

**Leading While Leaving
The Role of a Departing Pastor in
Preparing a Church for a Healthy Pastoral Transition**

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ABSTRACT

The transition from one pastoral leader to another can have a profound impact on a church's immediate and long term future. Research indicates that the key determinant to the congregation's experience through this period is the manner in which the pastor leaves the congregation. This thesis project examines the role a departing pastor has in helping a church experience a healthy transition to a new pastoral leader.

Recently resigned pastors and representative lay people from ten pastorates were interviewed during the pastors' departure period. The interviewer sought to explore the dynamics of the experience, gain a better understanding of the process, and seek principles to assist pastors leading congregations into similar periods of leadership change. These interviews were evaluated and processed in light of previous research and literature on the subject, as well as biblical examples of leadership transitions.

Chapter One explores why pastors choose to leave their churches and how the reasons for their departure can affect the final period of ministry. Chapter Two examines how pastors communicate their departure to the congregation. Chapter Three examines how a pastor personally and professionally deals with the transition so he/she is then able to effectively serve during the final stages of a ministry.

Chapters Four, Five and Six examine three areas pastors should address during their final period of ministry: Relationships (i.e. ministry to the grief process), Ministries (i.e. ensuring the church's ministries are sustained through the transition period), and Future Considerations (i.e. encouraging and assisting the congregation towards a new pastoral relationship). Chapter Seven encourages pastors to consider their congregations' perspective and to help them plan for a healthy transition process.

Leadership transitions are both organizational and emotional. They require intentional, thoughtful and strategic leadership if they are to be completed in a healthy

manner. Even as they leave, pastors who are concerned to fulfill their calling to build up the body of Christ will seek to give their churches the final gift of a good farewell.

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Yes, I am.

Introduction

A selective survey of the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches Directories over the past twenty-four years revealed that, while there has been a decrease in the number of churches undergoing pastoral leadership change each year, at any given moment a significant percentage of congregations were in some phase of that process.

Table 1: Churches of the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches in Stages of Pastoral Leadership Transition 1982-2006

Year	Number of Churches with No Pastor	Number of Churches with Interim Ministers	Number of Churches Whose Pastor Was New within the Previous Year	Total Number of Churches in Transition	Total Number of Churches Listed in the Yearbook or Directory	Percentage of Convention Churches in Transition
2006 ^a	54	-	111	165	528	31.2
2002	53	47	62	162	552	29.3
2000	55	22	64	141	555	25.4
1996	55	31	93	179	556	32.2
1992	51	17	79	148	571	25.9
1988	56	18	140	214	560	38.2
1986	28	13	165	206	560	36.7
1982	59	23	155	237	567	41.7

Source: Statistics gathered from the respective *Year Book[s] of the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces, Director[ies] of the Atlantic Baptist Convention* and the web version of the *CABC Directory* in February of 2006.

^a The web version of the CABC directory did not give a notation distinguishing interim ministers in 2006, but it can be assumed that most interims would be included in the column Churches Whose Pastor Was New within the Previous Year.

In 1982 eighty-two churches were either without a pastor or under the care of an interim minister. The pastor in a further one hundred and fifty-five congregations had begun his/her work within the past year.¹ This represented forty-two percent of the churches listed. That statistic dropped to thirty eight percent in 1988. In the 1990s and the early part of this new millennium, the percentage of churches in pastoral transition fluctuated between twenty-five and thirty-two percent.

As the above statistics reveal, while the overall percentage has declined since the early eighties, churches in pastoral leadership transition are still a common part of life in the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches. At any given moment as few as one quarter and as high as one third of the congregations are in some stage of the pastoral transition process. These statistics are not out of line with other reports. Donald Bubna stated in 1988 that on average a quarter of pastors will change churches each year.² While one hopes it will not occur frequently, most pastors should expect that such times of transition will be a part of their experience in ministry. If the average pastor changes churches once every five years³ then over a thirty to forty year career he/she may go through the process of leaving a particular ministry six to eight times.

¹ Ketcham identifies the pastoral transition period as beginning the moment a pastor resigns and not being complete until at least one year after the new pastor has arrived. Bunty Ketcham, *So You're On The Search Committee* (Washington: Alban Institute, 1985), 3.

² Donald Bubna, "How to Bid a Healthy Farewell." *Leadership* 9 (Summer 1988):119.

³ Among the ten pastors surveyed for this thesis the average length of a pastorate was five years and three months.

The purpose of this thesis project is to explore the period of time from when a pastor resigns until he/she actually leaves a particular church ministry with the goal of discovering some helpful principles for pastoral leadership that can set a good foundation for the transition to a new pastoral leader. As Edward White says, “How we say goodbye makes all the difference in the world!”⁴ The key question is “What is the role of a departing pastor in providing a church with a healthy transition to a new pastoral leader?”

Edward Friedman noted that similar to family problems, many of the troubles that churches face today are the “residue” of conflicts from previous generations that began with or were carried on through transition periods. No matter how gifted the next pastor may be the “residue” of a poor departure will make his/her job very difficult.⁵ In one study cited by Joseph Umidi, twenty percent of the respondents in a new charge stated that the largest problems they faced stemmed from unresolved issues the church had with the former pastor.⁶

The potentially long lasting effects of a poor transition mean that both ministry start-up and ministry closure are crucial moments which call for effective pastoral leadership. If the transition is done poorly it can result in a demoralized congregation.⁷ How a pastor separates from a congregation is important in shaping the type of church the succeeding

⁴ Edward White, *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*. (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), xi.

⁵ Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 250 & 256.

⁶ Joseph Umidi, *Confirming the Pastoral Call: A Guide to Matching Candidates and Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000), 18.

⁷ Robert Dale, *Pastoral Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 174 & 185.

pastor enters⁸ and how easily he/she is able to establish a new pastoral relationship with the church.⁹ This thesis will heed the principle of Gerald Gillaspie that resigning from one church to go to another should be done in such a manner as to “safeguard the interests” of the one being left.¹⁰

The material for this thesis has been gathered through three primary areas of research. The first was a survey of literature related to the subject of pastoral ministry and pastoral transition in particular, along with some secular leadership materials cited in that literature. Literature related to the grieving process was also consulted to assist in understanding some of the emotional issues related to a pastor’s departure. The Alban Institute has produced the largest source of material on the subject of pastoral leadership transitions. There are few other books devoted to the topic entirely, but many pastoral ministry volumes include a small section on this time period in ministry.

The second area of research involved a survey of biblical examples of leadership transitions to seek insights and principles that might be garnered from those experiences and practices. As with many parts of church life, the Scriptures do not provide a specific handbook on leadership transition, but there are some helpful models including that of Christ to His disciples.

The third area of research involved a series of conversations and interviews with recently resigned pastors and representative lay-leaders of the churches from which the pastors resigned. Ten pastors and fifteen lay-people representing eleven churches were

⁸ Friedman, 251.

⁹ Umidi, 19.

¹⁰ Gerald Gillaspie, *The Restless Pastor* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 31.

interviewed in forty-one separate sessions between June 2005 and November 2006. Although all the churches were located in either Nova Scotia or New Brunswick, efforts were made to seek a variety of settings and situations. The pastors ranged in age from thirty-five to sixty-five. The length of service in the church by the leaving pastors ranged from two years to ten years with the average being five years and three months. Reported worship attendance in these churches ranged from twenty-six to two-hundred, with the average being seventy.¹¹ Six churches were in a rural community, three were located in a town and one was in an urban area. Eight of the pastors were leaving either a senior pastor or solo pastor position. Two were leaving associate pastor positions. Two of the pastors were going through their first departure process, six were in the midst of their third and the remaining two were experiencing their fourth and fifth of such transitions. Nine of the pastors were male, one was female.

Among the laity interviewed there was a variety of leadership roles and many of them held multiple positions within their church. Six were deacons, two were treasurers, one was chair of a leadership council, three were members of the Christian Education Committee, and two were chairs of the Pastoral Search Committee. Nine of the lay-leaders were male and six were female. Their attendance and participation in their current congregation ranged from ten years to fifty years, the average being thirty-two years. The ages of those interviewed were from mid-forties to early eighties.

¹¹ Taken from the *2006 Annual Report Book of the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches*.

Potential pastors for the interview process were found either through suggestion by Regional Ministers,¹² or through public reports or newsletters. Once the researcher was aware that a resignation was public knowledge (i.e. announced to the congregation), an email was sent outlining the purpose of the thesis project and asking for permission to discuss their experience while assuring confidentiality.¹³ If a positive response was received, a time to meet in person was arranged.¹⁴ Lay-leaders were chosen and asked to participate by the departing pastor and then contacted by the researcher to set up a specific time to conduct the interview.¹⁵ All interviews were conducted privately and individually except for three interviews which were done with married couples.

Common to all the situations was that the pastor was leaving the church voluntarily. Eight of the pastors went to new church ministries,¹⁶ one left ministry for family reasons and one took early retirement. Because the focus of the thesis is the departing pastor's role in a healthy transition, forced resignations and terminations were not considered. By their nature such departures are often periods of unhealthy conflict. While this is an area that needs attention, it was felt that such conflict would hinder a pastor's ability to provide leadership into a healthy transition; therefore, involuntary departures would not fall within the scope of this project.

¹² While Regional Ministers did supply the names of people who had recently resigned, no follow up was given to them as to whether their suggestions participated in the surveys or were even contacted to participate.

¹³ See sample letter in Appendix 1.

¹⁴ On two occasions there was no response to the initial letter and the researcher did not pursue any follow-up. One pastor agreed to participate but a convenient time to meet could not be arranged.

¹⁵ This worked well in all churches except one where three contacts were given by the pastor and all three subsequently declined to be interviewed.

¹⁶ Although two pastors resigned without having a new church to go to, both had a new pastoral charge before they finished their time at the churches they were leaving.

The initial interviews with each person consisted of a standard set of questions about the church, the pastor's ministry, history of previous transitions, the details and feelings about the current departure, and thoughts about the future of the church.¹⁷ On average, the initial interviews with pastors lasted one and half hours and about one hour with lay-leaders. Follow-up conversations were usually held about one month later to clarify any details or issues brought up in the first conversation and to update the researcher on the progress of the transition period. These sessions lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes. In some cases a third follow-up interview was held another month later if the pastor had not yet departed from the local church. Due to the brevity of the departure time, in three churches there was only one set of interviews with the pastors and lay-leaders.

Of the ten pastoral transitions studied, four could be characterized as unhealthy. In these churches the feelings expressed and the experiences related went beyond what one might expect to be normal signs of sadness or grief at someone's departure. Pastors and lay people told stories of heated conflict and/or seasons of withdrawal and viewed the departure with a sense of defeat. Six of the transitions could be characterized as healthy. In these congregations, pastors and lay-people were able to celebrate the pastor and congregation relationship and expressed positive feelings about the departure process even though they were sad to be separating. The discovery that healthy experiences outnumbered unhealthy ones was a pleasant surprise compared to an Alban Institute study done among departing army chaplains in the 1970's. In that study, which also included interviews with the base chaplains and members of their congregations, the research team

¹⁷ See Appendix 2.

concluded only two of seven chaplains had a “termination that enhanced their ministry” and left the congregation feeling positive about the closure process.¹⁸ The other five left people confused and wondering if the chaplain ever really cared for them.¹⁹

The material of this thesis is arranged in three sections. The first three chapters each deal with various processes which are generally focused on the pastor. Chapter one explores how pastors come to determine when it is time to complete a ministry and how the reasons which lead to that decision impact the final period of ministry. The second chapter considers when and how pastors communicate the impending completion of their ministry. The third chapter examines how the pastor can experience a personally and professionally healthy transition.

The second section of the thesis will explore three areas to which pastors should give attention as they prepare to finish a particular ministry. Roy Oswald believed there are three ways a pastor can orientate his final few months of ministry. Pastors can be people orientated, program orientated (ensuring programs continue after his/her departure) or self/future orientated (getting themselves ready for their next ministry). He believed those who were primarily people-orientated are best suited to providing a helpful and meaningful time of closure for a congregation.²⁰ This thesis will modify Oswald’s outline

¹⁸ Roy M. Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles; Terminating A Ministerial Relationship With A Parish* (Bethesda MD: Alban Institute, 1978), 4.

¹⁹ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 5. Oswald’s study among chaplains followed a similar format to the survey conducted as part of this thesis, although with a smaller sample of congregations. It was also the earliest study of departure styles discovered among the literature. Parishioners surveyed included army personnel and non-army personnel.

²⁰ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 6.

slightly and suggest a departing pastor has a responsibility to give time to Relationships, Ministries and Future Considerations.

Chapter four focuses on Relationships and outlines some of the relational and emotional issues that arise with the departure of a pastoral leader. It compares the ministry during the final period with the work that needs to be done during other periods of loss, and in particular it identifies the primary ministry to be that of grief work.

Chapter five focuses on Ministries and suggests that pastors who are concerned with ensuring ministry programs and the day to day life of the congregation continue after his/her departure will give attention to lay leadership development. They will also want to prepare the primary governing Board of the congregation for the increased responsibilities which come after a pastor's departure.

Chapter six focuses on Future Considerations and explores various ways pastors can help their congregations towards the goal of establishing a relationship with a new pastoral leader. The future includes both an immediate period, which we traditionally label as the 'interim' between pastors, and a long term period when the church has settled into a relationship with a new pastor.

The final section, chapter seven, concludes by emphasizing the need for pastors to gain the congregations' perspective of the transition process and to help their churches plan ahead for the loss of their pastoral leader.

Unfortunately, many pastors enter into the period of departure with little confidence or understanding of the dynamics involved. In an article entitled, "What I Wish I Knew Before I Quit," Anthony Laird lamented his lack of preparation for facing issues of

resignation and departure. “I’d never taken ‘Resignation 101’ in seminary. The whole issue was never really discussed.”²¹ His regrets on the lack of preparation and help for resigning pastors are echoed by Calvin Ratz’s lament that “Few guidelines and fewer counselors are available to the pastor who wonders ‘Is it time to resign?’”²² These sentiments were expressed by at least two pastors interviewed for this thesis. One in particular repeated often that he did not know what he was supposed to do, so he simply did what seemed easiest.

Times of pastoral leadership change can be filled with a mixture of emotions, confusion and anxiety, but they are also periods when churches are ripe for other changes. These times of transition are opportunities for churches to re-examine identity and realign ministry priorities.²³ Bob Russell suggests the pastoral leadership transition period can be an opportunity for a ministry to advance. He compares it to a relay race. The passing of the baton is the most crucial part. “That’s often where the race is won or lost. . . . If that transition is made smoothly, there actually should be a step gained in the race”²⁴ Times of pastoral leadership transition provide unique moments of opportunity for a local church. The goal of this project is to discover principles and practices which enable clergy to fulfill God’s call to pastor and lead well so that even as they close a particular ministry the Kingdom of God might advance.

²¹ Anthony Laird, “What I Wish I’d Known Before I Quit: Lessons of a Pastor Who Left Too Soon.” *Leadership* 19 (Winter 1998) : 33.

²² Calvin C. Ratz, “The Loneliest Choice of All.” *Leadership* 6 (Winter 1985) : 75.

²³ Loren B . Mead, *A Change of Pastors. . . and How it Affects Change in the Congregation* (Herdon: The Alban Institute, 2005), 64.

²⁴ Bob Russell, “How to Mentor Your Successor,” *LeaderLinks.com*, http://www.leaderlinks.com/pastissues/2004/11_november/feature20041101.htm (Accessed January 31, 2006).

Chapter 1 - Deciding to Leave

A Lonely Choice

A pastor's decision to leave a congregation is seldom a hasty decision. While an announced departure may come as a surprise to many people, Chandler Gilbert notes that "In most cases, the seeds were planted long before, though perhaps unrecognized at the time."¹ Loren Mead describes the process as a gradual shift from a sincere resolve to stay, to openness to other possibilities, to the arrival of an offer that the pastor cannot ignore. Seldom, he states, is it "a bolt out of the blue... usually the pastor has felt stirrings for some time and often the congregation has begun to have hints that the pastor may be 'in play.'"²

Each of the pastors interviewed for this thesis related that the decision to leave their churches was the result of months of thoughtful, and sometimes prayerful, deliberations. While the longest period of consideration was almost three years before the actual resignation and the shortest was about three months, on average the pastors began thinking about their departure about a year in advance. The length of time most pastors give to this decision indicates that it is not taken lightly. Most pastoral tenures begin with a service of induction during which pastor and people make commitments to each other. While not as permanent as a marriage, the pastor and congregational relationship is a covenantal union that should not be terminated without due consideration.³

¹ Chandler Gilbert, "On Living the Leaving," in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 23.

² Loren Mead, *A Change of Pastors . . . And How it Affects Change in the Congregation* (Herdon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2005), 23.

³ Lynn Anderson, "Why I've Stayed" *Leadership* 7 (Summer 1986) : 77.

For the benefit and health of the church, it is best when the pastor takes the initiative to discern and make the decision about when it is time to leave. Forced exits invariably split churches⁴ and leave a heavy burden of guilt on members of the congregation which can cripple effective ministry for years.⁵ The experience is no less traumatic and painful for the pastor involved. Along with the emotional toll of being fired, common opinion is that a pastor who is fired may be severely handicapped in seeking future ministry opportunities. They are often perceived as a potential problem for churches seeking a minister.⁶ Whether the forced separation was ‘messy and full of anger’ or done ‘decently and in order’ both the pastor and the congregation suffer a painful loss from which it can be difficult to recover. It has been likened to dealing with the stress of death and divorce.⁷ According to John C. LaRue, Research Director for Christianity Today, twenty-five percent of American clergy have been forced out of a church at some point in their career and of those pastors forty percent do not return to ministry.⁸ Should a pastor find a new ministry, unless he/she has intentionally sought help to deal with the emotional issues, he/she will most likely take this pain into the next

⁴ John Larue in “Forced Exits: Personal Effects” *Your Church* (November-December 1996) : 64, states that when a church forces a pastoral departure ten percent of the congregation will leave the church, many to follow the terminated pastor in his new position. Quoted in Umidi, 15. In a comparable statement about company CEOs Irving Shapiro said, “Every CEO should remember that the position exists not for his benefit, but for the corporations. It is his job to know when it is time to step down.” Quoted in Jerry Sonnenfeld, *The Heroes Farwell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 79.

⁵ White, 1.

⁶ Perry Biddle, “Involuntary Separation: When the Preacher is Fired,” *The Christian Ministry* 24 (September-October 1993) : 11.

⁷ Biddle, 9.

⁸ Quoted in Umidi, 14.

pastorate.⁹ For the wellbeing of both the pastor and the congregation, it is best when the pastor takes the initiative to decide if it is time to leave.¹⁰

Accepting the responsibility for the decision does not make the decision any easier,¹¹ nor does it mean a pastor will avoid emotional turmoil. For Charles Dennison the decision felt like a “gnawing in my soul... I felt utterly alone, without anyone to talk to.”¹² Especially when the current pastoral relationship has been a positive and loving experience, there can be feelings of fear, uncertainty and insecurity.¹³ But regardless of the degree of difficulty or the determining influences, Williams Philips, Edward White and Calvin Ratz all agree that as the pastoral leader it is the clergy’s responsibility not only to take the initiative but also to make the decision or else the leader becomes the follower.¹⁴

A dissenting opinion was given by Gerald Gillaspie in the 1970s. He thought that when a ministry was in decline a pastor should ask his church officers to help in the search for a new ministry opportunity. He also cited two pastors who felt one’s congregation should be consulted about any decision to leave. Ed Byington suggested

⁹ Umidi, 14

¹⁰ Goetz’s survey of terminated pastors notes the devastating impact on the pastor’s confidence, as well as his/her family’s loss of trust in the Church. David Goetz, “Forced Out: How Likely are You to be Fired or Pressured to Resign?” *Leadership* 17 (Winter 1996) : 47-49. For the impact on the church see the previous page.

¹¹ Gary L. McIntosh, “Is It Time to Leave?” *Leadership* 7 (Summer 1986) : 75.

¹² Charles S. Dennison, “When It Might Be Time to Leave.” *The Christian Ministry*, 27 (July–August, 1996) : 10.

¹³ Chandler W. Gilbert, “On Living the Leaving,” in Edward White, *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*. (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 33.

¹⁴ Phillips, William Bud. *Pastoral Transitions: From Endings to New Beginnings*. (New York: Alban Institute in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Church and Ministry, 1988), vi; White, 1; Calvin C. Ratz, “The Loneliest Choice of All.” *Leadership* 6 (Winter 1985) : 74.

that when a pastor receives a call to another church he should have a candid discussion with his current church Board and outline all the details about the new church including the size of the salary. Walter Schuette suggested that after telling his people not to consider their feelings of personal attachment, a pastor should give the details of the new offer he has received and then allow the church to vote on whether he should accept it or not. If the church votes to have him stay then he should stay, but if there is a split vote or a vote that he should leave, then he should accept the new call. Gillaspie did note that Victor Albers thought that such consultation had the potential to be “destabilizing” for a church.¹⁵

Research for this project indicates that Albers represents the majority of opinions. Congregations expect their pastors will leave eventually,¹⁶ but generally they do not want to be put in the position of telling him/her that it is time to leave. Among the churches surveyed, several lay-people related that they sensed even before the announcement that their pastor’s tenure would not be much longer. One layman related an experience of sensing from the Lord to pray for his pastor because he was being called to a new ministry. It was confirmed by the pastor that he had given his resume to his Regional Minister at about the same time. The layman did not reveal this experience to his pastor until the pastor announced his resignation and acceptance of a call to another church; which occurred approximately six months later.

