

Addressing Issues in Pastoral Transitions

By the
Mid-America Union Local Conference Ministerial Directors Team
Started January 27, 2016

Introduction

Jesus seems to have thought that planning for transitions was important. According to Mark 3.14, Jesus called the 12 to be *with* Him. Jesus assigned them tasks and supervised their work. He sent them out preaching and then debriefed them. It was clearly an apprenticeship role with increasing responsibilities over time. He was nurturing leaders who would take His place after His ascension. Following this pattern, Paul invested heavily in Timothy. Elijah/Elisha also come to mind.

The Old Testament has stories of abrupt and violent succession stories. Generally, death was the succession plan for the kings in the Biblical narrative!

While even our botched succession plans for pastoral positions in local churches are a far cry better than death, honesty requires that we admit that far too often we are inconsistent in how pastors are moved, how the decisions are made, what voice a pastor or a local church has in the decisions, and how pastors and churches are prepared for and helped through these transitions. We all know stories of hurt and damage that have come out of pastoral transitions – some of us have experienced such hurt and damage personally.

In an effort to do whatever we can to help make pastoral transitions healthy and growth-producing for both pastor and church, we launch this effort to surface a range of issues that can be addressed in virtually every pastoral transition. Even if some of what we will raise here is simply the obvious, just being reminded of them might cause us to put some things in play that will truly be a blessing to our work force and our congregations.

Even with all this as reasonable motivation to give pastoral transitions a close look, we have some objective information on which to lean from the 2014 study on Stressors in Pastoral Families conducted by AU at NAD Ministerial's request that tells us that there is a serious, significant need to wade in:

Moving Stressors – The majority of pastors and spouses reported at least mild stress when their families faced the possibility of moving and because the decision to move was made, not by the pastor and the family but rather by external others. Nearly half of pastors and spouses feel at least mild stress when they have to balance the needs of their families with accepting a call to move.

Recommendations: ... Consideration must be given to the policy of frequent moves for pastors. The needs of pastoral families as well as the conference [and the local church] should be considered. (page 6)

Also in the report, there were financial implications raised when moves come into play:

Consistently...concerns and stressors around finances emerged. All family members felt that there were insufficient resources to meet the expectations that children would be educated in Adventist schools, live middle class life styles and have sufficient funds for retirement. Both data sets also suggest that salary issues also placed expectations that spouses would work and that pastoral moves made a spouse's career difficult. (page 16)

As Ministerial Directors, we can't do much about how our local conference presidents choose to handle personnel issues – but we can still play a pivotal role when pastoral transitions occur. In fact, there is a wide range of opportunities for Ministerial Directors to constructively enter the world of pastors and congregations during times of transition.

Far too often pastors and/or local churches can feel that they faced either heavy-handed directives from conference administrators, or they received little to no contact/coaching during the process.

Not only are significant ministry opportunities lost when either of the above extreme approaches are used, issues with either the pastor or the congregation are not adequately addressed, often leaving long-entrenched patterns to simply be perpetuated. Many of these patterns can poison the well of a new ministry when a fresh pastorate starts there.

Appropriate involvement with both pastor and congregation may well lead to a healthier, longer-lasting relationship that should require less trouble-shooting and crisis management later on.

On its own merit, pastoring pastors through these transition points is doing God's work. Even pastors who may at first feel no need of receiving the ministry of another may well be surprised at how much the caring and careful involvement of their pastor (Ministerial Director) may mean to them or to their family.

Finally, in today's world, more and more churches ask for a voice and a role in choosing their next pastor. While these desires are perfectly understandable, often the direct involvement of the local church leadership is clumsy, inappropriate, and sometimes even damaging. Training and equipping local churches for this task is critical to make sure that neither an outgoing or prospective incoming pastor, nor the church is in any way damaged by well-intentioned efforts.

Range of Issues to be Addressed

Among the issues that rightly fall into the domain of this study:

- Role of the ministerial director and conference administrators
- Before a pastor knows they are leaving
- When a pastor leaves
- Time in between assignments for pastors
- When a pastor enters
- Time in between pastors for congregations
- Candidating
- The search process and the role of the Spirit's leading
- The transition process
- Interim pastorates
- Crisis Transitions
- Retirements

Partial Resource List

General Transition Titles

The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken About Pastoral Transitions, Carolyn Weese & J. Russell Crabtree, Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Next: Pastoral Succession that Works, William Vanderbloemen & Warren Bird, Baker Books, 2014.

