the succeeding leader attaining varying levels of success and acceptance by God's people. Studying the biblical examples related to transition reminds us of God's interest in ministry transitions and can help us understand how to navigate the waters of change.

2) *Departing Pastors: Prepare Your Congregation*

The departing pastor can demonstrate care for the congregation and enhance the transition process by helping them prepare adequately for his departure. One way to help is to lead the Session in developing a transition or succession plan, and have that plan in place before he considers leaving. Whether or not a plan is in place when he announces his desire to make a transition, the pastor plays a key role in preparing the congregation for the process that lies ahead. Through personal conversation and writing, he should help the congregation understand the impending search process may be lengthy and must be approached prayerfully. He should urge members to embrace his successor with love and prayer, striving to avoid a critical spirit. By doing so, the pastor equips the congregation to move beyond mere change to genuine transition. Since every pastor will depart at some point, proper care requires the pastor help the congregation be as prepared as possible for that inevitable day.

3) *Expect To Grieve*

Congregations must understand that grief over the departure of a long-time pastor is normal and can be part of a healthy transition process. Over the years, members develop an emotional attachment to the pastor. Church leaders must appreciate the sense of loss and grief the congregation experiences when the pastor leaves. Just as we would not expect someone to quickly "move on" following the death of a close family member, elders should not expect members of their congregations to quickly "move on" following the departure of one with whom they may have had a close spiritual relationship over many years. Of course, the attachment of members to a former pastor can become problematic, even idolatrous, if they refuse to recognize the legitimate position of the new pastor. Yet, just as we are to *grieve in hope* when a believer dies (1 Thessalonians 4:13), Christians amid a pastoral transitions can grieve in hope because Christ is sufficient for the church he loves.

4) *Don't Underestimate the Value of Prayer*

This may seem obvious, but prayer does not always happen to a large degree in the midst of pastoral transitions, at least not in an organized way. By coordinating and encouraging times of congregational prayer before and during a pastoral search, the leadership involves the members in the transition process in a healthy way and helps a church enjoy a key means of God's grace.

5) *Sessions: Strike the Right Balance with the Search Committee*

There is a delicate balance when it comes to Sessional involvement with search committees. A Session can provide helpful guidance to search committees as they begin their work. A lack of guidance on the front end at times leaves committee members feeling somewhat helpless. The work of search committees is usually more efficient if Sessions formulate pastoral and congregational profiles before the committee begins its work. These profiles help the committee compare and pursue candidates who match the general parameters of the congregation. By developing these profiles, the Session plays a valuable

leadership role. Once a committee begins its work, however, the Session must not interfere or place any kind of pressure on those the congregation has elected to find a new pastor.

6) *Search Committees: Don't Look For Mr. Clone - Or Mr. Opposite.*

Churches sometimes seek a successor who is just like - or just the opposite of - his predecessor. Both choices are mistakes. An exact copy of the previous pastor doesn't exist, and pursuing such a candidate is not only fruitless but also keeps the congregation focused on the past instead of moving toward the future. Searching for the other extreme - a pastor who is the opposite of his predecessor - is problematic as well. While this kind of successor may have gifts his predecessor did not possess, he will most likely be lacking in other areas which are important to the health of the congregation.

The successor needs to possess those ministry strengths of the predecessor that helped define the ministerial character and approach of the congregation. A congregation *can* benefit from a new pastor who possesses ministerial gifts that the previous pastor did not have. However, the search committee should investigate whether he exercises those gifts in humility, in submission to his fellow elders, and in pursuit of the edification of the body of Christ.

7) *Don't Rush - Be Patient*

While it is possible that the search process can be finished relatively quickly with a pastoral call extended to just the right man, it's also quite possible that the process will take a considerable length of time. The failure of a search committee to locate quickly a candidate to recommend is not an indication that the committee is failing to do its job. A period of vacancy can actually be God's gift to a congregation. Decisions that are rushed or pressured are typically not going to be good ones. Sessions, as well as congregations, can serve search committees well by allowing them to do what they have been charged to do, even if the process seems to be taking a long time. Quality of fit for the new pastor - rather than speed of the search process - must be the desire of the church.

8) *Congregations: Be Realistic in Your Expectations*

Some people will probably leave the church after the pastor departs - expect it. At the same time, you can also expect new people to come under the ministry of the new pastor. Once the new pastor arrives, members should examine whether the expectations they have for him are realistic. For example, the new pastor will not know the names of every member when he begins his ministry. He will be different from his predecessor in his temperament, in his mix of spiritual gifts, and in his ministry emphases. If members 1) allow the new pastor to be the man God has made and gifted him to be, 2) give him an opportunity to minister, and 3) seek to minister with him, as well as to him and his family, then it's quite possible his ministry will be long and fruitful.

9) *Pastors: Honor Each Other*

The attitudes of the predecessor and the successor are key to a good transition. A humble willingness to honor one's predecessor will help provide the successor with a good beginning in his new place of ministry. Honoring the predecessor helps build "relational capital" with church members who loved their former pastor. Likewise, the former pastor should not tolerate other people speaking negatively to him about the new pastor. Instead, the predecessor must be an enthusiastic cheerleader for the successor.

10) *Remember: Transitions Really Can Go Well!*

Though conventional wisdom often says otherwise, pastoral transitions are not doomed to failure, even if a popular, long-term pastor is being replaced. Ministry transitions may be hard, but Jesus cares for his church and knows her needs. We can trust him, his plans for his people, and his presence with us.