Lay-leaders in churches that were experiencing conflict expressed sentiments that they expected their pastor would be resigning before they actually knew it, but in one

¹⁵ Gillaspie, 28, 85-86.

¹⁶ McIntosh, 71.

church surveyed, it became common knowledge that the pastor was actively seeking a new placement. At a special annual service that was designed to be an outreach event, the pastor stated from the pulpit that it would be “a miracle” if he was present at the same occasion the next year. The lay-leaders interviewed thought this was highly unprofessional and reported that it caused quite a commotion in both the congregation and the community as a whole. It was almost ten months before the pastor actually resigned to accept a call to another church, but the sentiment of many people in the congregation was that the effectiveness of the pastor’s ministry ended the moment he verbalized (albeit in a round-about manner) his intentions.

One of the most thoughtful treatments on the ethical issues surrounding the question of informing the congregation that one is seeking a new ministry is found in James Antal’s work, *Considering a New Call: Ethical and Spiritual Challenges for Clergy*.¹⁷ He questions whether the process of seeking a new church can be done without being deceptive with one’s current congregation. He condemns the flimsy excuses pastors use to justify lying when confronted with difficult questions from “nosey” members of the congregation. He admits he only knows of one example when a pastor informed his congregation he was searching for a new ministry without actually resigning. His resolution to the dilemma is for pastors to gently remind parishioners from the start of a ministry that no pastoral relationship lasts forever. This most often can occur when someone asks, “How long do you think you will stay?” Antal concludes,

By addressing the issue throughout our ministries, however obliquely, do we thereby avoid deception when we enter an active search? In fact, being

¹⁷ James Antal, *Considering a New Call: Ethical and Spiritual Challenges for Clergy* (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 2000), 26-33.

open about our intention to leave eventually alters the context. Rather than an indication of disloyalty or abandonment, our decision to leave becomes a matter of timing. If we do this well and consistently, with out raising questions of loyalty and commitment, when the time comes we will honestly be able to say that we are not deceiving the congregation by initiating a search “behind their backs.” Rather, we are doing exactly what we told them we would.¹⁸

Three pastors in particular made reference to this dilemma. The first decided it was good that the congregation did not know about his search. During the six months of his search process a new family began attending the church. He believed that if they had known he would be leaving within a year, they would not have continued to attend the church. However, within that time they made connections with others in the congregation and now he felt they would stay. A second pastor kept the search process private because he believed that if it became public knowledge it would cause “trouble” to the ministry. However, he felt he would prefer to be more open about the process in the future. The third pastor after announcing his resignation was confronted with the question, “How did that church find you?” The pastor honestly explained the process of giving his resume to the Regional Minister and it then being passed on to the searching congregation. The layman responded, “That is a poor system. How come pastors can’t say I’m feeling like I am about to leave and go from there?” The pastor responded, “Congregations would no longer respond in the same way if they know. If they do not know they will respond in the same way, but if they know then they are always wondering when he is going to resign.”

¹⁸ Antal, 31-32. Gillaspie also addressed what he called the problem of pastors “candidating on the sly.” He tells pastors to inform the Board if one is planning to seek a new ministry. He also tells Boards who suspect their pastor has been candidating, to immediately, but graciously, request a conference with the pastor where they can make an effort to understand the pastor’s plans and tell him/her if they agree or disagree with the need for his/her departure. Gerald Whiteman Gillaspie, *The Empty Pulpit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 38.

Generally in the churches surveyed, the pastor's resignation came as a surprise. While people expressed sadness at the pastor's decision and at least two interviewees disagreed with their pastor's decision to leave, no one interviewed stated that their pastor should have consulted the church or its leadership first. This is not to suggest that a pastor should come to a decision without seeking any advice. Donald Bubna encourages pastors to seek godly counsel when trying to decide if it is time to seek another ministry situation.¹⁹ Antal believes that every pastor should have a spiritual director or a pastoral counselor who can provide godly counsel especially when considering a new call. He also lists colleagues as helpful sounding boards.²⁰ Many of the pastors interviewed did relate that they sought the advice and prayer support of other pastors, their spouse, close friends outside the church, or a denominational official before they made their decision. Charles Dennison believed that sharing his struggle with fellow clergy helped to develop a new bond with colleagues who took the time to care for and encourage him while they prayed for God to give him clear direction.²¹ At the opposite end of the spectrum Anthony Laird blamed pride for keeping him from talking with others about his struggles and for ignoring wise advice when it was given. He has since become more open with his pastoral colleagues.²²

¹⁹ Donald Bubna, "Is It Time to Leave? Guidelines for Making one of Ministry's Toughest Decisions." *Leadership* 17 (Winter 1996) : 52.

²⁰ Antal, 37 and 39.

²¹ Dennison, 12. Gary Harbaugh, Rebecca Lee Brenneis, Rodney R. Hutton, *Covenants and Care: Boundaries in Life, Faith and Ministry*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Pres, 1998), 23-24, also urge pastors to seek out the prayerful support of trusted pastoral colleagues through any type of transition process.

²² Laird, 35-36.

The decision to leave a church ministry will affect the pastor as well as two congregations if a call to a new church is part of the process. The wellbeing of all involved should be given consideration as a pastor explores the options with much prayer and integrity while seeking the good of the Kingdom of God.²³ The final responsibility to make a decision to stay or to leave rests with the pastoral leader. The process should and often does include wise and trusted confidants,²⁴ but experience suggests that churches do not want to know until the decision is made. When it becomes known that a pastor is even considering a move there is damage to both the ministry and morale of the congregation. One of the congregations interviewed, for example, learned their pastor had gone to preach for a call. He did not go to that church and it was another three years before he did leave to enter another ministry. It was conceded by both the pastor and the lay people interviewed that those three years were marked by periods of both conflict and apathy. A deacon said, “He really didn’t want to be here,” and felt the pastor was simply waiting for the right offer, or any offer, to move to a new church.

Why Pastors Leave

Deciding to leave a congregation is a complex issue. Pastors will weigh many factors including personal, family, vocational, spiritual and corporate issues. Gary McIntosh designed a straightforward yes or no ten question quiz to help pastors determine if it is time to leave.

1. I have been at my church less than seven years.
2. I have a dream for my church.

²³ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 45 and Curtis C. Thomas, *Practical Wisdom for Pastors: Words of Encouragement and Counsel for a Lifetime of Ministry*. (Wheaton: Crossways Books, 2001), 144.

²⁴ White, 111.

3. I sense that my spiritual gifts match the present needs of my position and will for several years to come.
4. My philosophy of ministry is compatible with my church's; we work together smoothly.
5. My socio-cultural background fits my church's, or at least we've come to a good understanding on expectations, practices, and traditions.
6. My church is facing opportunities for ministry, and I am able to help it take advantage of these.
7. If I am a generalist, that is the role my church needs. If I am a specialist, my church has a need for my specialty in the coming years.
8. I have credibility and my people are willing to follow my leadership in major decisions.
9. I am willing and able to work hard with my church.
10. My leadership style generally fits my church's needs. ²⁵

For McIntosh, determining if it was time to leave was simply a matter of counting the yeses. If there are more than six in answer to the statements, one should stay with the current church. If there are less than five, one should be leaving. If there are five or six, one may need to work on areas in which one answered 'no' until the situation becomes clearer. ²⁶

A simple questionnaire which could give one a definitive decision is very appealing but concluding that it is time to move is more complicated than counting yeses and nos, and McIntosh does acknowledge this.²⁷ The complexity of the issue became clear as pastors were asked "Why are you leaving at this time?" Typically respondents were able to quickly give a primary reason, but often as the conversation continued multiple other reasons would surface. For example, one pastor cited an on-going conflict

²⁵ McIntosh, 75

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ McIntosh, 75.

within the congregation as the reason he was leaving, but went to talk about the lack of spiritual depth in the association, the absence of pastoral peer support, how the move would resolve school issues for his children and provide better work opportunities for his wife.²⁸ The following are some of the reasons pastors gave for leaving their current ministries:

Table 2: Reason for Leaving Current Ministries

Reason ^a	Pastors Who Identified as a Reason
Calling of God	5
Time	5
Discouragement	5
Stress	3
Conflict	6
Stage of Church Life	5
Call to New Church	2
Career Advancement	2
Monetary	2
Family	3

Identified by the Pastors Surveyed

^a Pastors typically identified more than one reason leading to their decisions to leave at this time.

Call

According to a 1995 survey of US clergy by Richard Doebler, just over eighty-six percent of pastors refer to a “strong sense of God’s call” as the primary reason for

²⁸ It was interesting to note that in about half of the situations the reasons given by the pastor were not the same as the reasons suggested by their lay leader. This may be a matter of communication, which will be dealt with in a later chapter.

entering the ministry.²⁹ Indeed it is commonly accepted by most pastors that ministry is not as much their chosen career as it is a vocation which was chosen for them. They consider ministry a calling from God more than their intentional choice.³⁰ These sentiments have biblical precedence in the experiences of people like Paul and Isaiah. Paul explained “When I preach the Gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel.” (1 Corinthians 9:16 NIV)³¹ But unlike Paul, few pastors today expect this call to manifest itself in a Damascus Road type of experience. Rather they look to an inner urging from the Holy Spirit as the basis for their decision to enter ministry.³² Like Isaiah’s response to God’s request, “Here I am. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8) a decision to enter into ministry should be a cooperative human response to a divine calling.³³ This crucial sense of calling to ministry, however, does not come in isolation. Richard Bolles believes that calling is part of a process in which the person is an active participant.³⁴ According to Baptist counsel of previous generations, a

²⁹ Richard Doebler, “Would You Leave the Ministry for a Higher Paying Job?” *Leadership* (Winter 1995) : 68.

³⁰ Patricia M. Y. Chang, *Factors Shaping Clergy Careers: A Wake Up Call for Protestant Denominations and Pastors* (Durham, NC: Pulpit & Pew Research on Pastoral Leadership, Duke Divinity School, 2005), 3. See also Thomas G. Long, “Of This Gospel,” in *Awakened to a Calling: Reflections on the Vocation as Ministry*, ed. Ann M. Svennungsen and Melissa Wiginton (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 39.

³¹ See also Ephesians 3:1-13.

³² Gordon Warren, *The Christian Ministry: Its Opportunity and Challenge* (Edmonton: The Baptist Union of Western Canada, 1947), 4. Actual quote “No one, we take it, expects God to thunder a call from the heavens, yet all may look for some inner promptings of the Spirit.”

³³ Richard Nelson Bolles “The Pastor’s Parachute: An Interview with Richard Nelson Bolles,” interviewed by Marshall Shelly and Jim Berkley, *Leadership* (Summer, 1990) : 23.

³⁴ Bolles, 19.

personal call should also be recognized by the church³⁵ and one should also be conscious of “some aptitude and qualifications for the task.”³⁶

As entry into vocational ministry in general is a cooperative response by an individual to the calling of God, so the decision to enter or leave a particular ministry should be regarded as a cooperative discernment of God’s will that comes within a context. A common statement at CABC induction services is the phrase “It is our belief that the calling into the Christian ministry **and to particular service within it** is both of God and of the Church. It is inward constraint and outward calling answering each other.” (Emphasis added.)³⁷ Calvin Ratz summarizes the generally accepted sentiment well when he says, “Doing God’s will is all that matters. . . . This is what determines the time to move. His voice. His will.”³⁸ However, Ratz also believes that too often ‘God’s will’ becomes a pious cliché and “God, like the Devil, gets blamed for a lot of decisions he had little to do with.”³⁹ Gilbert Meilaender, a Lutheran vacancy pastor, felt that pastoral transition decisions justified only by appeals to the Holy Spirit’s leading are a disservice to the Holy Spirit in order to avoid facing difficult questions. This avoidance engenders distrust of pastoral and denominational leaders among their congregations. He

³⁵ Francis Wylan, president of Brown University described the Baptist perspective of call as a person who is “moved to enter this work by the Holy Spirit. This call is manifest in two ways; first in his own heart, and secondly, in the hearts of his brethren.” Quoted in Harrison, “Pastoral Turnover and the Call to Preach,” *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 44 no. 1 (March 2001) : 98.

³⁶ Warren, 6.

³⁷ Robert G. Wilkens ed., *A Manual for Worship and Service Prepared for Canadian Baptist Churches* (Mississauga: Canadian Baptist Ministries, 1998), 132.

³⁸ Ratz, 78.

³⁹ Ratz, 75.

suggested that the Holy Spirit could work better through a more open, honest and informed process.⁴⁰

Seeking and discerning God's will is frequently the result of both a thoughtful and prayerful process which also considers common-sense.⁴¹ Circumstances, one's particular pastoral gifts along with personal and corporate needs do not need to struggle against the less tangible inward sense of God's leading.⁴² For example the pastor who was leaving for what were obvious family reasons was confidently able to express a conviction of following God's call in that decision. Another pastor understood the circumstances of his current ministry, a premonition about a particular congregation before they called him, and the ease of purchasing a new home as evidence confirming a sense of God's leading in his decision to move. A third pastor, who had wanted to leave two years earlier, was able to reflect that circumstances would have made a transition at that time disastrous for the congregation. He saw God's hand in not opening the door to a new call at that time. Two years later, God opened a door to a new ministry and the church he was leaving was ready to enter a pastoral leadership transition.

⁴⁰ Gilbert Meilaender, "The Divine Call: Reflections of a Professional Vacancy Pastor," *Concordia Journal* 18 (July 1992) : 268.

⁴¹ McIntosh, 75.

⁴² Carolyn Weese, and J. Russell Crabtree. *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken About Pastoral Transition*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004) 41; as well as Lynn Anderson, 82. An amusing 1973 article by John Burt extolled the virtues of a computer generated matching system which was being proposed for the Episcopal Church. Perhaps it was a common-sense and practical approach to matching pastoral skills with congregational needs, but it removes the place of prayer and one wonders whether a computer can measure the sense of call. John H. Burt, "Clergy Deployment – Is There a Better Way?" *The Christian Ministry* 4 (November 1973) : 25-28.

Prayer, a firm conviction to submit to God's leading and honest reflection of all the factors can allow "God to interpret the evidence" and lead one to a decision.⁴³ Some of these factors include the following:

Time

Early in my work at my current ministry, I was informed there were a certain number of people in the congregation who believed that a pastor should serve a church for no more than five years. While none of the pastors interviewed reported they were leaving simply because they had served for a certain number of years, timing was a consideration for at least half of them. John Esau suggests that over time the question for a pastor should switch from "Why would I leave?" to "Why should I stay?" That is to say, that in the early years of a particular ministry the onus is on being able to justify a departure, while in later years the onus is to justify staying.⁴⁴

Of the pastors surveyed the shortest length of service in the church they were serving was two years and the longest was ten with the average being five years and three months. This is slightly longer than average according to an American study by Barna Group which found that the average tenure for senior pastors between 1973 and 1993 had decreased from seven to four years.⁴⁵ It should be noted that one of the reasons there are fewer Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches (CABC) congregations going through a

⁴³ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 46-48.

⁴⁴ John A. Esau, "How Long Should a Pastor Stay," in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*. ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 16

⁴⁵ Quoted in Umidi, 13.

transition at any given time is that the average tenure in Convention churches has increased.⁴⁶ This is a good sign.

Researchers tend to believe that younger pastors and those in their first pastorate are more likely to move sooner than older pastors or those in their second or later charge.⁴⁷ Schaller believes that a pastor's first placement functions as an "unofficial apprenticeship for the new minister."⁴⁸ In general this was true for the churches surveyed. Among those in their first pastoral charge after graduation from seminary the average length of tenure was four years. Among those in their second or later pastoral settlement, the average length of tenure was six years. Among those pastors in their thirties and forties, the average length of tenure was just over four years. The oldest pastors (who were in their sixties) were each leaving their churches after six years. There was one notable exception to the general trend. The longest tenure of ten years belonged to a pastor who was under forty years of age and in his first charge.

Researchers have also noted that larger churches tend to be able to hold on to their pastors for a longer period of time⁴⁹ although it is not immediately obvious whether these pastors stay because the church is growing or the church is growing because they have

⁴⁶ My calculations from the 1982, 1992, and 2000 editions of the *Directory of the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces* revealed that among settled pastors the average tenure increased from 3.4 years to 3.9 years to 5.1 years over that 18 year period. As noted in the Introduction above, 1982 was the surveyed year with the largest percentage of churches in transition and 2000 was the year with the smallest percentage of churches in transition.

⁴⁷ L. D. H., "Do Pastors Move To Frequently." *Concordia Journal* 11 (September 1985) : 162; Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 21.

⁴⁸ Lyle Schaller, *Survival Tactics in the Parish* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 27-28. G. Leslie Somers also notes that it is rare for ministers in their first pastorate to stay for an extended period of time. His research found it was more common for pastor to serve in one or two locations before they entered a "long term placement." George Leslie Somers, "The Ministry Marathon: Exploring Longevity in the Single Pastorate" (D.Min. thesis., Acadia University, 2004), 112.

⁴⁹ McIntosh, 71; L. D. H., 162; Ratz, 75; Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 18.

stayed.⁵⁰ Among the churches surveyed, those with an attendance over one hundred did have pastors who on average had stayed for a longer period of time; however, the longest tenure was in one of the smallest churches.

Most researchers agree that effective pastoral ministry begins after six to seven years.⁵¹ McIntosh asserts that short tenures (less than four years) are a major reason why eighty percent of churches are on plateau or declining.⁵² After fifteen years of ministry in the same congregation, Lynn Anderson observed:

The first two years you can do nothing wrong.
The second two years you can do nothing right.
The fifth and sixth years of a ministry, either you leave, or the people who think you can do nothing right leave. Or you change, or they change, or you both change.
Productive ministry emerges somewhere in the seventh year or beyond.⁵³

Anderson goes on to expound a number of reasons why longer pastoral settlements are preferable. He emphasizes that it takes time to become familiar with the community, to earn credibility, as well as to develop a close bond and an intimate rapport with the congregation.⁵⁴ G. Leslie Somers made similar conclusions about the benefits of ministries which last more than fifteen years. In addition to Anderson's observation, Somers also notes stability both for the church and the pastor's family, development of a corporate mentality, and longer term development of disciples and leaders.⁵⁵ To these

⁵⁰ McIntosh, 71.

⁵¹ McIntosh, 71; Umidi, 12; Esau, 15 and Lynn Anderson, 77.

⁵² McIntosh, 72.

⁵³ Lynn Anderson, 77.

⁵⁴ Lynn Anderson, 77-78.

⁵⁵ Somers, 91-93.

Donald Bubna would add that there are increased opportunities which come with being viewed as the senior minister in a community.⁵⁶ All three men agree that significant change, in individuals and in churches as a whole, can only occur as people have time to observe that a pastor lives what he professes to believe, and after people become confident their leader authentically loves them and will not quickly abandon them. Without that confidence, people are often unwilling to pay the price which significant changes for an effective ministry require.⁵⁷ “The ministry with the most impact is usually the one which has survived the longest.”⁵⁸

Only one of the churches surveyed stands out as an example of a pastor who left too soon. In that situation, it is the researcher’s opinion that the pastor was unwilling to give the time necessary to see significant change and in particular allowed a conflict with one person to overshadow the significant ministry and changes which were occurring in the congregation. Both the lay person and the pastor reported that the church was growing and people were excited about the future, however one lady was a source of constant agitation against change. The ensuing frustration led the pastor to begin contemplating his departure within a year of the start up of his ministry. This turn of events might not have surprised Schaller who observes that a significant number of pastors go through a “vocation depression” as they near the end of their third year.⁵⁹ Perhaps the advice of Vance Havner would have helped. He is quoted as saying, “A

⁵⁶ Donald Bubna, “Ten Reasons Not to Resign: How One Pastor Kept Himself from Bailing Out.” *Leadership* 14 (Winter 1993) : 103.

⁵⁷ Lynn Anderson, 77; Bubna, “Ten Reasons Not to Resign,” 102; Somers, 86.

⁵⁸ Lynn Anderson, 77.

⁵⁹ Schaller, *Survival Tactics*, 26. The departing pastor was just completing his third year.

preacher should have the mind of a scholar, the heart of a child, and the hide of a rhinoceros. His biggest problem is how to toughen his hide without hardening his heart.”⁶⁰

At the other end of the spectrum is the difficulty of pastors who stay too long. Esau believes that after twelve years there needs to be very compelling reasons for a pastor to continue,⁶¹ while Gillaspie believed that beyond ten years “is questionable for the average man.”⁶² Lyle Schaller argued that more often leaders make the mistake of staying in a position too long rather than not long enough and that staying too long actually does greater damage to a ministry than not staying long enough.⁶³ Curtis Thomas relates the story of a pastor who built a very successful ministry only to see it decline and fade because he would not retire. As people started to leave, the young ones first, he became resentful and when he was eventually fired he became a “tired, pitiful, bitter old man.”⁶⁴

Both Ratz and Finzel agree that pastors who stay too long usually do so out of either ego or fear. Some become so invested in their work that they fail to recognize their limitations and come to believe that no one else is capable enough to lead the ministry. Others can not deal with the insecurity of beginning in a new ministry or dread the loss of

⁶⁰ Quoted in Thomas, 138.

⁶¹ Esau, “How Long Should a Pastor Stay,” in White, 16.

⁶² Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 21.

⁶³ Quoted in Hans Finzel, *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 1994, 2000), 159.