Titles on Leaving a Church/Ministry

Saying Goodbye, Edward A. White, Editor, Alban Institute, 1990.

Ten Commandments for Pastors Leaving a Congregation, Lawrence W. Farris, Eerdmans, 2006.

Leaving Church, Barbara Brown Taylor, Harper San Francisco, 2006.

The Graceful Exit, Mary C. Lindberg, Alban Institute, 2013.

Titles on Entering a Church

The Pastor's Start-up Manual: Beginning a New Pastorate, Herb Miller, Editor, Abingdon, 1995.

A New Beginning for Pastors and Congregations, Kennon L. Callahan, Josey-Bass, 1999.

Ten Commandments for Pastors New to a Congregation, Lawrence W. Farris, Eerdmans, 2003.

Titles for Pastoral Formation & Pastoral Self-Understanding

Under the Unpredictable Plant, Eugene Peterson, Eerdmans 1992.

Decision Making and the Will of God, Garry Friesen, Multnomah Books, 25th Anniversary Edition, 2004.

Working the Angles, Eugene H. Peterson, Eerdmans, 1987.

Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work, Eugene H. Peterson, Eerdmans, 1980.

Deepening Your Conversation with God, Ben Patterson, Bethany House, 1999.

The Power of Loving Your Church, David Hansen, Bethany House, 1998.

StrengthsFinder 2.0, Tom Rath, Gallup.

The Small Membership Church, Lyle Schaller, 1995.

Titles for Understanding a Church

Generation to Generation, Edwin Friedman, Guilford, 1985.

Who Stole My Church? Gordon McDonald, Thomas Nelson, 2007

Healthy Congregations, Peter L. Steinke, Alban Institute, 2006.

Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times, Peter L. Steinke, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

The Hidden Lives of Congregations, Israel Galindo, Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

Perspectives on Congregational Leadership: Applying Systems Thinking for Effective Leadership, Israel Galindo, Educational Consultants, 2009.

The Emotionally Healthy Church, Peter Scazzero, Zondervan, Updated and Expanded Edition, 2010.

The Small Membership Church, Lyle Schaller, 1995.

Issues to be Addressed

Role of Ministerial Director and Conference Administrations

Because each local conference administration, with the advice and consent of their Executive Committee, has wide latitude in how pastoral placements and moves are handled, it would seem appropriate that workers in a given field know the answers to these questions:

- What is administration's typical involvement during a pastoral transition?
- What is the Ministerial Director's typical involvement during a pastoral transition?
- Is it consistent?
- Does your work force understand clearly the roles you and your administration have during transitions?
- Do you have a safe process in place where pastors can share their aspirations about where their ministry might head in the future? If so, do they know whom to talk with?
- Do your pastors have a voice in their own movements?
- What appeal processes are in place if they feel they are being moved out of a situation they still want to stay in or if they are willing to move but just not to where the conference wants them to go?
- What freedom does your administration give you to become involved with either pastor or church during a transition?
- Does your conference have a standardized church evaluation that can be regularly updated and kept available? Would this be an administrative function (generally conference secretary/VP for admin), or would this come under Ministerial?

It is suggest that from time to time at various pastoral meetings that some of these questions are surfaced and openly discussed. Not only would new-to-the-conference pastors appreciate hearing how things will work when the day comes that they will be transitioning, but even longer-term pastors in the conference tend to forget such things unless they are reminded.

Before a Pastor Even Knows They are Leaving

“Every Pastor is an Interim Pastor.”

Next, Introduction, page 9.

