

Is It Time for a Change?

Sooner or later every pastor will leave the congregation. But when should this happen? Who decides when it is time, and by what criteria? Many pastors stay in a congregation for 10 to 12 years, but some leave after two or three, and others have pastorates as long as 20 or more years. Whether the pastorate is comparatively long or short, the way the decision for change is made has a profound effect on the church and the pastor.

A messy “involuntary termination” initiated by the congregation (or, more often, a faction within the congregation) creates problems for the pastor and the pastor’s family. Less obviously, but equally important, it creates long-term problems in the congregation. Likewise, a unilateral and untimely decision by a pastor to leave can be detrimental for all concerned. The healthiest way to deal with the timing of a pastoral change is through mutual discernment at pre-determined times in the congregation’s life. Following are two different models for determining when such a decision should be made, and several sets of questions to be weighed in discerning whether a change should happen.

A. Two models for pastoral staff contracts

Two unsatisfactory models of pastoral contracts have influenced the kinds of contracts commonly used today. One inadequate pattern was for the pastor to stay until he/she decided to leave. In this arrangement the congregation had no recourse to release an incompetent or unsuitable pastor. The other pattern was an annual vote, which gave all the power to the congregation in determining length of tenure and which produced many bad experiences for pastors and congregations alike. Most congregations now use one of the following models.

1. Fixed-term contract: Some congregations are calling their pastoral leaders for a fixed-term contract of three, four or five years. This model should include on-going conversation and annual reviews as in the open-ended model. Toward the end of the term a major congregational review is conducted to allow for extensive assessment of congregational needs/expectations and to be compared with the information gathered from a review of the pastor’s performance and/or job description.
2. The open-ended term: In this model the pastor is called without a specific time limit of service but with an annual review. In other words, the question of continuation or termination is not raised annually but there is ongoing conversation about job satisfaction, performance, work load balance, review of job description, and an airing of congregational or pastoral concerns. This model allows for flexibility but need not create uncertainty if there is a relationship of mutual trust. The key is ongoing communication and review.

In both of these models it is important that there be on-going attention to the relationship between pastor and congregation.

- a. The PCRC meets regularly with the pastor to listen and share. This provides a context for processing issues as they arise.

- b. Some type of annual evaluation should be held to review the pastor's work and to receive leadership concerns from the congregation. Another option is to review both the congregation and the pastor. (See in this packet "Pastoral Review Process and Procedures.") The process should allow for possible adjustment to the job description and for review of the salary. The annual review is done by a committee appointed by the Church Council or Board and should include a member of the PCRC. Should issues emerge in any annual review or in an end-of-term review which call into question the pastor's continuing ministry within the congregation, the evaluating group should spend an adequate period of time (possibly six months) to sort out the issues to determine whether they can be resolved. It is very important in this process to use the resources of the area conference minister or someone designated by the Ministerial Leadership Committee of the area conference. The outcome of this discernment determines whether a mutual decision is made to continue or terminate.

The difference between these two models is that in the fixed-term model an explicit decision needs to be made whether to extend a call for the pastor to continue. A recommendation should be formulated by the appropriate leadership body for action by the congregation. The most common pattern is to agree ahead of time, if voting, on the percentage needed to validate the call. Some congregations use a consensus method. If the latter method is used, there should be adequate opportunity for testing the mood or opinion of the congregation.

In either model the length of the termination notice should normally be a minimum of three months. The same applies if a contract must be terminated mid-term by either the pastor or the congregation. And where confidence has broken down or severe problems exist the pastor should receive a minimum of three months salary in severance pay and be asked to leave immediately. (The contract or memorandum of understanding between pastor and congregation should state how much notice of termination must be given by either party.)

B. Questions to ponder about when considering continuation or termination

1. Opportunities for growth and change

- a. Is the pastor continuing to lead the congregation so that there is vital and meaningful growth in the life of the congregation? Where have the significant areas of growth been and what areas need attention? Does the pastor have the necessary gifts and skills to help the congregation to respond to these needs? If not, are there alternative ways of responding to these needs under the pastor's leadership or is a change of leadership indicated?
- b. Is there a continuing sense of trust in the pastor's leadership? Has the pastor "earned" the right to lead?
- c. Is the pastor continuing to grow in this context? Are there new challenges and cutting edges? Is there a freshness and relevance apparent in the pastor's leadership?

2. Emotional and interpersonal dimensions

- a. Does the pastor maintain a sense of enthusiasm for his or her work?
- b. Does the feeling of repetition and desire for newness call for a change?
- c. Are the congregation and the pastor relatively free to work at unresolved hurts and tensions?

3. Communication level

- a. Is there a good communication level between pastor and people?
- b. Are the pastor's ideas and concerns readily heard?

4. Family considerations

- a. If the pastor is married, what are the implications of a job change—especially if the spouse is working?
- b. Are there natural transition points where children are involved?

5. **Life cycle factors**
 - a. What vocational considerations are present in relation to the pastor's age, varied experiences, desires, continuing educational needs?
 - b. What are the particular needs, emphases, or leadership style needed within the congregation?
 - c. If the person is getting close to retirement age, it may be best to complete the final two or three years in that context. It is not normally helpful to wait more than two or three years until retirement if other factors indicate the need for a change in leadership.

6. **Broader church considerations**
 - a. Where can a pastor's leadership gifts be used best at any given time throughout the church? Where does the church need this person at this time?
 - b. Has the decision to stay or move been adequately tested with trusted persons not only within but also outside the congregation? (This procedure is based on the premise that God speaks through the community of faith and that there is accountability to that larger community in decision-making.)

7. **Discerning God's will**
 - a. Has the congregation and/or the discernment committee spent time together in Bible study, meditation, and prayer, seeking the leading of the Spirit?
 - b. Has the group identified what factors or considerations will be used in determining God's leading? Attention should not only be given to external circumstances but also to the inner guidance of God's Spirit as discerned in the group.

C. When a pastor decides to leave

Sometimes a pastor discerns independently of a congregational process that it is time to leave. This discernment should take into account all the above considerations, but it may also grow out of a call to another place of service or other internal or external factors.

It is recommended that a pastor come to this decision through conversation with the area conference minister and other confidants outside the congregation. In some cases the PCRC may be helpful in weighing the congregation's needs along with the pastor's needs and opportunities. It is usually wise to inform the congregational chairperson that one is considering a change, but it is not wise to involve the whole congregation in such decisions. Many members will lose trust in a pastor who is known to be considering a move.

Normally it is not wise to resign from a congregation before finding another ministry call. This often leads to an arbitrarily small window of opportunity for finding a place to serve, which creates unnecessary anxiety and sometimes results in unwise haste in making that decision.

D. Ready for the next step?

Counsel for the transition process is found in the "Transitions" document in this packet. Additional resources can be found in two related packets: "Ministry Transitions: The Candidate Version" and "Ministry Transitions: The Congregational Search Committee Version." These resource packets are available from the offices of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, as well as on the MC USA web site.

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