⁶⁴ Thomas, 140.

identity and sense of uselessness they believe will come with retirement.⁶⁵ This does not need to be. It is interesting to note that the one pastor interviewed who was retiring was looking forward to a period of very little involvement in ministry and greater opportunities to spend time with family, traveling, and doing a number of things which had been on hold for years because of ministry commitments.

Somers identified four potential hazards for pastors who commit to longer term ministries. These include: developing a critical spirit; becoming so identified with the people the pastor loses his/her ability to speak prophetically; resting on one's laurels; and the church developing an unhealthy dependence upon the pastor. However, he concludes these are hazards which can be overcome whereas the benefits of longevity cannot be replicated in shorter term pastoral tenures.⁶⁶

Timing is an important consideration for the pastor who is contemplating leaving a particular church. Similar to what has been observed in other denominations over the last number of decades,⁶⁷ it would seem the tendency among pastors in the CABC is to not stay long enough, rather than to stay too long.⁶⁸ Many of the other factors which lead to a pastor's departure could be resolved with patience, effort and time. Pastors could

⁶⁵ Ratz, 76; Finzel, 164-165.

⁶⁶ Somers, 94-96.

⁶⁷ This observation was made Lyle Schaller in the 1970s, *Survival Tactics*, 26-27, J. Keith Cook, in the 1980s *The First Parish: A Pastor's Survival Manual* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1983), 144, Bubna in the 1990s, "Ten Reasons," 103, and more recently in the 2000s by Paul Harrison who denounces the harm frequent pastoral turnovers cause churches, pastors and their families. Harrison, 87-88.

⁶⁸ Somers survey of twelve long term pastors found that the most common influencing factor for longevity was the support the pastors received from mentoring relationships. This suggests if the CABC desires to facilitate longer term pastorates it may want to explore developing mentoring relationships for pastors on a larger scale.

benefit by asking the question, ‘Have I stayed long enough to reach my most effective years of ministry in this church?’⁶⁹

Discouragement/Disillusionment

Joseph Umidi believes the root cause of discouragement or disillusionment can be traced back to a poor candidating process which fails to properly match a candidate’s gifts with a congregation’s needs. The result is unmet expectations.⁷⁰ Stefan Ulstein relates, “I left the pastorate because there were just too many expectations. I ended up working too hard and leaving too many things undone, giving a smattering of attention here and there but not really accomplishing anything for all the energy I expended. I like to do things well, but you end up fractured and fragmented.”⁷¹

Umidi also believes that the departure of a discouraged pastor will leave behind a weak and defeated congregation.⁷² Indeed among the churches surveyed the most discouraged pastor (John)⁷³ left behind one of the most discouraged congregations. At the root of this discouragement was a clear feeling of unmet expectations by both the pastor and the lay people interviewed. The pastor was unable to fulfill his own expectations of himself, and was not meeting the expectations expressed by the lay people. The pastor expressed that early in his ministry he felt he had gifts for evangelism and leadership, but after several years there seemed to be few fruits for his labor. He repeatedly said

⁶⁹ McIntosh, 72.

⁷⁰ Umidi, 12.

⁷¹ Stefan Ulstein, *Pastors Off the Record: Straight Talk About Life in the Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 103.

⁷² Umidi, 23.

⁷³ For ease of clarity from time to time this paper will randomly assign names to particular people but it should be understood that these are not the real names of those individuals.

throughout each interview “somewhere along the way I lost . . .” or “somewhere along the way things got off track.” A lay person interviewed from his pastorate also related that he “tried, but he wasn’t always successful,” and talked about things that never “materialized.” To date, this congregation was also the church with the longest interim period, going well over a year with week to week supply preachers.

Unrealized dreams will often lead to deep seated cynicism which a pastor may not recognize within himself.⁷⁴ One pastor surveyed (Paul) had overseen a long anticipated building program but did not see significant inroads in the areas of outreach to the local community or numeric growth. He blamed a group of detractors within the congregation for paralyzing efforts to reach out into the community. He could not see any end to the situation. When asked if he expected a gift at the farewell gathering, he confided that whatever it was he hoped it would not be a picture of the church building. He never wanted to be reminded of the energy he expended and the conflicts he endured to bring it to completion. It is ironic that what many would view as the significant achievement of his ministry, he viewed as a failure.

A sense of failure, whether the reason is justified or not, will also demoralize a pastor. Anthony Laird quit when he realized the grandiose dreams he had at the beginning of a particular ministry would be unfulfilled. He said, “My sense of failure disqualified me to be their pastor.”⁷⁵ Laird believes now that failure, properly understood, is disobedience to God. Success, on the other hand, should be defined as obedience regardless of the visible results. His survey of Paul’s letters to Timothy focused on the

⁷⁴ Dennison, 11.

⁷⁵ Laird, 33.

words “endure, persevere, work hard, train, study, and take pains.” This helped him to realize that at times normal ministry can just be hard.⁷⁶ However, when finances are failing, attendance is dropping and there seems to be no progress in the ministry the people can become dissatisfied with the pastor and the pastor can become seriously disillusioned.⁷⁷

Another pastor (Charles) listed high expectations and the ability to challenge as some of his gifts for ministry, but also stated that “dynamic preaching” was one of his weaknesses. In that congregation he was able to bring a great deal of change quickly, but became discouraged when he felt he lacked the support he expected to receive from the church leadership in particular. Ironically, the deacons were drafting a letter of support to read to the next church meeting, but the pastor resigned before it could be read.

William Phillips wrote about three types of what he termed ‘disenchantment’ which will likely cause a pastor to move. The “Confident Doubter” trusts in his own abilities, but does not have confidence that the congregation will be able to meet expectations (e.g. Paul and Charles). The “Dispirited Believer” has confidence in the church, but lacks self-confidence (e.g. Anthony Laird). The “Dispirited Doubter” has become unsure both of his/her own competence and in the ability of his/her church to do any significant ministry (e.g. John). For Phillips, the only pastor unlikely to move is the “Confident Believer” who has assurance in both his own and the church’s abilities to meet expectations.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Laird, 36.

⁷⁷ Phillips, 21; Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 40 and 42.

⁷⁸ Phillips, 6-8.

A sense of abandonment which comes from departures is another source of discouragement. In one situation a pastoral staff of three was reduced to just the senior pastor, who was the subject of the research. He found it extremely difficult to adapt to the loss of the sense of collegiality and support that had grown and flourished among the members of the pastoral ministry team. He said, "I felt like the wind was taken out of my sails." The ministry in general became burdensome as he picked up extra duties. He also had deep concerns for ministries, such as the youth programs, to which he could not tend. Both William Teague and William Phillips cite staff changes as a significant source of discouragement and disillusionment. The loss of part of a pastoral staff brings about a shift in workload and some amount of role confusion which can take an emotional toll on the remaining pastoral staff. Changes in the enthusiasm of the remaining staff and the adverse affects on the organization may not be noticed in the immediate aftermath of a co-pastor's resignation, but eventually they do become apparent.⁷⁹

Feeling unappreciated will also discourage many pastors. A commentator suggested that one of the reasons for so many short pastoral tenures was because congregations failed to express their appreciation. "Usually the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence, and particularly so, when it is not known whether the ministry is appreciated."⁸⁰ One of the interviewed pastors indicated he felt unappreciated as he described what he anticipated his farewell gathering would be like. He compared it to

⁷⁹ William Teague, "When It's Time to Say Goodbye: The Sweet Sorrow of Departure Provides Unique Ministry Opportunities," *Leadership* 13 (Spring 1992) : 73; Phillips, 20.

⁸⁰ L. D. H., 162.

going to his own funeral when people would say all the things he would have liked to have heard while he was there, but would only hear now that he was going.

There are some notations in the literature which suggest that older pastors are more susceptible to discouragement. Doebler's survey indicated that while about a third of those in ministry felt "trapped," the baby boomers were the most likely to feel this way.⁸¹ Roy Oswald believes those between age fifty-five and sixty-five are the most likely candidates for "discouragement, lethargy and burnout" as they begin to realize they have probably gone as far as they can in ministry and they are simply hanging on until retirement.⁸² Interestingly, it was the layman in the church of the retiring pastor who believed his pastor was retiring early because he was discouraged by the church's lack of willingness to change.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that overwhelming disillusionment in ministry is inevitable and that the sooner it came the better it would be both for the individual and the community. At the point at which the dream of the Christian community is shattered, then a pastor can learn to love the Christian community as it really is. The great danger Bonhoeffer saw at that moment was that rather than the pastor learning to love the church he would become the "accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God and finally the despairing accuser of himself."⁸³

⁸¹ Doebler, 68.

⁸² Roy Oswald, "The Pastor's Passages: An Interview with Roy Oswald." interviewed by Marshall Shelly and Dean Merrill, *Leadership* (Fall, 1983) : 18.

⁸³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Disillusioned With Your Church? It May be Part of God's Gracious Plan." *Leadership* (Winter 1998) : 37-38

Richard Bolles believes that discouraged pastors will too often leave to take whatever church calls and will end up in another mismatched situation.⁸⁴ Indeed John, the most discouraged of those interviewed, related that he had prayed for God to send him to a well established church, one without struggles or problems, but accepted a call to another difficult congregation. Rather than leaving a church discouraged, Anthony Laird counsels pastors to take a temporary leave of absence. To help prevent discouragement they might invest time in continuing education opportunities which will help refresh and sharpen one's perspective.⁸⁵

Stress and Burnout

The nature of ministry is such that there will be times when a pastor feels overwhelmed by the tasks ahead, by the large number of needy people, or by a sense of exhaustion after a particularly busy period in his or the church's life. Donald Bubna describes a short period of ministry when two close friends died and a third was almost killed, another potential youth pastor turned down the church, he received three very critical letters and a fourth letter containing the resignation of a long time staff member. Overwhelmed, he was ready to quit.⁸⁶

Edward Friedman believes that stress in ministry is inevitable and dangerous. "Since studies of stress indicate that the worst possible combination of work conditions is high-performance demand, combined with little control over the situation, the position of

⁸⁴ Bolles, "The Pastor's Parachute," 23.

⁸⁵ Laird, 34-35.

⁸⁶ Bubna, "Ten Reasons Not to Resign," 101.

clergy may, by nature, be dangerous to health.”⁸⁷ Using what he terms a systems view of clergy burnout, Friedman outlines how dysfunctional congregational relationships can catch the clergy in a triangle between the church lay-leadership and the general membership. He relates five factors that are likely to produce burnout. These include: isolation of a church from other congregations in the denomination; distance between lay-leaders and the general membership; a lay-leadership that invests its entire emotional life in the congregation (i.e. they have no friends outside the church); intense interdependent relationships (i.e. blood, marriage or business); and lay-leaders who are unable to assume a well defined position independent of complainers. He also asserts that simply treating the pastor for symptoms of burnout will not change the cause of that burnout. It will actually add to the stress level as the pastor is identified as the sick person while the relationship system in the congregation which caused the burnout is supported and reaffirmed.⁸⁸

Ratz also believes that dealing with intense and difficult relational situations within the congregation can lead to emotional exhaustion. He described a situation where a pastor successfully dealt with an adulterous relationship between two prominent church leaders, but afterwards was completely worn out emotionally and spiritually.⁸⁹ Oswald believes that those who are new to a congregation are susceptible to high levels of stress. They constantly have to adjust to the new people and situations they are facing while seeking to make good first impressions. After a full day of, “being confronted with the

⁸⁷ Edward Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 216.

⁸⁸ Friedman, 216-218.

⁸⁹ Ratz, 76-77.

unexpected triggers *of* the fight-flight response in one’s body,” these new pastors return home exhausted each night.⁹⁰

At least three pastors indicated some level of exhaustion related to stress as a factor in their decision to leave. After six years, one pastor felt tired and a need to be revitalized before he became completely exhausted and bitter. He stated that addressing these feelings required more than simply a month’s vacation. Another pastor, completing his first pastorate, talked about being the only minister in the community and therefore being pastor of everyone and everything and consequently always being on duty. He spoke of seven years of preaching three sermons and teaching Sunday School each Sunday and performing one hundred and eighty-two funerals during his time in the parish. His conclusion was that he was “burnt out emotionally, physically and spiritually.”

One departing pastor had taken a three month doctor prescribed stress leave the previous year. He would have resigned from the church during that period but felt it would be “wrong” and decided to hang in for one more year. He related having dealt with a lot of relational issues including power struggles between laity, abuse issues, an inappropriate sexual relationship, and an embezzlement of over \$10,000. Each of these issues took months if not years to resolve but during those times and during his own illness he felt little support from friends, the church or the denomination. He stated that the church had been “very hard emotionally” and “taken a lot out of me emotionally and physically.”

⁹⁰ Roy Oswald, James M. Heath and Ann W. Heath. *Beginning Ministry Together: The Alban Handbook For Clergy Transitions* (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 2003), 108.

McIntosh wrote that, when deciding if it is time to leave, pastors need to consider whether they are willing to “pay the price of pastoral ministry.”⁹¹ Pastoral ministry is just plain hard work and normally full of great stress.⁹² There are a multitude of books, resources and strategies that a pastor may use to deal with stress, but it is important for pastors to recognize and take the steps necessary to reduce stress before it becomes a serious health issue.⁹³

Conflict

Even though none of the pastors surveyed were forced to resign, issues related to conflict arose in six out of the ten surveyed. Warner White believes, because of his/her position and role, the clergy-person is “always the center of controversy in a parish.”⁹⁴ Perry Biddle discovered among American Baptist Churches that nine out of ten pastor-congregation conflicts the pastor either left of his own accord or was forced to resign. He further noted that in such conflicts pastors, churches and denominational leaders “lose hope, deny the openness of the future, and seek retaliation rather than newness of life.”⁹⁵

The issues need not involve a lot of people. Umidi cites a study which suggests as few as three percent of congregation can force a pastor to resign,⁹⁶ while Gillaspie suggests that if one’s opponents represent at least ten percent of the congregation than a

⁹¹ McIntosh, 74.

⁹² McIntosh, 74.

⁹³ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 109. See pages 109 to 111 for a description of numerous “Coping Strategies to Reduce Stress.”

⁹⁴ Warner White, “Should I Leave? A Letter From One Priest to Another,” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 4.

⁹⁵ Perry H. Biddle, “Involuntary Separation: When the Preacher is Fired.” *The Christian Ministry* 24 (September-October 1993) : 10.

⁹⁶ Umidi, 14.

pastor may want to move on.⁹⁷ While most commentators agree that one difficult person is not reason enough to leave a congregation⁹⁸ one of the pastors surveyed cited a continuing conflict with one person as a primary reason for his departure. In that case the conflict over worship music content and leadership was at least a year long and well known throughout the congregation. According to the deacon surveyed, it was this person's "agitation" that caused the pastor to seek a new congregation. Following the pastor's resignation the person was brought before the Board of Deacons, confronted and made to give account in a 'professional manner.' The deacon stated that the Board would be keeping a close eye on this person in the future, but it was already too late to salvage the current pastor-church relationship.

In a multi-church field the pastor referred to an on-going conflict with one family within one of the churches as a primary source of grief which affected the whole of the church's ministries. While he insisted that in "no way did they push" him out, he felt it was time to leave because it was not a "battle" he felt he had the strength or willingness to face.

The theme of not being willing to continue to engage in a battle also emerged with another pastor. In that case both the pastor and the two lay-people interviewed labeled the pastor's opponents as "detractors" who were unwilling to change. The pastor had had enough and was unwilling to participate in any discussion of the issues during the final three months of his ministry; leaving it instead for the next pastoral leader to

⁹⁷ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 41.

⁹⁸ See Ratz, 76; Lynn Anderson, 80 and Gillaspie, 41. Ratz labels difficult people as "grace-builders."

handle. It is interesting to note that while the pastor cited the conflict in terms of a power struggle, one of the lay-leaders interviewed described the issue as a conflict of values and theology. She suggested that the church was more liberal while the pastor was more conservative. While conflicts over theology and values did not surface in any of the other churches surveyed, William Phillips believes that such clashes are common and that indeed half of what leads to conflict is a result of differences between a pastor and congregation theologically, socially or subjectively.⁹⁹

When another pastor was asked what gifts he lacked, he responded that he was not a confrontational person, but he would not “back down” when conflict came. When we talked about his predecessors he related stories of conflicts each of the previous five pastors had faced, noting that two of them were no longer in ministry and a third had paid a heavy emotional toll. In this case the pastor saw the history of the church as dominated by chronic pastor-church conflict, with different issues for each pastor. He had entered this particular church with a vision for settling these conflicts, but at the point of his resignation felt he was no longer willing to see it through.¹⁰⁰

Despite Biddle’s statistics above, conflict is not necessarily a sign that one should resign.¹⁰¹ Curtis Thomas, referencing Paul’s admonition to fight the good fight (2 Timothy 4:7), states that ministry is neither for the timid nor those who quickly run from

⁹⁹ Phillips, 4, 15-16 and 18.

¹⁰⁰ In Goetz’s research sixty-two percent of terminated pastors said their churches had done this before, and forty-one percent of those pastors said their churches had done it more than twice before. He concludes, “Churches that force out pastors will likely do it again.” Goetz, 42.

¹⁰¹ Bubna, “Is It Time,” 51.

difficulties.¹⁰² A congregation where conflict is repeatedly resolved (or left unresolved) by a pastor's departure will not benefit from another pastor's early departure, nor will the pastor himself/herself be well served. Gillaspie believes these circumstances result in "ill conditioned churches" and ministers with "weak character."¹⁰³ "Sometimes we have to correct a situation before someone else can follow."¹⁰⁴

In one case a key factor in the pastor's decision to seek a new ministry was a conflict, which was again related to worship music. Both the pastor and the lay-leader related stories of "explosive" business meetings, numerous accusations, people leaving the church and eventually the resignation and dissolution of the Board of Deacons. The pastor, while seeking a new ministry, nevertheless did not resign and continued to serve that congregation for a further two years before finally accepting a call to a new ministry. During that period the overall conflict was resolved and a new leadership structure was established. The church was restored to a new measure of health such that the transition was in the researcher's opinion the smoothest of all ten pastorates surveyed. Had the pastor actually left two years earlier, the story would have been very different. The pastor attributed the result to God's timing.

Conflict does not necessarily need to result in a pastor's resignation, but there are at least two situations in which researchers consider it likely the best course of action: when it comes to the point that a vote of confidence is required to measure a pastor's

¹⁰² Curtis C. Thomas, *Practical Wisdom for Pastors: Words of Encouragement and Counsel for a Lifetime of Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossways Books, 2001), 140.

¹⁰³ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Bubna, "Is It Time," 52.

support within the congregation;¹⁰⁵ and when one's Board tells one it is time to go.¹⁰⁶ In such circumstances it is likely that further action by the pastor will only result in more division and harm to both pastor and church.¹⁰⁷

Stages of Church Life

George Barna describes six phases in a church's life cycle. The first two, Conception and Infancy, are the developmental stages. The second two, Expansion and Balance, are growth stages. The last two, Stagnation and Disability, are stages in declining congregations.¹⁰⁸ For Barna each of these stages in the life of a church call for a different set of leadership skills and qualities of a pastor. For example, during the Conception phase the pastoral leader needs to be a "jack of all trades, master of none." While it is an exciting time in the life of a church as something new is created, it is also a period full of chaos and often a lack of resources. On the other hand, during the Expansion phase the key question for the church is how to manage the continual growth. The pastoral leader needs to be a person who is a team builder and comfortable being less involved in every decision.¹⁰⁹

Whether one agrees with Barna's model of church life or not, consensus in the literature is that different types of pastoral leadership and pastoral gifts are needed at

¹⁰⁵ Ratz, 76.

¹⁰⁶ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 42.

¹⁰⁷ Ratz, 76.

¹⁰⁸ George Barna, *A Fish Out Of Water: 9 Strategies Effective Leaders Use To Help You Get Back Into The Flow* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2002), 173-181.

¹⁰⁹ Barna, 175 and 177-178.

different stages in a church's life and development.¹¹⁰ Churches change over time and not every pastor has all the gifts necessary to lead a church through every different stage.¹¹¹ Pastors also change over time. They may discover new gifts or develop strengths that diverge from the needs of their congregations.¹¹² It is incumbent upon the pastor to evaluate realistically his/her own abilities and gifts to determine if they match the current and future needs of the church.¹¹³ Gary McIntosh suggests that one of the major reasons why so many growing churches suddenly plateau is because a new leadership style is needed to reach the next level and the pastor cannot change to meet the new challenges. He concludes, "Most pastors can adjust their style of leadership. Few can drastically change it."¹¹⁴

Schaller in a 1997 book offers a unique metaphor of measuring one's ministry. Rather than considering how long one has served a particular congregation, he suggests that pastors evaluate their ministry in terms of "chapters." Chapters measure a ministry by changes in the ministry, relationship and significant stages or events. The question of departure is then phrased not in terms of a time period, but whether one senses a desire or ability to lead a congregation through the next chapter of the church's life story.¹¹⁵

Among the churches surveyed there were references both to changes in the church and changes within the pastor that led to a decision to leave. Among the pastors, one left

¹¹⁰ See for example Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 20-21; Phillips, 18; and McIntosh 72.

¹¹¹ McIntosh, 72

¹¹² L. D. H., 162.

¹¹³ Barna, 184.

¹¹⁴ MacIntosh, 74.

¹¹⁵ Schaller, *Survival Tactics*, 23-26, 31.

an associate role to take on a senior pastor position. He related that even though he loved the congregation he was serving, over the previous year it became increasingly clear he was coming to a stage in his life and vocation where he needed to leave youth ministry. Once that decision was made, and even before he was called to a new church, he experienced a renewed passion and excitement for ministry. Another pastor had enrolled in educational studies to further his pastoral training, but not with the intention of leaving his congregation. However, as he neared the end of his studies, he realized the growth he had experienced was coinciding with a call to a new ministry.