Well before a pastor is ready to leave or even thinking about it, what are some of the things he/she can be doing to prepare them for when that day comes? Some ideas:

1. Help them be proactive in learning about themselves:
 - Personality/ministry style assessment (using Schaller’s suggestion of “1st Great Commandment Churches and 2nd Great Commandment Churches can also be applied to pastors as well. See his book “The Small Membership Church” for his explanation of this. He observes that many pastor/church conflicts arise because a 1st Great Commandment Pastor is assigned to a 2nd Great Commandment church and vice versa. We need to do a better job of matching pastors and congregations!)
 - Strengths Finder
 - TJTA/16 PF/Myers-Briggs/DISC
 - Coaching/Visioning
 - Core Qualities
 - Pastoral Evaluation
2. Give them some important books to read to solidify their own pastoral formation/theology
 - Under the Unpredictable Plant, Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work, or Working the Angles, all by Eugene Peterson
3. Give them tools to help them determine if they are in a healthy place with their current congregation. Expose them to some helpful Family Systems theory books or seminars
 - Help them watch for potentially unhealthy scenarios:

A special “captivity” – one that is incredibly hard to break free of – is what I call the “romance.” The pastor and the congregation “fall in love.” System theory calls it being emotionally “stuck together”. It happens with long pastorates of twenty to thirty years. It can just as easily happen in the short pastorates of four to six years, especially if the pastor developed the congregation.

Romance is blindness to reality. It is illusion. Romantics idealize one another. Being myopic, they are selective about what they are aware of and remember. Faults and deficits are largely invisible. Romance is being under an anesthetic or a spell.

When pastor and congregation fall in love, they have a “tie that binds.” The pastor is regarded as “one of a kind.” Compared to other clergy, Rev. Special is far superior. In return, the adoring congregation is rewarded with “good feelings” and a specialness of its own.

Usually the pastor is charming, ambitious, outwardly confident, always cheerful, and positive. Quite often the pastor excels as a crisis counselor or as a “rainmaker,” bringing in people and money. Very few pastors in these situations care about the rigors of thinking. They want to touch the heart. As a rule, the pastor’s sermons are anecdotal, folksy, upbeat, and motivational. The people are enchanted. It’s as if the Sunday worship service provides a narcotic or fix. More appropriate to romance, worship is an aphrodisiac.

Both parties have an attachment problem. Clergy and congregation are too emotionally entwined. Without sufficient distance, they cannot see each other clearly. Their romance, though, is a spurious wholeness. The two sides project positively onto one another. Thus the one cannot change or disappoint the other because that would alter the relationship arrangement. To maintain the romantic glow, each party plays its role. This is the deal: you soothe and stroke me, I’ll soothe and stroke you. When people become overinvested and fixated on one another, they are emotionally fused. In *Intimate Worlds*, Maggie Scarf depicts a fused family in which one family member says, “When one of us has a headache, we all take an aspirin.”

Realistically many pastor-congregation relationships are romantic. When a pastor first arrives, the period is called the “honeymoon.” If it goes on and on, the romance has started. Two parties dissolve into one. Any movement toward differentiation is considered treasonous. If, however, one of the parties fails to match the partner’s ideal, what was once “kisses and roses” turns into “scowls and lemons.” Or if one of the partners gains awareness, breaking through the romantic spell, that party will function in new ways. The second party becomes upset, does everything possible to return the relationship to the former pattern, and short of that, turs against the other. Blackmail tactics replace honeymoon tactics. Either way, the two parties are emotionally stuck together.

Of course, the opposite type of relationship can develop, too. Pastor and congregation never connect. Either the pastor leaves in one or two years or the congregation sees to it that it happens. Instead of romance, the two parties fear getting too close. This is also an emotional arrangement. Like romance, the alienation is a rigid pattern of functioning. Both parties create enemies.

Many years ago, theologian Richard Niebuhr declared that the purpose of the ministry and the congregation is “the increase of the love of God and neighbor.” By love, Niebuhr meant an attitude of gratitude and respect: “Love is reverence; it keeps its distance even as it draws near; it does not

seek to absorb the other into the self or want to be absorbed by it.” This is a stark contrast to a romantic relationship or an alienated one between pastor and congregation.

Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach, Peter L. Steinke, p 79-81.

4. Help our pastors to *not* become the clergy equivalent of Brett Favre:

Brett Favre is one of the most decorated quarterbacks in NFL history. His legacy is largely defined by gritty, gutsy play. That kind of courage and the confidence that comes with it are a big part of what made Brett Favre one of the best.

But his legacy is now also defined by his inability to recognize when it was time to move on. When it came time to find a new future, Brett didn't end well. He retired, then un-retired several times. He kept believing that he had one more year in him, even when his body and performance clearly told him otherwise. His series of transitions was so tragic that it even became the butt of late-night television jokes.

