

Transitions

The transition point in pastoral ministry is a time of high anxiety, great opportunity and considerable risk. A bad departure can undo much of the positive ministry that has been offered over years of service. First impressions at the beginning of a pastorate will influence the relationship for a long time. A number of books and articles have been written about the crucial events of pastoral transitions. Following are some observations to stimulate thinking and actions that might be appropriate in your local setting.

A. **When a pastor leaves**

Separation is a time of grief, especially where relationships have been close. It is a time to identify gratitude for the good dimensions of the past relationship. Depending on the circumstances, the time of leaving is also a time of remembering painful incidents and disappointments. For the pastor (and the pastor's family) and the congregation this is also a time of anxiety as they anticipate a largely unknown future. All of these emotions need to be recognized and processed. It is highly recommended that an exit interview be held with the pastor to process any issues or concerns around the transition of leaving brought by either the pastor or the congregation. Take note of "A guideline for pastoral exit interview" in the PCRC Packet.

1. **Personal needs**

Recognize and express your feelings to the pastor. These may include expressions of appreciation, regret at seeing the pastor leave, wishing God's blessing, and so forth. If there are unresolved negative feelings, identify them and seek resolution—with the help of a third party if necessary. Personal contacts are important, but be sensitive to time limits and the emotional strain of numerous family home visits during those last months.

2. **Community activities**

Plan for public event(s) where social and worship celebration events can highlight the feelings of the congregation in relation to the pastor. Storytelling, reminiscing, gift giving and saying "thank you" all help in saying goodbye. These public events also help to reinforce the awareness that the pastor is leaving. Community farewell events are very important even when there are negative emotions and issues around the departure.

3. **Letting go**

Let your pastor go so that you are free to receive the new pastor. It is professionally unethical for a former pastor to maintain a pastoral relationship with the congregation and its members. This means that the former pastor does not return for weddings and funerals. Wish him or her God's blessing, recognizing that the transition is a reality. Incidentally,

don't say goodbye prematurely in situations where the resignation is well in advance of the departure. Occasionally, a pastor plans to remain in his or her congregation upon retirement. Our polity guide addresses this situation:

"In cases where it is impossible or unlikely that a pastor will be able to leave his or her congregation after the assignment is finished, an accountability group can be established to manage the "pastor emeritus" stage of ministry." P. 118, 119, "A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership"

4. Administration

Review with the terminating pastor where the official records are kept, files which the new pastor may need, or other special information which may be needed to make the transition smooth.

B. Making interim arrangements*

Experience is showing the church that there is value in having a gap between the previous pastor and the new pastor. It allows a time for the congregation to unhook from the previous leader and to explore the congregation's future leadership needs.

Interim leaders have a specific task to help the congregations make the transition by letting go of the past and begin embracing the future. An interim period could run from a minimum of six months to a maximum of three years depending on congregational circumstances.

The structure of the leadership team will vary depending on local needs and on leadership issues. An interim lay leadership group may well manage a six-month time period. Normally an outside, experienced pastoral person would be more helpful in sorting out the leadership issues. This is not a time for business-as-usual but to work at transition issues. The area conference can provide guidance and resources for the congregation in arranging for leadership during this period.

C. Preparing for and welcoming a new pastor

These ideas grow out of the experiences of persons who have been through pastoral transitions.

1. The church office

- Have the furnishings in place ahead of time.
- Check with the new pastor regarding some personal items and decorating—provide some money to help cover costs.
- Have the name changed on the church sign and in the church bulletin before the pastor arrives.

2. Personal needs

- Check to see whether housing needs are met and adequate, particularly where the church owns a parsonage.
- Check on possible needs and concerns of family members. Be specific as to your availability and resources.
- Be available to help on moving day (assist unpacking, providing meals, and so forth). Of course the congregation will have paid for moving costs, but that does not cover all the work that needs doing.
- Members are encouraged to drop by or phone during the next few days. These can be lonely and bewildering times, especially for persons who are new to the community.

* See the document "Intentional Interim Pastoral Ministry" in this packet.

- If the pastor is moving from another city or town, offer help in finding a doctor, dentist, hairdresser, plumber, lawyer, insurance agent etc.
- If there are children in the pastor's family, link them with children of the same age to introduce them to friends, recreation possibilities, a new school and the local hangouts.

3. Introducing the congregation to the pastor

- Prepare a scrapbook. Each family could prepare a page telling about themselves.
- Church directory with photographs of families.
- When meeting the pastor for a second or third time, volunteer your name – don't keep him or her guessing.
- Be sensitive to particular opportunities to get acquainted; for example, invite the pastor to the youth group meeting, fellowship and so forth.
- Invite the pastor's family to your home.

4. Linking the pastor (and family) to spiritual support structures

- Ensure that the pastor understands the conference support services for pastors
- the pastor to the local ministerial fellowship
- Introduce the pastor to local church resource centres, seminaries, retreat centres etc.

5. Getting started

Give the pastor time to get acquainted – don't expect too much too soon. Possibly there should be a week or two gap between moving in and beginning ministry whether an interim pastor or the long-term pastor.

Adapted from a document by Ralph Lebold
Revised by Sven Eriksson, January 2005

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