Both pastors and lay-people were able to identify changes within the church that were a result of the pastor's ministry. Even in one of the churches that experienced a difficult transition, a very critical lay-person said that each pastor contributed to the life and development of the congregation and had some part in bringing the church to where it was. The current pastor, for example, had been able to bring some much needed organizational structure to the church. Another layman said his pastor had brought a lot of changes to the church citing the many new Christians and the deep spiritual growth. He believed the pastor felt he had accomplished all he could in that setting. A pastor in another church stated that the church had undergone a lot of spiritual and relational healing during his ministry and had found a new focus and sense of purpose. It became clear to him; however, that new purpose did not require his particular gifts. He believed he had accomplished his purpose for the church and now it was time for someone else to lead them in the next stage.

Both among the literature and those interviewed there was also a consensus that it is better to exit while the ministry is going well. One layman commented,

It is not always possible, but you want to leave on a high note. Even if you cannot leave on a high note, leave on a love note for the sake of the church and for the sake of the pastors themselves. It is a very sad thing, to my mind, to see a pastor have to leave on a bad note. It leaves a bad taste in the pastor's mouth and in the congregation's. That is not honoring to God.

Another pastor, having seen the church through almost two years of conflict, stated, "I am glad we are leaving with a sweet taste and not on a sour note. I am glad we persevered to see it through and waited on the Lord until it was sweet." Another lay person succinctly stated pastors should "try to leave when things are going well."

In the literature, Malcom Nygren, writing about his retirement suggested that it is a good idea for the pastor to "quit while he's winning."¹¹⁶ He would much rather hear people say he left too early than he stayed too long. "When he's given the best years of his life to a church, a pastor doesn't want to end by giving them the worst years."¹¹⁷ He also believes that leaving before people want him/her to leave allows the pastor some control over his/her life which one cannot have when he/she is forced out.¹¹⁸ For those who might think things are going so well that it would be wrong to leave, Calvin Ratz points out that God moved Phillip out of Samaria in the midst of a great revival.¹¹⁹ Finally, John Esau believes that positive as one's ministry might be, it is worth asking with a realistic view of one's limitations, might the congregation do even better under

¹¹⁶ Nygren, "Ending a Long Pastorate," 19.

¹¹⁷ Nygren, "Ending a Long Pastorate," 19.

¹¹⁸ Nygren, "Ending a Long Pastorate," 19.

¹¹⁹ Ratz, 76.

newer leadership.¹²⁰

Among the ten churches surveyed, interviewees in five of the six churches who experienced a healthy transition characterized the ministry as positive and growing. Three of the four churches that experienced difficult transitions were in a period of decline when the pastor left. In one church which experienced a very difficult transition after about eight months of conflict, it was remarked that had the pastor “left a year earlier it would have made all the difference in the world.”

Writing about clergy firings, Perry Biddle believes that the pastor is usually the one held responsible for the state of the church. If it is growing he/she is praised; if it is declining he/she is at fault. The measuring stick is usually the bottom line of numbers and dollars.¹²¹ His advice for pastors is to check the pulse of the congregation when they first sense there might be some dissatisfaction, and see if a misunderstanding or hurt can be resolved before there is a movement to oust the pastor.¹²²

Decline or stagnation for whatever reason can cause a minister to move. One lay person cited the reason for her pastor’s departure as, “He felt the ministry wasn’t moving forward as he would like it to. He couldn’t see it moving.” But a frustration with a lack of growth is not necessarily a reason to leave. Churches grow in spurts and can plateau for periods of time. Pastors should take a longer view. If there is a lack of growth or even a decline for a sustained period it may be a sign of a need for new leadership.¹²³

¹²⁰ John Esau, “How Long Should a Pastor Stay?” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 16.

¹²¹ Biddle, 9.

¹²² Biddle, 10.

¹²³ See Bubna, “Is it Time,” 51-52 and Lynn Anderson, 79-80.

Pastors and congregations change over periods of time; therefore it is appropriate for a pastor to ask if his/her gifts still match the needs of the congregation. ¹²⁴ One pastor who felt he had the gift of evangelism felt he was becoming so overwhelmed by the counseling needs of his congregation, he was unable to use his gifts for outreach. He felt the new congregation might offer more opportunities to use his gifts. Another pastor felt that disobedience to God's call would hurt both himself and his growing congregation. "If I stayed the ministry here would suffer. I have taken them as far as I can, and He has someone else ready to come and take them someplace else." Even when a pastor decides to stay after a thorough assessment of his/her gifts and the church's needs, the process itself can yield fruit. It can invigorate one's ministry as one discovers a new focus on what brings joy and fulfillment in service and leadership.¹²⁵

Resignation may not be inevitable for the pastor who feels that his gifts no longer match the desires or needs of the congregation. Donald Bubna believes that sometimes pastors need to seize the opportunity to grow into the new demands rather than run from them. Continually departing to start again somewhere else results in a pastor simply repeating the same experiences over and over again in different places. A little perseverance and perhaps God can use the challenges to bring growth both for the pastor and the church. Leave too soon and one never learns new lessons.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ McIntosh, 72-73.

¹²⁵ Bolles, 22.

¹²⁶ Bubna, "Ten Reasons," 101.

Call to New Church

Among the ten pastors surveyed, only Stuart was approached by a new church before he decided it was time to leave his current ministry. This suggests that within the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches this is the less frequent course of events leading to a pastor's resignation. At least one author suggests that the only right time to consider leaving is when a new ministry is calling.¹²⁷ Anecdotal evidence, however, leads one to conclude that most often the pastor initiates the departure process by letting denominational officials know that he/she is open to accepting a new call. In Stuart's case, he was approached by two individuals from the new church who asked if he was interested in applying for the opening in their congregation. He responded positively, and then heard nothing more for about two months. At that point he received a phone call requesting an interview with the Search Committee. After that meeting Stuart made an offer and the church made a better counter offer which he immediately accepted.

There is a sense in which a call to a new church can be more of a going to a ministry than a leaving of an old one. The reason for a departure may not be a need to exit one church, but more a leading to a new work.¹²⁸ In reality, a pastor who has not already decided it is time to leave faces a two sided issue. The question is not just, "Is God calling me to this new church?" One must also ask, "Is my work done in this current ministry? Does God have more for me to accomplish here? What about unfinished plans and dreams for this congregation?"¹²⁹ To consent to discussions with a new congregation

¹²⁷ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 52.

¹²⁸ Lynn Anderson, 81.

¹²⁹ Ratz, 75.

with integrity, one must be willing to consider that it is time to leave his/her current church.¹³⁰

One pastor commented, “A clear call of the Lord helps with the transition.” But not every new ministry call is from God. Sometimes the attraction to a new congregation is simply an attraction, not a calling.¹³¹ Knowing that another church is interested in you can be an exciting ego boost.¹³² For one pastor committing to go through the procedure of talking with a new church requires a commitment to an extended period of private upheaval and no small amount of personal energy. During the process there is often discomfort about developing too many long terms plans for the current ministry when it might be possible that one might not be there much longer. It requires wisdom just to decide whether to candidate or not.¹³³

Career Advancement

Among the literature there is more than consensus that leaving a congregation for no other reason than career advancement is to be frowned upon. One writer describes it as an “insidious shift” from ministry as vocation to ministry as career.¹³⁴ Calvin Ratz states that the idea is secular and “foreign to the New Testament.”¹³⁵ Patricia Chang reminds her readers of Jesus’ warning against the desire to become great in the Kingdom (Matthew

¹³⁰ Ratz, 74.

¹³¹ Lynn Anderson, 82.

¹³² Name Withheld, “First Runner Up: Overcoming the Pain of Not Getting that New Position,” *Leadership* 19 (Winter 1998) : 47.

¹³³ Name Withheld, 48.

¹³⁴ L. D. H., 162.

¹³⁵ Ratz, 77.

23:1-12; Mark 10:41-45), noting that ministries that are all “noise, nickels and numbers” are “far removed from the ministry of Jesus.”¹³⁶ Nevertheless, both Ratz and Chang leave room for the idea of seeking God’s calling to an area of larger work or greater responsibility. Chang in particular remarks that Jesus said, “Those who have shown faithfulness in little things will be given greater responsibility.” (Matthew 25:23) Ratz concurs when he writes,

... as our ministries mature, God does place us in positions of greater responsibility. As our ability to handle larger churches, to administer more complexity, and to speak to congregations of more diversity develops, God does open up new areas of service.¹³⁷

Among the eight clergy who were leaving to go to new ministries, four were going to larger churches and four were going to smaller ministries. However, the associate pastor who was becoming a senior pastor was among those going to a smaller congregation which many might still consider advancement. The layman from his congregation certainly did when he commented, “I don’t think young men with promise should stay in that [*associate*] position. They should **move up** to senior pastor positions.” (Emphasis added.) The pastor himself, however, stated he made his decision based on the Spirit’s leading and not on whether or not it was a good career move. He was clear that he has never made a ministry decision based on “climbing the corporate ladder.”

Another pastor echoed Chang’s comments on Matthew 25 when in the initial interview he spoke about the call to a new congregation as a blessing for being faithful.

¹³⁶ Chang, 26 and 27.

¹³⁷ Ratz, 77.

In a follow-up interview he was asked if he viewed the new church as “a reward from the Lord?” His response was, “Not exactly, but I believe if I am faithful with what He gives, the Lord will bless and give me more responsibility.”

It is interesting to note that among the four pastors who referred to either discouragement or conflict as a part of their reasons for departure, three went to significantly smaller congregations. The transitions in the churches they were leaving were also among the most difficult. These pastors seem to fulfill Richard Bolles’ prediction that discouraged pastors too often leave to take whatever church they can find, even if it might be perceived as a step down.¹³⁸

On the other side, of the six pastors who left growing or positive ministries, five made what an observer might term advancement. Four went to larger congregations and, as stated above, one moved from an associate to a senior position. The remaining pastor went to a church of a similar size to the one he left.¹³⁹ If Chang’s research is correct, the experience of this last pastor may be the more common. According to Chang, among Protestant churches in America only one percent of pastors will have an opportunity to step into a senior pastoral role. There are few and fewer of such positions and with the large number of smaller churches there will be declining opportunities for advancement, meaning that most clergy will spend their vocational lifetime ‘stuck in the middle levels.’¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Bolles, “The Pastor’s Parachute,” 23.

¹³⁹ For a bit more clarity, it might be noted that one of the discouraged pastors was among those leaving a growing ministry to go to a larger congregation.

¹⁴⁰ Chang, 19-20.

According to Susan Gregg-Schroeder, women pastors are less likely to make vocational choices based on career advancement. Among her female peers she observed they chose to go to “ministries that feel authentic,” rather than seeking positions on the basis of “image, prestige, or the expectations of the church hierarchy.” This meant some women pastors said no to opportunities that might conflict with their sense of calling. “Each of us is trying to live a life of balance, wholeness and authenticity in response to God’s calling.”¹⁴¹ Gregg-Schroeder’s observations rang true for the one female pastor surveyed. Her new ministry role would not be considered by outsiders as a step up for her vocational career, but she was nonetheless excited about the change.

Gregg-Schroeder also wrestles with a system which places inexperienced pastors in small struggling churches while experienced and creative clergy get to advance. The implication is that smaller churches are less important.¹⁴² While no ministry ought to be considered insignificant or less deserving of a gifted minister, it does seem that those who do well in one setting tend to be called to places of larger responsibility. Perhaps only the pastor can determine whether or not a particular move should be considered advancement.¹⁴³ When asked, “Is there any room for vocational ambition in the ministry?” Richard Bolles said, yes and no.

Everything depends on who the person is. If I’d see ambition in certain individuals, I’d salute it, because it might be the first time they’ve consider themselves worthy of a greater work for God. But if I’d see that ambition in others, it may appear consistent with their pattern of being secular corporate

¹⁴¹ Susan Gregg-Schroeder, “Choosing Paths of Service,” *The Christian Ministry* 30 (May-June, 1999) : 6.

¹⁴² Gregg-Schroeder, 6.

¹⁴³ Ratz, 78.

raiders in parochial dress. If that were the case, I'd pray that they'd jettison their ambition.¹⁴⁴

Money and Family

While monetary concerns were cited as a reason for leaving by only one pastor of those interviewed, issues around money surfaced in several of the interviews with the pastors. In two situations there was an open conflict over the salary package. In one case it was one of several conflicts that eventually led to the pastor's departure. In that particular case it was a disagreement over a housing allowance. In the second case an agreement to a cost of living increase in the pastor's salary was broken. At least three other pastors made reference to dissatisfaction with their current salary level, but they did not verbalize these feelings to anyone within their congregations. These pastors felt there were misconceptions among the congregation about what should be considered salary and what the salary level should be. At the same time they did not address these issues lest their intentions be construed in a negative light. For one of these pastors, the difference of understanding between himself and the chair of the Finance Committee led to a final pay cheque that was smaller than the pastor expected.

A belief that churches do not understand reasonable clergy compensation levels is prevalent throughout the literature. Chang's research, for example, led her to conclude that clergy do not receive salaries comparable to other similarly educated professionals.¹⁴⁵ James Meek believes that congregations need to adjust both their attitude and understanding. They need, he wrote, to take to heart the Scriptural principles

¹⁴⁴ Bolles, 24-25.

¹⁴⁵ Chang, 20.

that a worker is worthy of his hire (Luke 10:7) and those who receive spiritual leadership should monetarily support their leaders. (Galatians 6:6, Romans 15:27 and 1 Corinthians 9:11). He suggests that someone needs to help congregations understand that it costs a pastor as much to live as most people, and perhaps more than others when he/she has large educational debts. Meek does not suggest who should impart this understanding.¹⁴⁶

Writing twenty years ago, the editor of the *Concordia Journal* remarked that the only time many churches raise the pastoral salary package is when they are trying to attract a new pastor. He suggested that had they increased their current pastor's compensation, they might not be looking for a new one.¹⁴⁷ The opposite of this scenario occurred in one of the congregations surveyed. The departing pastor related that the church planned to reduce the salary package for a new pastor so that there would be room to give increases again at a later time.

While there is almost universal disdain in the literature for clergy who base their decision to leave or stay on the compensation¹⁴⁸ there is a feeling that financial pressures cannot be completely ignored, especially for younger pastors who have families to consider. If a low salary level is making it difficult for the minister to provide for the growing needs of his family then several writers suggest the wisest move may be to a new congregation.¹⁴⁹ Ratz emphatically states, "It's time we got off the guilt trip that a

¹⁴⁶ James Meek, "We Need to Know More," in *Factors Shaping Clergy Careers: A Wake Up Call for Protestant Denominations and Pastors*, by Patricia M. Y. Chang, Pulpit and Pew Research Reports. (Durham NC: Duke Divinity School, 2005), 27.

¹⁴⁷ L. D. H., 162.

¹⁴⁸ See for example Bubna, "How to Bid", 121; Ratz, 75; Gillaspie, 29; Lynn Anderson, 80; and Phillips, vi.

¹⁴⁹ See for example Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 42; Ratz, 77; and L. D. H., 162

move to another church where we will be better cared for is all wrong. We are not in this work for the money. But God does know our needs and takes note of our faithfulness.”¹⁵⁰

There are more than just monetary concerns in the delicate balance between family needs and ministry departure decisions. Whatever decision is made it will not only affect the pastor, but also the pastor’s family, especially if relocation will occur. Consulting with one’s spouse is more than encouraged and can even be a season when the marriage relationship can grow deeper.¹⁵¹ Nine of the ten pastors surveyed were married and all but one stated their spouse was very involved in the decision making process. In that one instance, it was the spouse’s decision not to be a part of the process. In one other instance it was actually a decision of the spouse to accept a new job that led to the pastor’s decision to resign. This is in keeping with Anderson’s view that commitment to the covenant of family should supercede one’s commitment to a particular congregation.¹⁵² It is also consistent with John Esau’s opinion that a spouse’s role and career needs should be given due consideration.¹⁵³ Bubna and Anderson both state that when staying with a particular church is going to impact a family’s physical, spiritual, or emotional health in a negative way, it is always the right decision to move on.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, Bubna also states when a move will hurt rather than help one’s family, then one might decide to stay despite other factors. He advocated consulting and praying about

¹⁵⁰ Ratz, 77.

¹⁵¹ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 120.

¹⁵² Lynn Anderson, 81.

¹⁵³ Esau, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Lynn Anderson, 81; Bubna, “Is It Time,” 52.

the decision with one's children even if they are still quite young.¹⁵⁵ God's will for a pastor to stay or leave a ministry can be communicated through the needs and concerns of one's family.¹⁵⁶

Of those surveyed, six pastors had children living at home to consider. The children ranged from infant to middle school age. Two pastors made reference to needs related to their children as a part of the reasons for their departure. For one the concerns were around both education and the lack of opportunity for the child to develop friendships. The other pastor believed that his family's personal needs and goals could no longer be reached in that particular setting. For all of the six pastors, family needs and concerns were a significant part of determining what new ministry they would accept. In particular the children's needs for schooling, opportunities for friendship and proper housing were given consideration. Often the children were part of a candidating visit to a new church. While some pastors allowed their children to voice concerns, none gave their children a right to veto a decision. The children of one pastor did demand the right of a vote, but it was not granted.

A Correlation Between Why and How

While there is very little in the literature on how the reasons a pastor leaves a church impacts the way he/she leaves that church, observation and reflection on those surveyed suggests there is a correlation. 'Why' a pastor leaves his/her congregation is reflected in 'how' he/she functions during the departure period, as the following observations point out.

¹⁵⁵ Bubna, "Ten Reasons Not to Resign," 102; and "How to Bid," 120.

¹⁵⁶ Ratz, 77.

Among the four transitions that could be termed difficult, one would observe the pastors who cited discouragement, stress and conflict as reasons for their departure. Only one made reference to a sense of calling from God to leave and two resigned before they were called to a new ministry position. As will be noted in later chapters, churches whose pastors resigned without a new ministry to go to went through some of the greatest emotional turmoil. Feelings of anger, guilt and rejection were more prevalent and there were more reports of conflict between the members in these congregations.

Pastors who cited reasons of conflict or discouragement for their departure were also less engaged with their congregations during the transition process. They reported less time spent in visitation and a refusal to engage in any conflict situations. One pastor completely ceased a normal visitation routine, though he continued hospital and funeral visits. A lay person in another congregation noted that the only time most people saw the pastor was at the Sunday services. These pastors were also more likely to be found spending time at the church they were going to than other pastors. Three of four discouraged pastors made at least two visits to the new congregations during their final weeks at the current church. These visits were over and above meetings with a search committee. One pastor reported spending about one day a week at the new ministry setting. By contrast, only one of the remaining four who entered new ministry settings spent any time at the new church before completing service at the current church. In that case it was one meeting with the Board of Deacons. Two of the four discouraged pastors also took vacation time during their final weeks serving with their congregations, as opposed to only one of the remaining six. One pastor, who cited stress as a factor in his

departure, took a two week sick leave. Finally, the time between the announcement of a resignation and the final day of service on average was three weeks shorter in those leaving for reason of discouragement, conflict or stress, compared with remainder of the group.

On the other hand, pastors who did not cite discouragement or conflict were typically as engaged as normal or even more engaged with their congregations during the final weeks of service. For example, one pastor leaving for reasons related the length of his tenure and the stage of the church life made an intentional effort to visit the homes of every member before his departure. When asked about some of their final tasks during initial and follow up interviews pastors who had not cited reasons for discouragement or conflict more often referred to people they needed to visit or had already visited before they left. Another pastor intentionally attended the gathering of every group, committee, or Board he had participated with over his years of ministry, even though it had not been his usual practice to be at all of these events or meetings each month.

Those citing discouragement, conflict or stress were also less likely to seek resolutions to conflicts during the period of their departure. Disputes varying from minor to major were reported to have arisen in seven of the eleven congregations during pastor's final weeks of service. One discouraged pastor very intentionally did not address any conflict issues stating those issues would be something for the next pastor to address. Another pastor said his relationships within the congregation were a lot easier now because his detractors felt they had finally won. He also said he was intentionally not

dealing with any controversial issues. He told one deacon, “I am not going to push anymore.”

By contrast, in a congregation where the pastor’s primary reasons for leaving were a calling by God and a calling to a new ministry, a letter was sent to the Board of Deacons within days of the pastor’s resignation. The writer advocated the church sever all ties with the CABC and its agencies. That pastor ensured the issue was dealt with quickly. For the pastor who sought to visit every member of the congregation before he left, part of his reasoning was to ensure there were no “fires to put out” before he completed his work. A third pastor was criticized for not being as available as some felt he should be. In particular the issue related to people being unable to get through to him on the phone. He resolved the issue by installing a new answering machine and checking it regularly to ensure he did not miss anyone’s calls.

Several pastors noted that especially as the final day drew closer there was a temptation to work less in the current ministry. As one pastor stated, “It is hard to stay motivated to work hard until the last day. Because what can they do? They can’t fire me. So there is a temptation to coast to the end.” More often it was those who cited discouragement, conflict or stress who gave in to the temptation. Along with fewer visitations, this tendency was observed in less attendance at Board and committee meetings and the discontinuing of other duties that had been a normal part of the schedule. In one church there were no Board of Deacons meetings held after the pastor’s resignation, and in another the pastor no longer attended the Church Council meetings. A pastor who resigned in August and left in November, did not begin the regular mid-week

Bible Study in September as was usual and as requested by the deacons. The lay person interviewed remarked that if the pastor had started it someone would have continued it after he was done. By contrast Bible Studies or small groups led by the pastor were kept up in each of the churches where pastors did not cite discouragement or conflict as a reason for their departure.