What does Brett Favre have to do with pastoral succession, including those who are still far from actual retirement?

A person's greatest strengths, when unguarded, can become that same person's greatest weakness. And Favre's story, like that of so many other aging athletes who stay one too many seasons, is played out in churches by highly competent pastors far too often. In ministry, a pastor's confidence, one of the qualities God uses to build a church – can become one of the biggest obstacles to pastoral succession. The very voice of confidence that overcomes a fear of public speaking and enables a pastor for years to get up in front of the congregation and boldly proclaim God's Word – that voice, if unchecked, can also whisper in the pastor's ear, “You've got another good year or two in you.”

The voice may have many different translations: “Stay, because this church still needs you,” or, “You've been here so long that you can do things a newcomer couldn't,” or even “This church owes a great debt to you that you need to receive and cherish here.”

And so begins the far-too-often-played story of the pastor who keeps hanging on, long after the vision and energy for the current ministry are gone, long after the community around the church has changed, or long after the congregation has stagnated.

No pastor wants that for a legacy. No pastor wants to be the leader who walks out of a meeting, only to be the subject of the next conversation that centers around, “How do we tell Pastor that we think it's time to consider a change?”

So how do you know when your time has come to let go? What questions can pastors and their trusted advisors ask and discuss that would help them decide whether or not they really have one more year?

Next, page 48-49.

Suggested questions for pastors to ask themselves about the health of their relationship with the church:

1. What markers can I see that tell me that my relationship with the church is a healthy one?
2. Are there issues I've been unable or unwilling to deal with that would be good for the health of the church or my relationship with the church if addressed?
3. What long-standing issues do I see that may be holding the church back from really being the force for the kingdom we'd like it to be?
4. What's next?
5. Where do I see myself in, say, 5 years?
6. Do I have the gift mix necessary to help the church move to their next level of kingdom progress?

When a Pastor Leaves

Coaching Opportunity: While new pastors definitely need some coaching on how to leave, it's striking how often even seasoned pastors could use some coaching during a transition out of a ministry.

A pastor might never ask for some coaching, and may even be resistant if it was offered to him or her straight up. To provide coaching without barriers being raised, perhaps offering to take the pastor and their spouse out for dinner as soon as is practical once the transition is definite would give you an entrée point to have a coaching conversation with the pastoral couple. Some useful questions to ask them might be:

- So what will you remember with the greatest fondness/fulfillment from your time here?
- What do you sense is yet undone?
- Are there situations that you can tie up before you leave that will make things easier for your successor?
- How is this move impacting your family?
- How have the members of the church family you are leaving responding to the news?
- What are you thinking about saying to your people in your last few sermons?

- How would you like to be remembered here?
- What do you think the conference should know about this church and its unique characteristics, potential, downsides, etc?
- What have you learned about ministry during your time here?
- What have you learned about yourself during your time here?
- What are the gifts God has given you that really clicked with this congregation?
- What kind of relationship did you have with your church leadership team?
- What would you like to say to your successor about the church leadership team?

Their answers to these questions would open many opportunities for coaching, and may well lead to extended conversations later on.

If a pastor really isn't getting it and you think they might benefit from a more concrete approach, try getting them a copy of *Ten Commandments for Pastors Leaving a Congregation* by Lawrence W. Farris. Some highlights of his 10:

I. Thou shalt know when it is time to go

How does a pastor know when it is time to leave? Long, comfortable, satisfying pastorates may keep that question on the back burner – so much so that it might not even be on the stove. By contrast, highly conflicted pastorates in which the pastor is enmeshed in the conflict may relentlessly push the question into everyone's consciousness. But as most pastors will move at least a few times over the course of their ministry, and all will one day retire, the question is inevitable. Giving some regular attention to it – perhaps on a yearly basis during a retreat time or in consultation with a spiritual director or mentor or supervisor – is the first step in leaving well. Asking, "When do I leave?" is a crucial and ongoing aspect of evaluating the impact and continuing value of pastoral leadership. Page 2.

II. Thou shalt explain thyself

Whatever the reason for making a pastoral move, once the decision has been made, it is essential to explain it to the congregation to the best of one's ability.