Though the researcher did not hear any of the pastors' messages, from what was reported by both clergy and laity there was a noticeable difference in the preaching between those leaving for reasons of discouragement and conflict and those leaving for other reasons. One pastor's final series of messages was a "best of" series. He chose some of what he felt were the best messages given over the time of his tenure and preached them again. Another lay person reported attending a neighboring church service and hearing the same sermon her own pastor had preached a week or two earlier. Later she was able to find the message on an internet sermon site. The final message of a third pastor was on the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man. The pastor originally wanted to preach against the love of money but said, "God would not allow me to preach it." Instead he said he would let those who think they are poor know that the rich guy "doesn't have it all." In contrast, among those pastors not citing conflict or discouragement, two pastors reported that their ability and passion for preaching improved during the final weeks of their ministry. They also continued to develop new messages suited to the needs and issues in the congregation. One pastor did a series on attitudes and how to keep them positive and then a final three week series on leadership transitions. Another pastor completed a series on evangelism and outreach. The final

sermon in another congregation was done around the communion table and focused on church covenant and commitment. Another pastor did a series on discipleship and completed it on his last Sunday with reflections on the joy it had been for him to observe the growth in discipleship within the congregation.

Each congregation held an obligatory farewell event for their pastor. Among pastors who cited discouragement, stress and conflict there was reticence about attending those events. As mentioned above, one pastor was concerned what sort of gift would be given, another would rather there not have been an event at all. Among the other pastors there was a feeling of anticipation for these farewell events. One pastor smiled and laughed saying he did not know exactly what would happen, but he had heard rumors and was looking forward to lots of laughter, as well as a few tears. For another pastor there was both a farewell event for the whole congregation, and a separate dinner gathering of deacons and former deacons during which each one shared with the pastor the memories he was leaving with them.

Pastors who were leaving for reasons other than discouragement or conflict were more likely to ensure that Search Committees were formed and ready to function and that plans were in place for the interim period before they left. Search Committees were named in all eight of the churches losing a senior pastor before that minister's departure, but in two of the four churches of pastors citing discouragement or conflict these committees had not met. In the other two the committees had met once. By contrast all four of the other committees had met with their Regional Minister and two had begun interviewing perspective new pastors. At the time of the final interviews one of the

churches losing an associate pastor was ready to bring a name forward as a replacement. At the final interviews, only one of the four churches whose pastor was leaving due to discouragement and conflict had plans for interim Sunday supply for longer than a month and two had no arrangements even for the Sunday following the pastor's departure. By contrast five of the remaining six congregations had firm plans for the interim. Most critics agree that the departing pastor should not influence Search Committees,¹⁵⁷ nor make the interim arrangements and it should be noted that none of the pastors surveyed appeared to cross that line. However, those who were not leaving due to reasons of conflict or discouragement were more likely to ensure that the Search Committees were functioning and that those responsible had begun to put interim plans in place.

One should not conclude from these examples that pastors leaving for reasons of conflict, discouragement or stress did nothing right in their final weeks and the other pastors did nothing wrong. However, it would appear that when the causes of a pastor's departure are primarily reasons one might consider negative (i.e. discouragement, conflict and stress) he/she is less likely to do the things that will be identified in later chapters as contributing to a healthier transition process both for him/herself as well as for the congregation. Roy Oswald's 1978 study of Military Chaplains' departure styles listed six characteristics of what he termed a positive closure process. Include in this list was: "remaining conscientious about their assignments until the end;" "considered all groups (family, friends, commanders, congregation);" "worked to develop an acceptable climate for a new person;" and "open to invitations to homes."¹⁵⁸ These are activities that those

¹⁵⁷ For example Orval Butcher, "The Transfer of Treasure," *Leadership* 3 (Summer 1982) : 98.

¹⁵⁸ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 5.

who were leaving for primarily negative reasons often neglected but were frequently found to be a part of the final weeks of the other pastors. On the opposite side, among the practices of those Chaplains who had closure styles that left their parishioners bewildered and hurt Oswald observed they usually: had a “hard time being straight and honest;” “got a bad review by a Commanding Officer so avoided him,” and “hated farewells” so they “slipped away in the night.”¹⁵⁹ Again, issues related to avoidance and a dread of farewell events were two of the characteristics observed in those who left for predominantly negative reasons.

Are pastors who resign for reasons related to discouragement and conflict doomed to lead churches into an unhealthy beginning for their transition to new pastors? Observations would suggest that it is more likely, but it is not inevitable. Not every pastor who was discouraged oversaw the start of an unhealthy transition. Not every pastor who was leaving because of conflict issues produced an unhealthy start to their church’s transition. Indeed perhaps the pastor who had endured the greatest number of conflicts over the course of his ministry provided one of the healthiest starts to the transition process. As will be explored in Chapter 3, what may be required of the pastor who truly desires to give the congregation a healthy start to this transition is coming to terms with his/her own reasons for leaving the current ministry and the emotions related to those reasons.

¹⁵⁹ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 5.

Summary

The transitional period for a pastor begins when he/she begins to consider the question, “Is it time to leave?” It is not unusual for a pastor to prayerfully consider this question for a year or more before coming to an answer. It can be a lonely period of contemplation as a pastor weighs numerous factors and reasons which go into what should be a discernment of God’s leading both for the pastor and the congregation. Pastors often consult and take into confidence trusted pastoral colleagues or friends, but churches generally do not expect nor desire their pastors to involve them in the decision process. Most often when a congregation prematurely discovers their pastor wants or is planning to leave, the ministry and morale of the church suffers.

There are numerous reasons why a pastor may decide it is time to leave a particular ministry and most often multiple factors are considered in the decision making process. It was observed that the reasons for a pastor’s resignation often impact the way he/she functions during the departure period. Pastors who resign for what can be considered primarily negative reasons (e.g. discouragement, conflict, stress, etc.) are less likely to engage in activities and ministry which will facilitate the start of a healthy transition process. Instead they are more likely to make an early emotional, and sometimes physical, withdrawal from their congregation and precipitate a difficult transition period for the church. Pastors who resign for what might be considered primarily positive reasons (e.g. call, stage of church life, etc.) are more likely to remain engaged and seek the welfare of the congregation even as they prepare to leave. While one should not assume pastors who have negative reasons for their resignation are

destined to lead a difficult transition, it does require more intentional effort and a certain amount of personal awareness to overcome the temptation simply to leave and wash one's hands of a particular ministry.

Chapter 2 - Communicating Departure

More Than an Announcement

Communicating one's departure is more than simply making a public statement that one's services will conclude on a specific date. In some ways it is a whole process in and of itself. The manner of the communication will set the tone for the final months of a pastor's ministry with his/her congregation. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, addressing the issue of how doctors tell a patient their condition is terminal, notes that while the patient's reactions are not completely dependent on how the doctor communicates, communication is an important factor which is too often underestimated. For Kübler-Ross the question is not "Do I tell my patient?" but . . . "How do I share this knowledge with my patient?"¹

Many factors, such as the pastor's personality and the history of the pastor-church relationship, influence how the information is communicated. There is not one technique or formula that fits all circumstances.² Indeed one pastor specifically stated that it is a process one can "never master." Researchers, however, believe that to provide some measure of familiarity, and to help facilitate a healthy response to the grief which will come, it is best to adhere to traditional denominational patterns³ and congregational norms, especially if they are spelled out in a contract or constitution.⁴

¹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969, 1970), 36.

² White, 43.

³ Phillips, 26.

⁴ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 32.

Timing of the Departure

It is generally accepted that the communication of one's departure should come as soon after accepting a new call as possible to avoid the disconcerting impact on a church that learns their pastor has accepted a call before they hear he/she has resigned.⁵ One pastor, for example, called the chair of the deacons immediately after accepting a call to a new ministry. From time to time, however, there are some other mitigating factors such as special seasons or events in the life of a congregation. Gillaspie, for example, believes that the worst time to resign is at or right before Easter. His preferred time was soon after Easter as this gives the congregation the spring to adjust to the news, the summer for the pastor and family to adjust to a new setting, and everyone lots of time to prepare for a busy fall.⁶

None of the pastors surveyed had to deal with the Easter season, but for three pastors the Christmas season was a consideration in the timing of the announcement. One pastor, who was leaving without a new ministry to go to, made the decision to resign in November, but waited until the annual meeting early in January rather than subject the congregation to the grief process through the Christmas holidays. Another pastor accepted a call to a new congregation during the second week of December, but did not announce his resignation until the first Sunday of January. He stated that his preference would have been to say something right away, but that the church had completed a very successful series of outreach events in November and entered into the Christmas season with a "real momentum." He felt that hearing of his departure during the Christmas

⁵ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 88.

⁶ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 53-54.

events would not have been a “positive thing” for the church and would have “quashed” seasonal celebrations, so he waited until the earliest opportunity after Christmas.

A third pastor (Andrew) also accepted a call to a new pastorate before Christmas. In Andrew’s case, he was anxious both to get his home on the market and to arrive at the new charge as soon as possible. He resigned on the first Sunday of Advent to be effective the final Sunday of February. However, his home sold quickly and he actually ended his ministry on the first week of January. In an interview with Andrew only a few days before his departure, he was unaware of any plans for who would fill in the next Sunday. The researcher later learned the church was able to obtain various Sunday supply preachers for January and February, but they were unable to employ an interim minister until later in March.

The optimum length of the actual departure time (i.e. the time from the announcement until the actual departure) is a subject of much debate. William Teague, while arguing for a longer period of time, notes that conventional wisdom suggests, “a good Academy Award acceptance speech and a pastor’s farewell from a church have something in common: both should be short and sweet. And then you should get off the stage.”⁷ White, Gillaspie, Cook and Bubna all accept this conventional wisdom and argue that the length of time should be as short as possible. Bubna writes that a pastor needs to give as little as two weeks notice (and no more than four weeks) stating that the sooner one leaves, the “sooner the healing begins and the church can start to look for a new successor.”⁸ Edward White believes fears about too quick a departure are unfounded and

⁷ William Teague, “When It’s Time to Say Goodbye,” *Leadership* 13 (Spring 1992) : 72 and 78.

⁸ Bubna, 121.

that sixty days are more than adequate because the longer one stays the more one will be tempted to exercise inappropriate influence and exert power over the life of the church. The pastor becomes a “temporary resident, who is passing through, and is no longer permanent and dependable and to be counted on.”⁹ Gillaspie, citing reasons similar to White, suggests that “six weeks is better than three months.”¹⁰ Cook believes that any more than a month is too long to burden a church with a “lame-duck” pastor and prolonged good-bys.¹¹

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Malcom Nygren compares a short departure time to giving a church a heart-attack,¹² and Roy Oswald rebukes pastors who cut short their departure saying that the church rightly questions if the pastor really ever cared for his/her people.¹³ He believes pastors cut their departure short to avoid emotional pain, but it usually backfires as powerful emotions are denied and not dealt with.¹⁴ Interestingly, J. William Worden, a grief counselor, states that it is a person’s own discomfort with the grief process that causes him/her to cut relationships short.¹⁵ Contrary to Bubna’s opinion, cutting the departure time short (e.g. Andrew’s experience) is usually more about avoiding the grief process necessary for healing than concern for the church one is leaving. Quick departures deny the congregation and the pastor opportunities to express

⁹ White, 46.

¹⁰ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 32.

¹¹ Cook, 145.

¹² Nygren, “Ending a Long Pastorate,” *The Christian Ministry*, 23 (March-April 1992) : 19.

¹³ Oswald, “The Pastor’s Passages,” 14.

¹⁴ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 2.

¹⁵ J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1982), 107.

and deal with their feelings. A pastor who allows enough time to properly express and model his/her own grief process will enable the church to adjust better to a new phase in their history.¹⁶

Among the pastors surveyed, excluding the pastor who retired, the shortest departure time was six weeks and the longest period was six months.¹⁷ The average period of time was twelve weeks (or three months). Opinions about a suitable length of a departure time were as varied among those surveyed as it is throughout the literature. For example, in the church which had fourteen weeks notice the lay person expressed a desire to have had greater notice, as much as six months, whereas in two congregations that were given eight and ten weeks notice, the lay people expressed that the amount of time given was sufficient. In one pastorate that was given three months notice one lay-leader felt it was not a sufficient amount of time and another thought that while three months was an acceptable norm, he was ready for the pastor to be gone within a month.

In the literature, it is generally agreed that retiring pastors are able to take a longer period of departure time and this held true for the retiring pastor surveyed who gave one and a half year's notice to his congregation. The reasons given for this particular timing took into consideration both personal financial issues and special events in the life of the congregation. Malcom Nygren, who gave two years notice to his congregation, also cited both personal and congregational reasons for a longer departure time. Personally, he wanted to be proactive and have some sense of control over the final two years of

¹⁶ Malcom Nygren, "Wrapping Up a Long Pastorate," *Leadership* 14 (Winter, 1993) : 124.

¹⁷ The two longest periods (six months and three and a half months) were given by pastors who resigned before they had accepted a call to a new ministry.

ministry and the terms of his retirement. Congregationally he believed that a longer period of time would allow the search committee plenty of time to complete their task and relieve the church from feeling deserted. What he found was that retirement was like “dying (without the obvious disadvantage): no one speaks ill of those who are about to retire. Unhappy people know their unhappiness will be short-lived. Supportive people want to seize the chance to show their loyalty. After I announced my leaving, then, I enjoyed enthusiastic support.”¹⁸ Oswald, Heath and Heath suggest that pastors who have served for a long period of time should actually announce their retirement four or five years in advance so that the congregation can strategically plan for important goals they would like accomplished before the pastor departs. They also recommend a three month sabbatical before those final five years so the pastor can “finish strong” and that the final six months be devoted to “closure.”¹⁹

Retirement aside, there is some wisdom in the concept of tailoring the length of departure relative to the length of the pastor’s tenure in the congregation. Churches whose pastor has served for a long period of time may benefit from a longer period of departure.²⁰ The ending of these ministries is frequently more traumatic for the church and if surprised congregants are given little time to prepare, problems can be compounded. Often they feel that someone they trusted has abandoned them. As Nygren concludes, “long pastorates should end differently.”²¹

¹⁸ Nygren, “Wrapping Up,” 123-124.

¹⁹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 11.

²⁰ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 11.

²¹ Nygren, “Ending a Long Pastorate,” 19.

Who Knows Before Whom

Among the churches surveyed only one pastor consciously chose to tell no one about his impending departure before he made a public announcement. All others at least made their deacons or church governing Board aware of their decision prior to giving notice to the church. Three, including the retiring pastor, made their leadership aware at a whole Board meeting (one pastor did this immediately before the church service), while a further five visited with their leaders individually in the week before the public announcement. The final pastor spoke with the chair of the deacons, but finding the conversation so emotional, asked that person to contact the remainder of the Board to inform them.

The vast majority of the literature assumes a pastor will confide in his/her Board before the general congregation is made aware of his/her resignation.²² This is also commonly assumed among the lay-people. Two lay-leaders, one a deacon and one non-deacon, were interviewed in the one setting where the pastor did not communicate with his Board prior to the announcement. Both expressed regrets about the pastor's course of action. The non-deacon felt that it made the deacons appear irrelevant and the deacon felt unprepared to face the numerous questions that immediately followed. The pastor admitted that the Board had years earlier specifically requested that, should he ever accept a call to another congregation, he let them know before he announced it to the church. He felt, however, that he could not trust them to keep the information confidential.

²² See Oswald, Heath and Heath, 11; Phillips, 25; Bubna, "How to Bid," 120; Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 87.

In most of the multi-staff church situations, the resigning pastor also communicated the news with the other staff members prior to the resignation. In the cases of senior pastors, this was done individually during the week prior to the announcement. In the case of both associate pastors, they confided with their senior pastor about the possibility of their departure early in the discussions with a new church's pulpit committee and before they made the final decision to move. Similarly, Donald Bubna confidentially asked for the prayerful support of his pastoral staff as he sought God's leading in a decision to leave a particular ministry. He specifically stated that he was not asking them to give him advice one way or another, but they were to hold him accountable for acting ethically and with a view to be God honoring through the process. When he broke the news of his departure to his staff, he also took the time to specifically ask what he could do to help each staff person before he left and to acknowledge the difficulties his decision would place upon them.²³

Four pastors also confided the information about their departure before the public announcement with non-Board people who were both inside and outside the congregation. Generally those confided in were close friends of the pastor and his family. Several of these moments of sharing took place over a meal. One pastor also told an older shut-in with whom he felt he had a special relationship. In only one church did the pastor systematically take the time to inform a large number of people. He spent most of the week previous to the announcement telling "those I wanted to know." Along with the Board, those he wanted to know about his decision included friends, former and current

²³ Bubna, "How to Bid," 120.

church staff, and older members who were “endeared to me.” The effect was that when the announcement was made there were “few gasps and few tears” which in the pastor’s opinion “felt right.”

Only one writer was found who thought allowing certain people to know ahead of the general congregation was inadvisable. Robert Dale believes that sharing such information creates the appearance of favoritism.²⁴ But William Teague believes that confiding in close friends is a fitting act of respect for those relationships and provides a “non-threatening way for our friends to respond initially.”²⁵ For one pastor these conversations with key leaders and a few close friends were very emotional, but they also helped him prepare for the public statement. He related, “When I talked with them, I could barely get the words out, but it got easier each time, and so when it came to the actual resignation, the first sentence was pretty tough, but after I got going it was fine.”

Phillips’ summation of the issue is perhaps the most helpful. He believes it is important for a pastor to consider the feelings of those he has worked closely with, those who have a right to know by virtue of their position within the church, and those who will be most deeply and emotionally impacted by the news, and to confide the information about his/her impending resignation with such people. He also recognizes there will always be other people who think they should have been a part of the inner circle, and it is up to both the pastor and the Board to care for the hurt feelings of those who felt they

²⁴ Dale, 183.

²⁵ Teague, 75.

should have been consulted first. He concludes that though it needs to be done, the “task is too complicated for anyone to do successfully.”²⁶

Public Announcement

Eight of ten pastors announced their resignation during a worship service. The remaining two (including the retiring pastor) gave their notice at a regularly scheduled congregational meeting. Eight read a written statement/letter, one spoke spontaneously and one pastor read a letter and then spoke “from the heart.” Of those who announced the news on a Sunday, seven did so at the end of the service, the one who spoke spontaneously did so from the communion table. The remaining pastor integrated the announcement into the substance of the morning message. He invited a second person, who was prepared ahead of time to come sit with him on the platform. Following the initial announcement, the pastor and the second person “informally chatted,” shared memories, and reflected on the pastor’s time at the church.

Consistent with the results in the churches surveyed, the literature indicates that a pastor’s resignation is most often announced at some point during Sunday worship, usually in the form of a written letter and usually, but not always, read by the pastor.²⁷ Gillaspie notes that while this is the norm, the practice should be changed because a resignation is too dramatic, emotional and unworshipful. His preference is to have a letter read at a business meeting. He along with Bubna and Phillips argue that much time and consideration should be given to crafting a carefully worded and well articulated statement that is neither resentful nor excessively full of praise, but which also gives

²⁶ Phillips, 25-26.

²⁷ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 36; Teague, 74; Bubna, 120.

proper respect to God's leading in these circumstances.²⁸ Bubna actually wrote several different drafts over the course of several days before deciding on a final draft for his resignation.²⁹ Phillips believes that the appropriate congregational leaders should be a part of drafting the resignation letter and approve the wording of the final statement.³⁰

Of the lay-people interviewed four, for various reasons, were not present at the service when the announcement was made and did not find out until later. It is for this reason, and believing that it is important for everyone in the congregation to know at the same time, that Oswald, Heath and Heath suggest the announcement should not be done orally, but through a letter sent to every household.³¹ Gillaspie goes a little further by suggesting that not only should a church be informed by mail, but the letter should also state the date and time of a business meeting when the letter of resignation would be dealt with.³² While this suggestion was not followed in any of the churches surveyed, the researcher is aware of this being done recently in an Ontario church. One would wonder, however, whether one could count on the mail arriving and being opened at everyone's house on the same day. It seems unlikely that a pastor could successfully let an entire congregation know simultaneously. Perhaps Antal's suggestion that a Sunday announcement be followed with a Monday morning mailing to all members, adherents and friends is the closest one might come to achieving this goal.³³

²⁸ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 35; Bubna, "How to Bid," 120

²⁹ Bubna, "How to Bid," 120

³⁰ Phillips, 26.

³¹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 11.

³² Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 37

³³ Antal, 77-78.

Content of the Announcement

Even though a pastor may share the news of his/her resignation with some people before a public announcement, for most of the people in a congregation the public announcement will be the initial notice of their pastor's impending departure. Kübler-Ross' advice that one consider carefully how one communicates the news is sage wisdom to pastors at this point.³⁴ For Bubna, the resignation letter itself should be both a vehicle of healing and a statement of faith that conveys an affirmation of God's sovereignty and an optimistic view of the future. It should express joy in the past relationship, a sorrow at parting and a conviction that a correct choice to follow God's leading has been made.³⁵ As Teague advises, three themes should govern the content of the announcement: openness, honesty and graciousness.³⁶

Openness

For Teague, openness refers to the emotional content of the communication.³⁷ It is important both for the congregation and for the pastor that he/she be open about the emotional impact of the decision. Openness on the part of the pastor provides a helpful model for the congregation and assures them that it is okay and appropriate for them to express their own feelings about what is to take place.³⁸ Acknowledging one's own sense

³⁴ Kübler-Ross, 36.