What will help is the thoughtful sharing of what deliberations the pastor has gone through in contemplating this change. The occasion of a move gives the pastor an excellent opportunity to speak theologically about what is meant by the term "call" in the particular tradition of which the congregation is a part. What is the combination of internal and external

considerations that help Christians discern a call? What are the roles of prayer, spiritual guidance, and consultation with others? Making a vocational change is not, after all, an experience restricted to the clergy. All Christians, to a greater or less extent, depending on their tradition, have some understanding of being called to serve God. All Christians want to live in a way pleasing to God and not just to themselves. How does a layperson comprehend the concept of calling? As the departing pastor explains the inward and outward movements in her life, she can help the members of her congregation begin to comprehend how they, too, might better sense the leading of God. Page 17-19.

III. Thou shalt not steal away

Leaving a congregation with which one has enjoyed pleasant years of mutual ministry can be a time of strong emotions, albeit more positive ones, in which it is tempting to “steal away,” giving very short notice and trying to simply slip away almost unnoticed, as if it were possible to end-run all the deep feelings a pastoral transition evokes. Perhaps the most essential reason to give ample notice of a departure – three months, on average – is to allow adequate time for pastor and congregation to say goodbye with depth, honesty, and gratitude. Will it be easy? Probably not. Will it be worthwhile? Absolutely. Page 27.

IV. Thou shalt affirm thy congregation’s ministry

When it comes time for a pastor to leave, in most instances the congregation will host an event to honor the departing pastor’s ministry with them. Such occasions are often marked by heartfelt remembrances, humorous anecdotes, and the giving of gifts to symbolize the congregation’s gratitude. But the departing pastor also has a gift to bestow in the months of leave-taking, a gift of vital importance. It is the gift of bringing to the congregation’s consciousness what has been wrought over the years of his or her pastorate. One pastor put it this way: “As they celebrate your ministry, make sure to celebrate theirs.” Page 36.

V. Thou shalt try to mend fences

While most relationships with church members will have been good and nourishing, it is inevitable that there will also have been individuals with whom pastors have had personality conflicts, significant differences of opinion on anything from theology to paving the parsonage driveway, or hurt feelings from words spoken in the midst of personal crisis.

While it may be tempting to “shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that town” with regard to such folks, this is not in the best interest of either pastor or parishioner, to say nothing of one’s Christian responsibility to work through such difficulties. There may also be the temptation to speak words bitten back for years, to fire a parting shot in a conflict at a time when there is little chance for retaliation. Yielding to

such temptation – and many departing pastors do, unfortunately – will tarnish the pastor’s reputation and elicit feelings of guilt when the momentary satisfaction of the skewering remark, scathingly delivered, passes. Page 43-44.

VI. Thou shalt help thy successor have a good beginning

Here are two questions for the departing pastor to ponder: What do you know now that you wish you had known when you started the pastorate you are now leaving? As an act of gracious collegiality and Christian fellowship, why not share this information with your successor?

Leaving a good and clear set of tracks for one’s successor will not only benefit him; it will also help minimize the inevitable loss of momentum the congregation will experience during the pastoral transition. Two items, a map and a history, will prove most useful. An old Arab proverb says that if you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there. Having a clear sense of where the congregation has been prior to his arrival on the scene can play a big role in helping a new pastor figure out which direction to go. Page 53.

VII. Thou shalt be gentle with thyself

The first six commandments have proposed a considerable amount of hard labor for the departing pastor—explanations to give, farewell calls to make, histories to write, instructions to leave. And all the while, many of the regular demands of ministry will continue unabated—emergent pastoral needs, committee meetings, and, of course, what Calvin Didier once termed “the haunting sweet agony of next Sunday’s sermon.” Unsurprisingly, the pastor’s self-care is the thing most likely to get lost in the midst of all these claims on his or her time and energy. We can become so busy meeting other’s needs—our parishioner’s’, our successor’s, our family’s – that attentiveness to our ongoing and essential needs is easily lost in the frenzied shuffle of the eschatological days of a pastorate. Page 59.

VIII. Thou shalt attend to thy family

The decision to move impacts pastors’ families as profoundly as it does pastors themselves. Most likely family members will share in the range of emotions—from anger to sadness to excitement to regret to anxiety, and most everything in between—moving within the pastor during a time of transition. There will be stress for each family member as their friendships are stretched by distance. Spouses may resent being uprooted from jobs they enjoy, or they may be glad to explore new opportunities. Children may be dismayed to be uprooted from a familiar school and church, and all the activities—music, drama, sports, clubs, youth groups—associated with them, or they may be excited about the adventures to come. If the pastorate being left was marked by conflict, the whole family may breathe

a sigh of relief about the leaving. In other situations, family members may be angry at having to leave behind much that has brought them happiness, identity, and security.

The dynamics of the transition can also be more difficult by virtue of the truth that the pastor cannot pastor his or her own family. To try to add that role to those of spouse and parent is to wear far too many hats, probably none of them well. Nonetheless, he or she can listen and support, all the while being attentive to their needs. The pastor must never allow the work of seeking closure with the congregation to become an excuse for ignoring his or her family's needs. Pages 65 & 66

IX. Thou shalt (usually) stay away once thou hast left

There is no universal policy that dictates the appropriate relationship between a pastor and his or her former parish. Some denominations strictly limit contact, permitting neither conversation with parishioners about church life nor functioning in any pastoral capacity (such as officiating at weddings or funerals) except upon explicit invitation of the governing board or current pastor. Others set no limits at all on these interactions, trusting that the former pastor will not interfere with congregational life nor with successor's ability to lead, and that any problems which do arise can be resolved amicably.

However, there is often a strong temptation to keep in touch with a former parish and some of its members, which is understandable, considering that the willingness to enter into a deep, committed relationship with a congregation and its people is an essential part of effective pastoring. When that relationship comes to an end, particularly if the relationship has been healthy, a pastor is concerned that the people he or she cared for will continue to be cared for well. It is usually easier for the departed pastor to keep an appropriate distance if the new pastor seems to be doing well. But if cherished ministries that took enormous energy to develop and implement begin to be compromised, if well-established traditions and norms are disregarded or trampled, or if pastoral needs go unmet, the temptation for the departed pastor to raise questions, give advice, offer criticism, commiserate about how much better things used to be, or otherwise meddle may grow irresistible.

Yet these temptations must be resisted. Pages 73 & 74

X. Thou shalt grieve

You have done all your farewells. You have left good feelings and good summaries behind. You have done what you can to resolve conflict and reconcile relationships. You have looked to the needs of yourself, your friends, and your family. You have stayed away once you have left. There is only one more task necessary in order to leave well.

You must grieve.

Perhaps it feels like this is exactly what you have been doing all through the process of leaving. And truly, many of the actions laid out in these commandments will help with the essential parts of grief work. But some grieving can only be done once the separation is completed, the move is made, and the former context is gone.

Once we are in retirement or serving with a new congregation, there is an understandably strong temptation to throw ourselves—heart, mind, body, and soul—into the new challenges. So much to learn, so many people to get to know, so many new possibilities! Who has time to grieve? The wise pastor, that's who. Page 81-82

Additional areas in which coaching may be helpful:

- The Final Sermons – Dos and Don'ts
- Taking care of the pastor's family
- What if it's a contentious departure?
- General ethics during the transition

Time Between Assignments for Pastors

There are at least three valid reasons for providing a small break between assignments for the pastor because it allows him/her:

- Time to breathe and recover from the recent departure of their prior church
- Time to learn more about the ministry setting they are about to enter
- Time to gather up fresh energy so that they are ready to bolt out of the starting gate.

How long should a conference give a pastor between assignments?

- I suggest 2 to 3 weeks at least, exclusive of move

*** If you make this a policy, then local churches will not hold it against the pastor if he/she is a couple weeks later in getting started

What should be expected of the pastor during this time?

- Study the history of its church (once we begin to do this systematically, then there will be material available for the pastor to read during this time)
- Chats with outgoing pastor

- Chats with one or two prime leaders
- Much prayer and listening time
- Initial preaching themes considered and put into place – give a series of moderate length that lays out your basic understanding of who God is and why He is winsome to those who want real life, preferably drawn from past sermonic material.

This provides the new congregation with an overview of what themes about God are formative to your own spiritual experience, plus it frees you up to finish unpacking and get your initial visiting/contacting done without the pressure of having to create new sermons right away