³⁵ Bubna, "How to Bid," 120.

³⁶ Teague, 73. Teague specifically uses the words, "gracious, truthful and open."

³⁷ Teague, 74.

³⁸ Ingram C. Parmley, "Reflections on Ending a Ministry in a Congregation," in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 46-47.

of loss can also be therapeutic for the pastor as he/she begins to come to terms with his/her personal feelings of grief.³⁹

Genuine expressions of feelings are generally well received and appreciated, but overly dramatic expressions will often be interpreted as disingenuous and result in a loss of credibility and a very destructive ending to the pastoral relationship.⁴⁰ In general, however, the tendency among those surveyed was to be too closed with their feelings rather than too open. One lay person expressed a common sentiment in the midst of the transition time when she said she knew some people are private, but she wished her pastor would be more open. She concluded, “I didn’t ask questions . . . maybe he is waiting to be asked.”

Most of the pastors surveyed acknowledged that the public announcement was a difficult and emotional moment. At least two pastors stated specifically that they spoke to the people “from my heart.” One of these pastors said that after reading the letter which gave the factual details of his call to another congregation, he put it away and expressed love for the people and his sadness at his departure from a congregation which would always hold a special place in his heart. The other pastor had given a letter to the Board, but when it came time to tell the congregation he told them he had sad news to share. While he could not remember exactly what he said, the lay person from the congregation said the pastor talked about having felt so at home in the community, and his regret at having to leave so many friends. The layman said that the pastor was genuinely sad to be leaving even though he knew it was the right decision.

³⁹ Phillips, 27.

⁴⁰ Phillips, 26.

The openness of another pastor, resigning from his first church, led him to begin his letter with reminiscences of his call to the congregation. He went on to talk about the soul searching which went into examining and accepting a new call to another church. He expressed in his letter the “deep sadness” which came with his resignation from the congregation where he had had so many of his firsts. He also made reference to some of the things he would miss, including their smiles and hugs. It was only after these feelings were expressed that he went on to give the details of when he would be finished and where he was going.

For another pastor, leaving after admittedly difficult circumstances, the factual details of his departure (i.e. when he was leaving and where he was going) were given first priority in his resignation letter followed by a sentence stating, “I will always treasure the time I spend (*sic*) here.” The remainder of the letter stated the reasons for his departure in terms of “I feel that...” For example, “I feel that a minister loses his effectiveness after so many years.” Such statements were more about opinions than emotions and probably could have been more accurately stated as “I believe that...” or “I think that...” The pastor concluded with “It is my hope and prayer that you can understand and accept my feelings along with this resignation,” even though very few actual feelings were included in the resignation. The content of the letter, however, did accurately reflect the low level of the pastor’s openness. He left within six weeks and only reluctantly consented to a farewell gathering.

Honesty

When asked if he had any advice to give to pastors for periods of departure, one layman simply said, “Be open and be honest.” For Teague, honesty means a commitment to “avoiding clichés, euphemisms and glossing over some tough issues from the past.”⁴¹ If Jesus is taken as an example, it is hard to conceive of someone who was more forthright when he articulated His impending departure.⁴²

Kübler-Ross notes that most patients know or at least sense that something is amiss by the reactions and behaviors of the people around them, and they will quickly lose confidence in doctors who lie to them.⁴³ She also notes that upon death, the survivors often wonder what they may have done to contribute to the reasons why their loved one died.⁴⁴ Similarly when a pastor resigns people begin to wonder what they may have done to cause the pastor to resign. This is where honesty and clarity about the reasons for one’s departure can be most helpful for members of the congregation. Oswald, Heath and Heath believe it is essential for people to know the pastor’s resignation is not the result of their actions, unless it is. Negative feelings of sadness, guilt and anxiety can be amplified by self-doubt if people feel the pastor is leaving because of something they have done or not done. Relief can come if they learn their pastor is leaving for reasons of “personal and professional growth,” or is able to enter into a “role he has been seeking for some time.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Teague, 73-74.

⁴² Weese and Crabtree, 14.

⁴³ Kübler-Ross, 36-37.

⁴⁴ Kübler-Ross, 4.

⁴⁵ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 106.

Bishop John Wyatt said, “It is a relief to people when they are able to say a departing pastor has a more important job or is getting more money. It assures them that he is not leaving because they are no good, and it also assures them, if they love him, that he is going to be in better shape than he is now.”⁴⁶ This was evidenced in particular with an associate pastor who was leaving to go to a senior pastoral role. Though saddened by the pastor’s departure, the lay person was excited about the new and greater responsibilities and opportunities for the pastor.

Even when the reasons for the pastor’s departure are conflict or other difficult circumstances, a wise measure of honesty and candor is still required. Oswald remarked that “the good-bys (*sic*) we detest are the ones where all is sweetness and light. If you talk only about the good things, you leave knowing that wasn’t reality.”⁴⁷ He also states it is the pastor’s duty to initiate these types of discussions and in so doing, give the congregation permission to converse honestly about the negatives.⁴⁸ Often in conflict situations the reasons for a departure are obvious to the congregation and attempts to skirt the issue will result in the pastor appearing to be dishonest.⁴⁹

An honesty that is helpful to the congregation being left also means the pastor will give reasons beyond just God’s leading. Gilbert Meilaender believes that there is no other circumstance when appeals to the Holy Spirit are more abused than in the process of

⁴⁶ Quoted in Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 8.

⁴⁷ Oswald, “The Pastor’s Passages,” 14.

⁴⁸ Oswald, “The Pastor’s Passages,” 14.

⁴⁹ Phillips, v-vi.

pastoral transitions and he places the blame squarely on the clergy. He writes, “No pastor ought to be allowed to write a letter accepting or declining a call in which he says no more than, ‘after considering it prayerfully, the Holy Spirit has moved me to accept/decline your call.’”⁵⁰ He, along with Phillips, believes that if the Holy Spirit has truly given the pastor understanding for his/her decision, then the pastor ought to be able to express clearly something of those reasons and the process that led to that decision. Not communicating those reasons leaves a congregation reluctant to speak honestly about their own feelings and understanding because one does not want to argue with the Holy Spirit. They also believe only citing the Holy Spirit’s leading is an easy way to mask and avoid discussion about what some may see as less than pure motives.⁵¹ Gillaspie is even more blunt when he suggests that if one is going to earn a much larger salary in the new charge, then “don’t get pious and talk about prayer and guidance by God.”⁵²

Edward White believes that if there is not clarity about the reasons for a pastor’s departure, people will simply begin to invent reasons and usually the imagined motives are worse than the real ones. Depending on what the invented reasons are, people can respond with either anger or guilt.⁵³ This was Mark’s experience in a previous pastorate. In that church he said the people did not really understand why he was leaving. When he tried to explain the process and his reasoning they would “read things into” what he said and “conjure up something else in their minds” which he did not intend. Contrary to

⁵⁰ Meilaender, 268.

⁵¹ Meilaender, 268; Phillips, vi.

⁵² Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 36

⁵³ White, 110.

White's advice, however, as Mark was leaving his current church he chose to be less candid. He felt it was better to simply say this move was 'God's will' than to risk miscommunication or misunderstanding. When the layman at this church was asked why his pastor was leaving he indicated that he understood his pastor had been looking for a new church for some time and now he had found the right one. He concluded that his pastor was not forced to leave, but "went on his own, by the will of God."

Perhaps there is no time when the challenge for honesty is greater than when congregation members find out their pastor is considering a move before an actual decision to depart has been made. There were three such instances among the churches interviewed. In two situations people in the congregation being left became aware their pastor was considering a move when a pulpit committee from a prospective new church came to visit at a Sunday service. In the first church a deacon became suspicious when the visitors arrived and later in the week he asked the pastor, "What is going on?" In response the pastor told the deacon he had not invited the pulpit committee to come but that his name was "out there as a part of seeking the Lord's will." In that instance the pastor did not resign to go to the church of the visiting committee and actually continued with the congregation for a further two years. The deacon, however, resigned within the year.

In a second church, it was again the surprise visit of a pulpit committee to a morning service which sparked the members of a Bible Study group to ask their pastor some very pointed questions at their next gathering. Questions such as "Who were those people?" and "Why were they here?" The pastor responded honestly that the visitors were

members of a Search Committee who had come to “check me out” and see if they were interested in me. When the group asked “Why would they be checking you out?” the pastor was again forthright in stating that his résumé was in circulation. Shortly after the Bible Study the pastor shared with the chair of his Board of Deacons the fact that his name was being considered by another congregation and what had transpired at the Bible Study Group.⁵⁴ Coincidentally, the deacon already knew the pastor’s résumé was circulating. He had heard from a friend in another Association that the pastor’s name was before the friend’s church’s Search Committee. When asked if he told his pastor about this, the deacon said, “No, it was not my business.” The deacon, in fact, did not share this information with anyone until this interviewer asked him how he learned his pastor was leaving. For the pastor, these exchanges with the Bible Study Group and the deacon released a burden. He felt like he had been hiding something from people he was close to. He preferred to be open and honest. Following those conversations the pastor kept both the Bible Study Group and the deacon advised at each step in the process. In this situation the pastor did leave to go to the church of the visiting Search Committee.

In another church, several deacons became suspicious that their pastor was seeking another church when he told the chair of the Board that he would not be able to preach the next Sunday. When asked “Why not?”, he replied that he had been asked to speak at another church. When she wanted to know further details he replied that he could not tell her anything further. The deacon correctly suspected the pastor was

⁵⁴ Gillaspie’s opinion is that churches should view the obvious visit of a Search Committee as an opportunity for both congregations to seek and discern God’s will for the pastor and their congregations. In light of the observed responses of during these interviews, his opinion seems to be as somewhat naïve. Gillaspie, *Empty Pulpit*, 77. Timothy Tuttle’s 1861 article, “A Permanent Ministry” unflatteringly labeled visiting Search Committees as “spies” who were not acting in accord with the “Savior’s golden rule, not doing to others as they would that other should do to them.” Quoted in Harrison, 89.

preaching for a call at the other church. The chair of the Board of Deacons, who was the lay person interviewed, said the Board did not know if it was a vacation Sunday or something else. It turned out later that the pastor did not count it as a vacation Sunday. The secrecy surrounding the sudden public absence was perceived as at the least unethical, if not dishonest. “Tell pastors not to do that,” the deacon said to me. The pastor did take a vacation a couple of weeks later. Had he used vacation time or spoken at the new congregation during a midweek service, there would have been little or no need for the cryptic language which invoked hurt and confusion among his deacons in particular. The pastor resigned to go to the new church about a month later.

Douglas Brouwer, writing about explaining departures, acknowledges that some matters are indeed private, but too much secrecy will fuel suspicions that something is being covered up. For Brouwer it is “better to err on the side of candor.”⁵⁵ For the most part, pastors among the churches studied followed this advice at least with their leadership, if not with the whole of the congregation. In seven out of the ten churches the primary reasons given by the pastor for his/her departure matched the primary reasons articulated by the lay-people interviewed. In one congregation, for example, both the pastor and the lay-person stated the primary reason was that the pastor had “accomplished what he had been called here for,” and now it was time to move on.

Of the three churches where the primary reasons for leaving cited by the pastor were not identified by the lay-people interviewed, one was Mark’s church. As stated above, while he was more open with this interviewer, he chose not to be as candid with

⁵⁵ Douglas Brouwer, “Explaining Unhappy Staff Departures: Should You Tell the True Reasons?” *Leadership* 19 (Spring 1998) : 52.

his congregation and leaders. In another situation, while the pastor was adamant particular conflicts within the church were not factors in his decision, it was reported that many thought the pastor was finally fed up. One deacon said, “I don’t know how he took it for so long.” It is the opinion of the researcher that in this instance the congregation may have had better insight into the reasons than the pastor. In the third congregation, the lay-person interviewed sensed a deep and ongoing dissatisfaction within the pastor, but could not single out the source of this dissatisfaction. Neither the pastor’s resignation letter nor his later conversations provided any further clarification into his reasons for his discouragement and departure and it was left to the church to imagine why. Interestingly, the transition in Mark’s church was one of the smoothest, while the transitions in the other two churches were some of the most difficult.

Due to the emotional impact of a departure, the numerous tasks involved and the fact that a pastor is trying to communicate clearly with at least two different congregations, one should expect that there will be some amount of misunderstandings. Nonetheless, openness and honesty should be a pastor’s watchwords.⁵⁶ Contrary to Mark’s example, William Teague decided he would not make “God the ‘fall guy’” for his decision and instead chose to seize the moment as a teaching opportunity. When people would ask him about his leaving he would share openly about the struggle and process that led to his decision. “It was a good chance to teach a little bit about God’s call and our need to respond. I would tell them how my own cautious nature made responding to God’s call difficult.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Phillips, 24.

⁵⁷ Teague, 74.

White states that “Truthfulness is a prelude to healthy closure.”⁵⁸ This seems to be reflected in the experiences of the ten churches surveyed. Among the four that one would consider difficult transitions, there was to varying degrees intentional efforts by the pastors to keep back some of the reasons for their departures. Their efforts often meant that issues went unspoken, but not unknown. With the exception of Mark, within the healthier transitions the pastors were quite open and honest about the reasons and the process that led to their decision to leave. Kübler-Ross noted for doctors that secrecy and dishonesty quickly erode the patient’s trust and confidence in their doctor.⁵⁹ One could expect a similar erosion of a congregation’s trust and confidence in a pastor who employed similar tactics.

Graciousness

For Gillaspie the relationship between pastor and people is pretty close to sacrosanct and should not be thoughtlessly destroyed. Therefore, he states, “Do not resign angry.”⁶⁰ By “Gracious” Teague means the pastor graciously accepts the predictable words, acts and gifts of appreciation, and more importantly the pastor expresses his/her own appreciation for others both publicly and privately. Gratitude should be expressed to the church as a whole, but also and perhaps especially to individuals. Teague went out of his way to say thank you to people stating as specifically as possible how they had touched his life and his family’s life. “For instance, one couple had been particularly

⁵⁸ White, 110.

⁵⁹ Kübler-Ross, 37.

⁶⁰ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 31.

generous in allowing us to use their vacation home. We told them how much it meant to us it to get away from time to time.”⁶¹

Parmley agrees with Teague asserting that expressing feelings of appreciation will not only help to maintain the pastor’s integrity and reputation, but will also be a healing moment for a congregation about to grieve the loss of its pastor. He goes on to write, “Gratitude expressed to them for their ministry to you as well as for the opportunity to minister to them should be a part of this confessional and intimate moment.”⁶²

Much thought, care and consideration should go into crafting the resignation letter.⁶³ It provides the first opportunity for the pastor and the people to reflect on the relationship they have shared together and will set the tone for the final few weeks or months of ministry. Bubna believes that a pastor should present an optimistic view of the future for the congregation. “By faith we can believe – and help the congregation believe – that the best days of the church are ahead.”⁶⁴ He also assured his church of his prayers for them and his successor and promised to support that successor as God’s chosen person for the church. “My affirmation seemed to help solidify the church.”⁶⁵ Perhaps the best testimony to a good farewell was expressed by a lay-person in one church who said that if his pastor had any bitter feelings towards the church no one would know. The pastor continued to speak of his love for the congregation and they continued to enjoy good times together. While the pastor spoke about his sadness at leaving, there were no

⁶¹ Teague, 73-74.

⁶² Parmley, 47.

⁶³ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 11.

⁶⁴ Bubna, “How to Bid A Healthy Farewell,” 120.

⁶⁵ Bubna, “How to Bid a Healthy Farewell,” 120.

“bad feelings” expressed and this was, the deacon stated, leaving the church in “a good frame of mind.”

Another pastor stated that he wrote “sound advice and positive remarks” in his final reports to the Boards and continued to be positive from the pulpit. He avoided preaching on any of his ‘hobby horses’ during those final sermons. As this pastor intimated, what is not said can be just as important as what is said. Insults, hostility, or crass comments can harm congregations in ways which can take years to heal.⁶⁶ One pastor stated during his Sunday morning resignation announcement, “I have been able to make everyone happy – some by my coming and others by my going.” Even if the comment was true, in the researcher’s opinion it was an inappropriate statement intended as a slight against a portion of the congregation with whom he had an ongoing disagreement.

Even when a pastor does not intend to cause hurt, the task of formulating a resignation letter can be challenging. Phillips wonders how a pastor can tell his church they have been such a blessing and help in his pastoral development that he now feels a call to greater challenges and responsibilities elsewhere without it sounding demeaning.⁶⁷ Consensus among the literature and the pastors interviewed suggests it is wise to avoid speaking too much about the new congregation. Parmley, for example says that one’s leaving will go a lot smoother if the Board does not have to hear every detail about the new church or one’s expectations there.⁶⁸ Robert Dale suggests that if a pastor displays

⁶⁶ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 11.

⁶⁷ Phillips, 23.

⁶⁸ Parmley, 47.

too great an enthusiasm for the new congregation it will by inference make the present church feel inferior.⁶⁹

Teague's final bit of advice for the announcement is to remind the congregation that change is coming. There will be a number of months if not a year of transition. Things will not be the same, but that need not be a negative thing; indeed it could be a positive and growing experience.⁷⁰

Full Disclosure

It is equally important to give as early as possible the complete details of the departure. Things such as the final Sunday, whether there will be vacation time taken during or after the final period, and other details should be communicated as clearly and succinctly as possible. Brouwer states that in the case of one unhappy departure even the terms of the severance were disclosed in the resignation letter along with as many reasons for the resignation as could be thought of. While some thought the package was too small and some thought it was too big, Brouwer stated, "For the first time, no one had to speculate on the subject. Everyone had the same information. The letter was a large step toward healing and reconciliation."⁷¹

In some cases the expectations of both the pastor and the congregation during a departure are written into a constitution.⁷² At other times they are part of an unwritten tradition. Phillips believes that it is important to agree on and acknowledge all the formal

⁶⁹ Dale, 183.

⁷⁰ Teague, 74.

⁷¹ Brouwer, 52.

⁷² In one Church it was reported that the Constitution stipulated that a pastor must give at least two month's notice of a resignation.

arrangements as soon as possible so that the congregation can know what is to be expected and then be able to take delight in doing something unexpected.⁷³

Resignations Should Be Final

During the course of one interview the pastor received a phone call from a congregational member asking him to reconsider his decision to resign. This particular pastor had resigned without a calling to a new ministry. He related that he had had a few people pressure him not to leave, but he said he felt that would be both “unethical and manipulative.” Parmley knew of one pastor who did withdraw his resignation, but the result was simply added confusion, hurt and anger.⁷⁴ A resignation should never be used as a negotiating tool.⁷⁵ Gillaspie suggests that a church should accept the resignation of a pastor who threatens to resign if he/she does not get her own way.⁷⁶

Prayerful thought and consideration should go into any decision to resign, but once the decision to resign is made and publicly announced one can not easily take it back. For Ratz, a resignation puts a church into a delicate position and in need of protection. The congregation wants to believe their pastor has come to this decision through God given guidance. An indecisive pastor is an unsettling proposition and rightly brings into question whether he/she is really listening to God’s calling, both in his/her own life and in his/her leadership of the congregation.⁷⁷

⁷³ Phillips, 25.

⁷⁴ Parmley, 44.

⁷⁵ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 121.

⁷⁶ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 31.

⁷⁷ Ratz, 74-75.

Summary

How a resignation is communicated requires careful attention as it will set the tone for the departure period. The announcement should come as soon as possible after accepting a call to a new ministry, although occasionally mitigating circumstances (e.g. seasonal celebrations) will mean a short delay may be a considerate course of action. There is a wide variety of opinions about the appropriate length of time between the announcement and the final day of ministry. The literature is almost equally divided between those who argue for a short period of time (i.e. less than a month) and those who believe something closer to the norm (i.e. at least three months) is preferable. While there is some room for variation, particularly based on the number of years of service, the pastor should give enough time to let the shock of the resignation subside so that the congregation can plan suitable farewell rituals and establish interim ministry plans.⁷⁸

It is customary and appropriate to inform the church's governing Board (i.e. usually the Board of Deacons) and other church staff before a public announcement is made to the congregation. Often there are others whose close relationship with the pastor will also warrant a personal communication prior to the decision becoming widely known. Most often the public announcement is made through a prepared statement given at the end of a worship service or during a congregational meeting. There have been, however, reports of other more creative and appropriate means of sharing the news (e.g. as part of the Sunday message). However the announcement is made, a pastor should be open about his/her own sense of sadness and loss, sensitively honest about the reasons for

⁷⁸ The importance of farewell rituals, establishing interim ministry plans and the opportunity for the pastor to minister to the initial grief process will be discussed in later chapters.

the departure, and graciously appreciative of the congregation. Specific details about the timing of the departure and the pastor's future should also be included within the announcement. Finally, resignations should be final and never used as tools to manipulate a congregation.

Chapter 3 – The Pastor’s Transition

Importance of the Pastor’s Ability to Transition

In his book, *A Hero’s Farewell*, Jerry Sonnenfeld studies how the departure styles of Chief Executive Officers affect the leadership transition process and the future of a company. His research concluded there are four distinct leadership departure styles, each having a different impact on the company structure. What is important to the present subject matter is Sonnenfeld’s observation that the decision to leave and the manner of a leader’s departure from his/her institution affects more than just the leader. It has a large impact on others. Sonnenfeld concludes, a leader’s “departure from their institution involves more than their own personal fate; it involves the fate of the firm itself.”¹ When the leader makes a smooth transition it “instills loyalty among the firm’s workers; a rocky one gives rise to uneasiness and distrust.”²

So too, a pastoral leader’s departure is not a private matter. It is, as Sonnenfeld phrases, “a public event with public consequences.”³ Given this perspective, there is a clear correlation between how well a congregation deals with a pastoral leadership transition and how well the pastoral leader is able to deal with the transition process. More than anything else, it is the minister’s attitude and conduct in the leaving process (i.e. how well he/she is able to function as the pastoral leader) which will prepare a church for the loss of their minister.⁴

¹ Sonnenfeld, 35.

² Sonnenfeld, 37.

³ Sonnenfeld, 268.

⁴ Bubna, “How To Bid,” 120; Friedman, 178.

Transition is Emotional

Business consultant Williams Bridges makes a perceptive distinction between change and transition. He defines change (e.g. a new location, a new supervisor, a new policy) as situational and external to the person whereas transition is the internal experience of the person. Transition should be defined as the “psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation.”⁵ For Bridges, it is a failure to transition (i.e. adapt to a change) which produces destructive results. “Many great ideas fail because people in organizations resist the reality of change and the new patterns of doing things that follow.”⁶ It is important to note from these observations that transitions (i.e. pastoral transitions) are more than simply a church exchanging one leader for another or a pastor exchanging one ministry setting for another; there are internal and emotional issues involved. As White states, it is “an ongoing sequence of events **and** feelings, actions **and** interactions.” (Emphasis added.)⁷ Transition is internal, personal and emotional. Mead’s experiences led him to conclude that “pastoral change is a deeply human interaction and process. The leaving of one pastor opens deep dimensions of grief.”⁸ Oswald’s research also led him to believe there is a grief process in pastoral transitions and to use the label “termination emotions” to describe the feelings associated with a pastor voluntarily or involuntarily leaving a congregation.⁹

⁵ Quoted in Oswald, Heath and Heath, 75 and referenced in Craig Satterlee, *When God Speaks Through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition* (Herdon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 2005), 3-4.

⁶ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 75.

⁷ White, 43.

⁸ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 22.

⁹ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 3.

Grief and Loss

Starting at least as far back as 1973 with Richard Kirk, writers have compared the pastoral transition process to the experience of death and grief.¹⁰ Anthony Plathe wrote “During every pastoral transition, some dying occurs in the one who leaves and in the church community left behind.”¹¹ Writing after a colleague’s departure, Douglas Brouwer described the experience as the death of both a relationship and an illusion. He stated, “I am still dealing with the death of a relationship, which in a short period came to mean a lot to me. I am also dealing with the death of some romantic illusions I had about the Church - and perhaps this church in particular. Those are especially difficult to let go.”¹² Interestingly, one pastoral counselor refers to the “death of a dream” as being as deeply felt a grief as the feelings surrounding the death of a loved one.¹³ These sentiments about the loss of a dream were also found among at least two of the pastors who cited discouragement as a reason for their departure. (i.e. John and Paul in Chapter 1)

¹⁰ Quoted in Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 9. For others who make this comparison see also Phillips, 33; Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 22; Dale, 170-171; John Throop, “What I Didn’t Expect in My New Pastorate,” *Christianity Today*, 16 March 1984, 55; and White, 111. Friedman makes reference to the transition event being like a funeral, but later he prefers to compare a pastor’s departure to being like a father giving his daughter to a new husband. Friedman, 260 and 266. Gouedy compares it to a divorce with the congregation experiencing the grief of an abandoned spouse. Ed Gouedy, “The Ghost of Pastors Past,” *Leadership* 4 (Fall 1983) : 22. Finzel compares the emotional pain for a leaving pastor to that of a parent sending his/her child off to college. Finzel, 166.

¹¹ Anthony Plathe, “The Pastor Says Goodbye: How to Move Through Good Friday to Easter,” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 49.

¹² Brouwer, 53.

¹³ Wayne Oates, *Grief, Transition, and Loss: A Pastor’s Practical Guide*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series, ed. Howard Stone (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 21-22.

Grief is the normal reaction to loss that all humans feel to one degree or another.¹⁴ Phillips believes when a pastor leaves a congregation there is always a sense of loss, regardless of how satisfying the relationship may have been.¹⁵ The depth of these feelings of loss will depend on a number of factors, not least of which is the length of service a pastor has given to the congregation. Usually the longer the pastorate the harder it is to break the ties.¹⁶ Regardless of the length of service, however, resignation is generally a painful process¹⁷ the impact of which tends to be underestimated.¹⁸ Note, for example, the grief present as Paul bids farewell to the Ephesian elders. (Acts 20:36-38) Paul had spent more time among the Ephesians than any other church. He had trained the leadership and given them the freedom to build on the work. Despite an optimistic view of the future of the church, the parting was still tear-filled and painful.¹⁹

There are destructive ways to leave a congregation. One pastor “vehemently castigated individuals by name” in his final sermon. The supply pastor who came the next Sunday left out his sermon to allow congregants time to share their hurt.²⁰ Both Ingram Parmely and William Phillips speculate that pastors who engage in these types of destructive behaviors are masking or denying emotionally painful feelings of loss and

¹⁴ Worden, 7 and 9; H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 9.

¹⁵ Phillips, 33.

¹⁶ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 14. It might be noted that the strongest emotional reaction occurred in the pastor who had the longest tenure. There was a lengthy break in the interview to allow for the pastor’s tears to subside enough to continue.

¹⁷ Plathe, 52.

¹⁸ Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 5.

¹⁹ Finzel, 166.

²⁰ White, x.

grief as a way to cope with them. Phillips suggests pastors who communicate mixed messages and who over-react to minor grievances are in fact reacting adversely to their sense of loss.²¹ Parmley believes that negative behaviors by the clergy belie an unresolved inner conflict over what the change of ministry means and the feelings they are experiencing. He believes pastors react negatively to reduce the positive feelings they have for the congregations, thinking this will make the departure less painful.²² Oswald came to a similar conclusion. He believed the five poor transitions in his study were a direct result of the chaplains being unskilled in grief work. In his opinion their disregard for the emotional needs of their congregations stemmed from an attempt to avoid dealing with their own feelings and emotions of grief. Unfortunately for their churches these actions invoked feelings of abandonment, betrayal and frustration in their parishioners.

Perhaps the most common destructive behavior is a quick exit.²³ Clergy correctly assume ending a particular ministry will be painful and try to rush through the process,²⁴ much like an attempt to pull off a Band-Aid in one fast rip. One pastor, about half-way through a ten week termination period said, “I just want it to be over with. I wish I was gone now.” He stated that he did not know how to handle and respond to his congregation’s sadness. According to Friedman, quick separations to avoid the painful emotions will often “spook” the future.²⁵ Quick exits may temporarily avoid some of the pain, but when deep and powerful emotions are not dealt with they will often emerge

²¹ Phillips, 35.

²² Parmely, 45.

²³ White, xi.

²⁴ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 105.

²⁵ Friedman, 258.

later in other unexpected ways. In the end, neither minister nor church come away from such experiences feeling good about themselves.²⁶ In contrast to protecting oneself from the painful emotions, one needs to face them boldly. Oswald contends, “If we choose love, we must also have the courage to grieve.”²⁷

When a pastor leaves a congregation he/she may feel several losses, but two are primary: a loss of relationships and a loss of role or identity. There can be several aspects of relationship loss: a working relationship with colleagues, devotional and spiritual bonds formed in shared moments of worship and prayer, friendships that have developed in moments of joy and/or sorrow, and so on. It is telling that when pastors were asked, “**What** will you remember with fondness?” the vast majority answered with **who** they would remember. For example, one pastor related a story about a woman whose vocal opposition had put the pastor through numerous trials. At one point she declared war on the pastor, but then over hot biscuits, tarts and coffee, she and the pastor experienced reconciliation and forgiveness. An associate pastor whose role was primarily overseeing the Christian Education programs, shed tears while speaking about tea with the ladies of the Women’s Missionary Society. Oswald believes pastors deny themselves the opportunity to cherish and embrace these relationships when they leave too quickly.²⁸

For Teague as each final event took place (e.g. the last Bible Study, the last huge Christmas tree, the last choir practice) he became less conscious of the new adventure that awaited him and more aware that he was leaving a “dear and beloved community of

²⁶ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 105.

²⁷ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 1.

²⁸ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 12.

friends.” As he observed his church form a pulpit committee, D. Hugh Peniston commented, “I feel like a dying man in the hospital, who has just told his wife it’s alright if she marries again after he’s gone.”²⁹

The other significant loss is one of role and identity. Oswald suggests a pastor may actually have a more difficult time dealing with the loss of the pastoral role than with the loss of the relationships.³⁰ Jerry Sonnenfeld observed this same issue among retiring Chief Executive Officers. These leaders invested so much of themselves into their companies that their sense of purpose and self-worth had become tied to their positions and the institution they had led.³¹ Pastors who cannot let go of their leadership role will often become inappropriately involved in pastoral functions after they have left. Such clergy seek to become what Oswald terms “immortal by being indispensable to their congregants forever.”³² In one congregation surveyed, for example, the pastor referred to receiving frequent phone calls from his predecessor, who was also making regular visits among certain folks in the congregation. About forty-minutes after his resignation at the end of a worship service, the very first phone call the pastor received was from this predecessor who had already heard the news of his resignation.

Oswald’s recommendation to pastors who have a difficult time dealing with the sense of loss is to “live deeply in the many forms of death.” By this he means the death of

²⁹ Peniston, 59.

³⁰ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 11. See Throop who states, “The minister’s identity, clearly defined in the present community of believers, now must die in order for a new identity to come to life.” Throop, 55.

³¹ Jerry Sonnenfeld, *The Heroes Farewell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6 and 33.

³² Oswald, Heath and Heath, 107.

relationships, roles, responsibilities, etc. in the pastor-congregation bond.³³ Wayne Oates' observations help to put Oswald's death motif in perspective. For Oates the end result of the grief process is a new life. Regardless of whether the loss comes by someone's death or by a separation (e.g. a pastor's departure) a person will experience the death of an old life followed by a resurrection to a new life. Each transition is the death of one era that leads to the beginning of a new one.³⁴

Modeling Closure

As will be explored further in the next chapter, the pastor is not the only one dying to an old life and rising to a new reality. The congregation is also entering a new era. As dying patients can help their families grieve by sharing their own experiences,³⁵ so pastors can become models of closure and help their congregations as they enter the grieving process.³⁶

Citing the research of "transition technologists," Roy Oswald believes that each person has a predictable pattern of disengaging with people that remains consistent whether one is saying good bye after a "twenty minute conversation or a twenty year marriage."³⁷ These patterns are developed over a life-time of meeting and leaving relationships and include such things as routine clichés and body gestures. Unless there is an intentional effort to examine and alter this pattern, a pastor will inevitably repeat the

³³ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 107.

³⁴ Oates, 85.

³⁵ Kübler-Ross, 161.

³⁶ Harbaugh, Brenneis and Hutton, 26.

³⁷ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 9-10; Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 23.

same pattern in the way he/she brings closure to a particular ministry.³⁸ In a society which more often tries to hide and deny the grief process, a pastor's final act of ministry ought to be modeling a healthy process of closure. A pastor's departure from his/her congregation provides a seldom exercised opportunity to model healthy ways to both grieve and conclude relationships. Modeling, however, will involve openness about one's own feelings.³⁹

Acknowledging One's Own Emotions

Table 3: Emotions/Feelings Reported by Pastors

Emotion/Feeling	Number Pastors Reported Experiencing
Anticipation/Excitement	8
Sadness	7
Regret	7
Emancipation/Freedom	6
Acceptance/Peace	5
Satisfaction/Accomplishment	5
Discouragement	4
Love for Church	4
Relief	4
Frustration	3
Anger	2
Devastated/Overwhelmed	1
Fatigue	1
Helplessness	1
Loneliness	1
Shock	1

³⁸ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 9-10, 12. Edward White also cites Oswald's suggestion that the way we "terminate a relationship with friends and parishioners when leaving can be a precursor to how we will face death." White, 109.

³⁹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 107; Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 10.

To be open and candid about one's emotions and grief process one must first acknowledge them⁴⁰ despite how deeply one may resist such an acknowledgement.⁴¹ Grief therapist J. William Worden states that counselors who wish to effectively minister to others in the grief process should first explore their own history of loss to gain an understanding of their own limitations and resources for dealing with grief.⁴² Similarly White states that it is essential for a pastor to monitor his/her own feelings and poetically writes, "Learning to be at home in the wilderness is essential to our capacity to say goodbye."⁴³

Wilderness is a good metaphor for one pastor who was asked how he was feeling. His first response was "Great. It is a terrific experience." His follow-up to that was, "It is a painful and lonely experience." Expressions of mixed and contrasting emotions were quite common in all the pastoral interviews and according to the literature this is to be expected. There is both sadness at leaving one community and an anticipation of entering a new community. At times some clergy have confused these mixed emotions, and in particular their grief, as a sign they have made an incorrect decision. This often adds to their grief.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 11.

⁴¹ Pat Engleman, "Just When you Appreciate them Most ... They Leave Home!" in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 78.

⁴² Worden, 109.

⁴³ White, 111; Edward White, "At Home in the Wilderness: A Sermon on Saying Goodbye," in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 84.

⁴⁴ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 3-4.

Only two pastors made overt references to feeling grief but typical grief emotions were reported by most pastors. Worden lists normal grief feelings as sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, yearning, emancipation, relief and numbness.⁴⁵ There were examples of all these emotions including a form of emancipation.⁴⁶ By far the most common grief emotion pastors expressed was sadness. Seven of ten pastors spoke about feeling sad. In one interview the pastor repeatedly referred to his experience as a trauma.

Another pastor, who was also experiencing the behavioral grief symptom of sleeplessness,⁴⁷ articulated feelings of failure and defeat during the second interview. He was one of the pastors who resigned before being called to a new ministry. During the initial interview along with sadness one of his prominent feelings had been anger. Between the first and second interviews he said he had dealt with those feelings through prayer and counseling. The lay person interviewed in this congregation thought the pastor was feeling hurt. Most of the lay people interviewed made reference to the tears they observed their pastors shed.

Eight of the ten pastors referred to feeling a sense of excitement and anticipation about their next ministry situation and three said they felt confident they had made the right decision. Positive feelings, however, were not reserved solely for the future. Five felt good about what had been accomplished at the current ministry and that they were

⁴⁵ Worden, 20-23.

⁴⁶ Worden talks about emancipation in the context of a woman who no longer felt she had to “live under the tyranny’ of her father after his death. (Worden, 22) While no one used the word “emancipation” per se, one might relate the sense of freedom that will be discussed in the section “Taking Charge of What Remains” as a type of feeling of emancipation.

⁴⁷ Worden, 24.

able to leave the congregation in a better position than when they arrived. Another pastor spoke about how the process had been a lot more emotional than he had anticipated, and that the decision to leave had come after a long struggle, but having made the decision and the announcement, he was presently experiencing an “incredible sense of peace.”

As a pastor departs one congregation and enters a new ministry, the emotions of mourning and celebration often overlap.⁴⁸ The mixed response of one pastor is perhaps typical of those who were leading smooth transitions. In one sentence the pastor said, “It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do; to leave a healthy church that I absolutely love, to go to a new place.” A few moments later the same pastor said, “I am so excited about going. It is a very clear calling. It is hard to leave, but we know it is the Lord’s call so we are confident and excited.”

Termination Tasks

As early as 1978 and as late as 2003 Roy Oswald was quoting John Fletcher’s study of terminally ill patients as a model for pastors to follow. Fletcher was writing to help clergy understand how to help such patients deal with their situation and suggested that upon learning of their impending death, patients were faced with four major tasks:

- taking control of what remained of their life;
 - getting their affairs in order;
 - letting old grudges go;
- thanking those to whom they are grateful.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Throop, 55.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 6 and again in Oswald, Heath and Heath, 106. Note also Edward White refers to Oswald’s “Termination Tasks” in his 1990 work, 109.

Oswald contends these termination tasks are also important for the departing pastor to take care of before his/her departure.⁵⁰

Taking Control of What Remains

Under this first heading, Oswald meant that the pastor should be actively involved in the process of bringing closure to his/her pastoral leadership and in particular develop a plan of action for the final period of ministry. This plan should include such things as a timetable for visiting, phoning or writing notes to significant people and saying goodbye to various Boards, committees and groups within the church. Oswald felt that taking charge and developing a plan is so important to a healthy transition process that it is imperative for the governing Board to ask their pastor what his/her plan is and how they might assist in completing it.⁵¹

Robert Dale bluntly tells pastors who have resigned, “You’re a lame duck. That means you have much less formal power.”⁵² The implication of Dale’s belief, and the temptation for pastors, is that one becomes a passive and powerless participant in the church following resignation.⁵³ But according to Edward Friedman, this lame duck philosophy is both short sighted and detrimental to one’s ability to deal with the emotional issues in a healthy manner.⁵⁴

Malcom Nygren was concerned that following the announcement of his retirement he would become a lame duck with very little authority to lead. He worried

⁵⁰ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 106.

⁵¹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 106, 12.

⁵² Dale, 183.

⁵³ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 7.

⁵⁴ Friedman, 251. Friedman refers to this as the “Lame Duck **Myth**.” (Emphasis added.)

parishioners would not be motivated to work with a pastor who would soon be gone. His concerns turned out to be unmerited.⁵⁵ The experience of William Teague also seems to discredit the lame duck myth. He found that added to all his normal pastoral duties people began to come to him with an increasing number of issues. He concluded, these “conversations were prompted . . . in part by people’s knowing I wouldn’t be around much longer.”⁵⁶ D. Hugh Peniston very intentionally maintained his authority within the church. He wrote, “It was a matter of great pride to me, and important in the process, that I was truly the pastor of the church until midnight of the last day.”⁵⁷ To that end he maintained a count down calendar to keep the urgency of each task before him.⁵⁸

One of the pastors interviewed reported that he had been told by a more seasoned pastor that as soon as he resigned his ministry would be over and nothing more would be accomplished. He was told the people would no longer trust him. His experience, however, was the opposite. “I thought they would push me away, but they have not. They still trust me.” Discipleship and Bible studies were as vigorous as before the announcement, people were still seeking his advice and counsel, and still wanted him involved in their lives. He sensed no loss of trust. His congregation was one of the few who requested an exit interview so they might gain his insight about both the present and future direction of the church.

⁵⁵ Nygren, “Ending a Long Pastorate,” 19, and Nygren, “Wrapping Up a Long Pastorate,” 123. Nygren had considered postponing the announcement of his retirement because of this concern, but in the end he felt there was greater advantage in giving an advance notice of his retirement so the church could prepare for his departure. He gave two years notice.

⁵⁶ Teague, 74-76.

⁵⁷ D. Hugh Peniston, “Saying Goodbye to My Parish” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 59.

⁵⁸ Peniston, 58.

A number of the pastors interviewed made reference to a greater sense of freedom which followed their resignation. One pastor who struggled with his decision to leave for about eight months reported that coming to the conclusion God was calling him to search for a new church brought a renewed passion for ministry which noticeably benefited the current ministry. His preaching became stronger and more passionate, he was more willing to address and resolve controversial issues, and he began to challenge the leadership to greater responsibilities. He stated, "For good, bad or indifferent there is a liberty that comes after you resign. You want to finish well; but what are they going to do? It is not a freedom to be nasty or rebellious; as a responsible leader you don't flog that horse to death. But I do feel I have more freedom." Another pastor reported a parishioner observed "You seem to have a freedom you didn't have before." He responded, "Yes." He pondered during the interview whether he should have that same sense of freedom all the time. When asked, "Have you done or said anything you would not have done or said if you were staying?" he responded, "I think so. Nothing outlandish, I just feel freer. I like the feeling."

It is hard to think of someone who was more in charge of His departure process than Jesus. Consider the night of the last supper as an example. Jesus directed the disciples in preparation for the Passover Meal (Mark 14:12-16). Jesus disclosed not only His impending death but also the betrayal so the disciples would understand it better after it happened (Mark 14:17-21 and John 13:18-19). Jesus got up to wash the disciples' feet and then Jesus shared and taught them what He believed they needed to know in the face of His death (John 13:1-17, 13:31-16:33). Following the resurrection and preparing for

the Ascension Jesus was again the One giving direction to His final days. He told the disciples where to go, where to wait, and what the plan should be following His departure (Matthew 8:8-10, Acts 1:1-11). He set the agenda for those final days.

Reading through the transition from Moses to Joshua, it is apparent Moses played the key role in the process even though many of the events were dictated by God. Moses requested God choose a successor so the people would not be like a flock without a shepherd (Numbers 27:15-17). Moses presented and commissioned Joshua before the people so they understood Joshua had the leadership authority (Numbers 27:18-23). In the later chapters of Deuteronomy Moses was still taking the lead to prepare the people for his departure. He told them plainly about why he would not be going with them, what the tasks ahead would be, and who, under God, would lead them (Deuteronomy 31:1-8). Moses concluded by giving the people a new song to guide their journey into the next phase of conquest and possession of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 32:45-47). Moses then pronounced a blessing on each tribe (Deuteronomy 33). After their period of grief, the people followed Joshua because “**Moses** had laid his hand on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded **Moses**.” (Deuteronomy 34:9) (Emphasis added.)

Weese and Crabtree are very critical of pastors who do not take initiative and plan their departure strategically. They state, “Leaders who design worship services with an impulse of excellence driving every detail are willing to leave the impact of a major leadership transition to curious silence. When it comes to pastoral transition, leaders often

stop leading.”⁵⁹ It is their conclusion that a lack of planning and a lack of pastoral leadership will undermine the whole transition process and do long term damage to a church’s ministry. They ponder, “How many church leaders understand that failure to manage their own transitions to another ministry with clarity and wisdom creates lingering casualties among the members they have worked so hard to cultivate?”⁶⁰

Weese and Crabtree’s remarks are supported by observations within the churches surveyed. Among the most difficult transitions there was a noticeable lack of pastoral leadership, and a noticeable lack of intentionality. Three pastors in particular did not take charge of what remained of their time. In the first church the lay people interviewed reported the pastor became less visible and more absent during the final weeks. The Board of Deacons did not meet and pastoral assistance and guidance was only given in response to repeated requests. The pastor was reactive rather than proactive. His sense of powerlessness became evident during the second interview session. When he was asked, “Is there anything you want to accomplish in the last few weeks?” his answer was, “I honestly don’t know. I was hoping things would go smoothly. I had a vision in my mind of things going smoothly and it would be a great transition, but it has not turned out that way and I can’t do anything to change it.” The interim period for this congregation was fourteen months.

In a second ministry setting the pastor no longer attended Board meetings and chose instead to communicate with the Board through letters. He intentionally stopped making decisions about the ministry. For example, when the church’s child protection

⁵⁹ Weese and Crabtree, 14.

⁶⁰ Weese and Crabtree, 15-16.

policy was not being followed he refused to address the issue. Visitation was reduced to just hospital visits. He confessed, “I am not hitting the troubled spots intentionally.” His goal was to “keep the status quo until an interim begins.” At the time of writing even though this congregation was among the first ministry settings surveyed in 2005 it had yet to call a permanent pastor.

In the third instance, when the pastor was asked, “What input, if any, have you given to the transition period?” he responded that this was a “touchy subject.” He related a list of things he had prepared to share with the Board. Items included how they ought to be praying, how to form a search committee (there were no instructions about the process in the Constitution), and several other issues related to his final days. However, early in the meeting he became disgruntled with one of the people in attendance and consequently chose not to share anything that he had prepared.

By contrast, in some of the smoothest transitions the pastors were able to give specific details about their plans for the final months of ministry. These included such things as visitation schedules, farewell gatherings, ensuring lay-leaders were prepared to pick up ministries that had been under the pastor’s purview and a series of sermons specifically geared to the circumstances. This corresponds with Oswald’s study of Army Chaplains. The two chaplains who brought positive closure experiences each worked intentionally to lead the process. Oswald wrote, one chaplain “took control of the whole process” and planned it all with the help of friends.⁶¹

⁶¹ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 5.

Oswald believes strongly that ensuring a healthy start to the transition process and bringing closure to a period of ministry is the responsibility of the leaving clergyperson.⁶² A period of closure is so important to providing a congregation with the freedom to enter a new pastoral relationship “emotionally and spiritually,” that it needs to be entered into thoughtfully, intentionally and strategically.⁶³ Planning and leading one’s own departure process should be understood as one of the pastor’s final acts of service to a congregation. Even Robert Dale, who promotes the *Lame Duck* theory, states that the pastor needs to take initiative because the manner of departure is vital to one’s ministry legacy. “How you leave flavors how your ministry is seen and evaluated.”⁶⁴ However, more than one’s personal legacy benefits from good planning. The church as a whole and the Lord in particular are well served by pastors who thoughtfully plan their final period of ministry.⁶⁵

Getting Affairs in Order

Under this heading, Oswald includes ensuring records are up-to-date and filed properly, fulfilling commitments that have been made, removing personal items from the church, and leaving offices and parsonages in good order. He also suggests the pastor make a list of his regular tasks so that they can be done in the interim period.⁶⁶ To these items Loren Mead adds setting a firm date for one’s departure and ensuring that

⁶² Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 7.

⁶³ White, 109.

⁶⁴ Dale, 183.

⁶⁵ Parmley, 48.

⁶⁶ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 106.

government and/or denominational paper work is filled out and submitted properly, especially in the case of a pastor who is retiring.⁶⁷

As Malcom Nygren got closer to the end of his ministry he began to complete a number of tasks which he referred to as “putting the church house in order.”⁶⁸ These were unpleasant tasks which in the past had been postponed or overlooked in the shadow of more urgent matters. In Nygren’s case, he dealt with a dysfunctional memorial gifts process by drafting a new procedure for accepting and using such gifts. He suggested removing a poorly functioning leader and developing a policy for the use of the church building as other examples of house cleaning tasks. These are mostly administrative and organizational in nature but tasks which Nygren felt would be unfair to leave for one’s successor. Accomplishing these changes in his final months gave Nygren a sense of satisfaction and completion.⁶⁹

For Edward White, getting his affairs in order included not only completing files but also relinquishing responsibilities to others in the church so that “the community can continue in decent order.” Handing over each responsibility to a different person became an important part of the experience of letting go of the ministry. He felt what made it easier to go was that, “By the time of my departure I occupied a position that no longer had any functions to perform.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 25.

⁶⁸ Nygren, “Wrapping Up,” 124.

⁶⁹ Nygren, “Ending a Long Pastorate,” 19. Lyle Schaller similarly urges departing pastors make these sorts of changes before completing their ministry. He lists dealing with difficult choir directors, janitors or other pastoral staff along side of fixing leaky roofs or amending faulty budgets as changes it is easier for a departing pastor than a new pastor to address. Lyle Schaller, “Helping Your Successor Succeed,” 97.

⁷⁰ White, 109.

Letting Old Grudges Go

It is very difficult to begin fresh in a new congregation when there are unresolved issues with one's former congregation. Oswald contends a pastor will become dysfunctional in his/her new ministry if he/she carries old grudges and that in the context of one's departure there may be an opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness.⁷¹ Friedman agrees, stating the ending of a pastoral relationship presents an "unusual opportunity" to work out unresolved issues and promote emotional health for the pastor and the congregation.⁷² For the good of both the current and new congregations, as well as for the benefit of the pastor him/herself, it behooves a pastor to make an effort to resolve outstanding conflicts. Even if the other party refuses to resolve the conflict, the effort itself often helps the pastor come to terms with his/her own feelings so that he/she does not carry them into the new setting.⁷³ William Teague's effort to reconcile a broken relationship with a parishioner before he was finished is an example. The result of the lunch meeting was an "impasse" but there was an acknowledgement of the hurt and they both expressed hope that the situation might resolve itself over time. While Teague felt little sense of accomplishment, he was thankful to have at least tried.⁷⁴

Friedman, along with Weese and Crabtree suggest that in the wake of a resignation a pastor should expect conflicts and bickering to increase within the congregation.⁷⁵ Weese and Crabtree point to Judas' betrayal and Paul's warning to the

⁷¹ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 7.

⁷² Friedman, 169.

⁷³ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 106.

⁷⁴ Teague, 77.

⁷⁵ Friedman, 258; Weese and Crabtree, 26.

Ephesians about the rise of “savage wolves” after his departure (Acts 20:29-31) as Biblical evidence of this phenomena.⁷⁶ Friedman states that in any relationship breakdown the partner who does not initiate the separation will be the more reactive, especially if the other partner has a new mate. Similarly, there can be increased reactivity among congregants when they learn the pastor is leaving to go to a new ministry.⁷⁷ For this reason, Weese and Crabtree believe a pastor needs to have a strategy to recognize and resolve this dysfunction so it does not hinder a healthy transition.⁷⁸

For Friedman, how harmful a conflict becomes is almost wholly dependant on the pastor’s reaction to the situation. The pastor’s best tool for reducing tensions and even resolving conflicts is an ability to remain clear headed, not to get caught up in taking sides and to be a “non-anxious presence.” He compares the pastor to a transformer. His/her anxious and heightened responses will increase the volatility of a conflict situation, while a pastor’s non-anxious and calm response can lower the level of hostility and reduce his/her risk of becoming either a victim or self-destructive.⁷⁹ Friedman later suggests a pastor who allows congregants to express their feelings without his/her over-reacting to what is expressed allows both the pastor and the church to go on to their next pastoral relationships with the least amount of emotional baggage.⁸⁰

Perhaps the best Biblical example of resolving an underlying conflict is Jesus’ restoration of Peter at the end of John’s Gospel. Jesus took the initiative to go to Peter

⁷⁶ Weese and Crabtree, 26.

⁷⁷ Friedman, 258.

⁷⁸ Weese and Crabtree, 26.

⁷⁹ Friedman, 208 and 210.

⁸⁰ Friedman, 258.

who had returned to fishing and engage him in a conversation clearly intended to help remove from Peter the stigma of his denial. Even as Peter's emotions, and presumably his voice, began to rise Jesus calmly repeated the invitation to feed His sheep. At the end Jesus significantly issued the same invitation Peter had heard beside the sea three years earlier, "Follow Me." (John 21:15-19; Mark 1:17).

Among the pastors surveyed, those who failed to take charge of the time that remained were also the least likely to make efforts to resolve outstanding conflicts. As noted in Chapter 1, three pastors who resigned in part due to an on going conflict also reported an unwillingness to expend further emotional energy on the issues. They resolved to leave the situation for the next pastoral leader to handle. In one of these churches the lay leader interviewed related similar conflicts over similar issues between the same group of people and the three preceding pastors. Because none of these pastors had resolved the issues and each had left it for the next leader to deal with, resignations and interim periods became a hiatus in the conflict rather than an opportunity for a fresh start. The pastor noted that members of this group became more regular in worship attendance following his resignation. The lay-leader, who was a deacon, reported the members of that group were already putting pressure on the Board of Deacons to consult with them more about the transition process and the selection of the next pastor. In the final interview with the pastor he expected, similar to previous transitions, several people would leave the church after he was done. This ongoing conflict overshadowed any sense of anticipation he had about the new ministry. When asked if he was excited about the

new ministry he said it was hard to be excited because of the way he was leaving this current ministry.

In another congregation a conflict arose following the pastor's resignation when he did not return home from vacation to conduct the funeral service for the father of a member of the church. The member stopped attending worship and made it known she would not return until after the pastor was gone. The lay person reported the pastor did visit the widow when he returned home, but not the church member. Biblically, he thought, it was the pastor's duty to go to see the person who had been hurt by his action, or inaction. The pastor's version of the event, while slightly different, did confirm that he had not met with the person who was no longer attending worship. The lay person concluded that had the pastor not been leaving already this incident would have ended his ministry there.

Even among some of the churches who experienced the smoothest transitions, there were episodes of conflict. The difference in those churches was the pastor's willingness to engage those who disagreed with him/her and to resolve the issues. In one church, shortly before his public resignation the pastor intentionally reached out to a couple who had left the church to see if there was a willingness to reconcile. The couple did respond, but were unable to reconcile with the pastor. The situation was explained to the deacons and became the inspiration for including a conflict resolution process in the church constitution. Within this same church there was a disagreement about vacation pay and the pastor's home equity allowance. The treasurer felt the pastor was not entitled to any of it since he had resigned. In the initial interview the pastor said he was willing to

drop the issue. When asked about the outcome of the conflict in a follow-up interview, the pastor related that he met with the treasurer and they had come to an agreement that both of them found acceptable. This same pastor again related an incident with a woman who came to him with a list of things she did not like about his ministry. He said, “I just took it on the chin, acknowledged her concerns and thanked her for telling me.” He surmised, pastors “are not Jesus, and even Jesus could not please everyone.”

As referred to earlier, an underlying conflict about the church’s membership in the CABC arose shortly after another pastor’s resignation. A letter from a “very influential person” was sent to the Board of Deacons advocating that the church pull out of the Convention. This had been an issue in the past and in the pastor’s opinion the proponents for it saw his resignation as a new opportunity to bring the issue forward. At the follow-up interview the pastor was able to report, “It is resolved.” The church had decided they were a part of the Convention and would remain a part of the Convention.

The words of one lay person resonate well with the advice of Oswald and others. Her counsel was, “If there is a problem, do all in your power to solve the problem before you go so that you can go with the blessing of the Lord. If I was an angry pastor or if they were angry with me, I suspect it would always cling to and bother me. I think I would always be watching for it, and a pastor does not have time to watch for those things.”

Oswald lists not only conflicts but also regrets among the things that a pastor needs to let go in order to establish a healthy relationship with a new ministry.⁸¹ Many of the pastors interviewed had something they regretted or something that upon reflection

⁸¹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 12.

they wished they had done differently. Some pastors regretted the response that others had towards something they had done. One pastor, for example, confronted an inappropriate relationship. He said, “It blew up! I regret that it happened, but I don’t regret that I spoke to him.” Other pastors regretted not being able to really connect with specific people. Most echoed the sentiments of one pastor who said, “I probably made some bad choices - but I do not dwell on them.”

Thanking Those to Whom We are Grateful

For Oswald, expressing appreciation and acknowledging meaningful relationships is just as important to closure as settling conflicts. Both are a part of reviewing and evaluating one’s experience and bonds with the congregation. “Meaningful closure means that no aspect of the relationship is denied or avoided.”⁸² Saying thank you to special people would seem like a natural thing to do, but beyond what was mentioned about Graciousness in Chapter 2, there is a lack of material among the interviews about this aspect of leaving. There were no reports of pastors taking opportunities to express thanks to particular individuals. Most pastors did express gratitude publicly as a part of their resignation letter and made other public statements of appreciation, but only one pastor related saying thank you to individuals who had significance to them in the ministry setting. In this particular case, the pastor sent letters of thanks to several people he had recruited from outside the congregation as financial supporters of the ministry. The letter was to say thank you for the support, as well to inform them of his resignation and acceptance of the new ministry he was beginning.

⁸² Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 7.

There were instances of personal expressions of thanks in the literature. Peniston, for example, wrote thank you letters to people who had shown him special support over the years. It was an emotional task through which he relived some powerful moments of his ministry. To his surprise the congregation had also gathered a collection of letters of appreciation and memories in a book that they presented to him.

Personal expressions of appreciation are an often overlooked opportunity to build up and encourage church leaders in particular. Expressions of thanks give voice to the significance of the relationships and affirm people who have been meaningful parts of one's life and ministry.⁸³ White writes, "It's unfortunate that we so often fail to express appreciation until the end is near. But that's why it is so very important to do it then."⁸⁴

Time for Reflection

There is one very significant way in which terminating a pastorate is not like death; the pastor continues to live on and will have to cope with his/her feelings and emotions.⁸⁵ In another work, Roy Oswald suggests one more helpful termination task to complete following one's departure from the church and prior to entering a new ministry setting. He advocates taking time off, a good amount of time-off, to intentionally and thoughtfully reflect on what one has experienced in the previous ministry and transition process. He notes that while churches usually have an interim period in which to reflect on their past, pastors often take only a week to move and start again. He believes reflection is an essential part of professional and personal growth. Pastors perpetuate their

⁸³ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 106.

⁸⁴ White, 110.

⁸⁵ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 2.

short-comings and repeat cycles of ministry unless there is an opportunity to reflect, evaluate and make an intentional decision to change.⁸⁶ Oswald urges reflection on questions such as:

What shape did the transition leave you in?
Are there people/things that you miss from the last place?
What is left unresolved?
Do you find yourself denying your feelings about leaving?
Do you feel any guilt for having left your last pastorate?
Any anger? At whom? Why?
In deciding to move did you make any bargains with yourself – family-
with God?
What will it take to resolve those issues?⁸⁷

He also wants pastors to rate their emotional state. He suggests pastors ask themselves if they are:

1. Upset or distraught.
2. Feeling the pain of transition but managing.
3. Coping with a variety of loose ends but feeling okay.
4. Basically in good shape but with twinges of loss and pain for the old situation.
5. Being excited and exuberant about the new situation with no feelings of loss.⁸⁸

Oswald makes this heart-felt plea: “I urge you to give yourself this kind of space as you move from one parish to another. It will make a big difference in how you start up your ministry.”⁸⁹

Sadly, only one pastor made plans for an extended period between ministries. He felt time to “process” and for “reflection” was absolutely key to a good transition and booked a week away with his wife to relax and contemplate the previous five years of

⁸⁶ Oswald, *New Beginnings*, vi.

⁸⁷ Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 5

⁸⁸ Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 5.

⁸⁹ Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 2.

ministry. For this pastor it was important that any left over baggage from the previous ministry be left behind so that they could come “fresh to the new context.” Among the remaining seven pastors who were entering new ministries, there were some who took a vacation period during their final weeks, but none were planning to take any significant space of time between leaving one church and beginning the next. Oswald warns that ministers who arrive at new ministries without having resolved their feelings and experiences from the previous charge tend to become depressed, discouraged, find it difficult to be motivated in the next context,⁹⁰ and almost impossible to provide “whole-some, life-giving ministry with new people.”⁹¹

Summary

There is general consensus among the literature that one of the most important factors which will determine the relative health or dysfunction of a congregation’s transition is the departing pastor’s ability to transition. Transition from a particular ministry is an emotionally filled and often a painful grief process. Some ministers will try to avoid the pain by a quick exit or by engaging in other hurtful behavior which they mistakenly think will make the departure easier. But if the pastor is to make a healthy transition and also to be a model for a grieving congregation then grief over losses of relationships and pastoral identity need to be experienced, rather than avoided. Open acknowledgement of the mixture of emotions is a good starting place.

Oswald suggests there are several Termination Tasks which can help a pastor prepare for his/her departure. “Taking Control of What Remains” means a pastor will be

⁹⁰ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 106.

⁹¹ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 2.

thoughtful, intentional and strategic in planning out the final period of ministry. In contrast to some opinions that the resigned pastor is a “lame duck,” there is a freedom and liberty which several pastors observed and enjoyed following their resignation. The responsible pastor can use, but not abuse, this freedom to be actively involved in bringing closure to his/her ministry.

“Getting Affairs in Order,” means completing various tasks which will leave administrative matters in good order as well as addressing outstanding issues which one may have avoided in the past. “Letting Old Grudges Go” means as much as possible settling old conflicts as well as new conflicts which may arise during the departure period. If a resolution is not possible, the pastor should at the very least not increase the severity of the conflict by his/her own displays of hostility. Even failed efforts at resolution can help the pastor to let go. “Thanking Those to Whom We are Grateful,” means taking the time to honor those who have been a meaningful part of the pastor’s life and ministry. Finally, a suitable period of rest and reflection following one’s departure can help a pastor enter a new ministry set free from the attachments to the previous church and ready to make a fresh start in the new ministry.

Chapter 4 - Final Tasks – Relationships

Pastor as Grief Counselor

When Donald Bubna resigned from his congregation he expected there might be some anger and grief because it came as a surprise to his people. The congregation's response illustrated classic grief symptoms (e.g. sadness, anxiety, shock, and yearning).¹ In particular people initially avoided Bubna because they were not sure what to say. To try to relieve this situation he talked with the congregation about the stages of grief and assured them it was okay to not know what to say. This, he stated, "provided people with space and gave them the freedom to come to us as they were able."² Roy Oswald praises pastors who not only recognize their own feelings about their departure, but also their church's need to grieve. When congregations do not have the opportunity to express their grief with the departing pastor grief counseling often becomes the first task of the next pastor.³

A new pastor's time should be concentrated on accomplishing several initial tasks; not least of which is trying to assimilate and bond with his/her new church.⁴ Facilitating a church's grief, while also trying to bond with the people, is a delicate job fraught with many pitfalls. Michael Blaine, for example, suggests a new pastor could

¹ See page 101 for Worden's complete list of normal grief feelings.

² Bubna, "How to Bid," 121.

³ Oswald, *Running Through Thistles*, 2 and 3.

⁴ Englemann, 78; Warner White, "Should I leave? A Letter from One Priest to Another," in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 9.

mistakenly interpret unresolved grief for the departed pastor as a lack of acceptance of him/her.⁵ Of greater danger is the likelihood that unresolved grief will manifest itself in destructive behaviors. A new pastor can easily become a lightning rod for pent up negative emotions. It is far better for the departing pastor to help a congregation at least begin to deal with their grief so the new pastor can focus on start up tasks rather than closure tasks.⁶

At the end of a long list of things one can do to assist one's successor Lyle Schaller suggests one of the greatest gifts a pastor can give to the succeeding minister is a healthy termination. For Schaller, this includes giving the congregation enough notice to recover from the initial shock of the announcement, adjust to the reality that a change in leadership is coming, and plan an impressive farewell event.⁷ His list fits well with J. William Worden's goals for grief counseling. Worden's *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* is based on a premise that the purpose of a grief counselor is to help the counselee work through the mourning tasks. The goal of these tasks is to bring mourners to a place where they are ready to reinvest their emotions in a new relationship.⁸ This is in essence the goal of a healthy pastoral transition process. At the end of the process a congregation should have moved from ending one pastoral relationship to being engaged in a new one. To the extent a departing pastor can help a congregation through that process he/she becomes grief counselor to the congregation for his/her own departure.

⁵ Michael Blaine, "Succeeding a Patriarch: How to Perform When You Have a Tough Act to Follow." *Leadership* 14 (Winter 1993) : 120.

⁶ Lyle E. Schaller, "Helping Your Successor Succeed." *Leadership* 3 (Summer 1982) : 97.

⁷ Schaller, 97.

⁸ Worden, 36.

Being counselor through part of the grief process does not mean the pastor is not a part of and deeply involved in it. Worden states that a counselor should be comfortable with and aware of his/her own sense of loss, fears of loss and personal death.⁹ Oates has the same advice for pastors. Grieving while ministering to grief is not an uncommon position for a pastor. Often when a member of a congregation dies the pastor is conducting a funeral, ministering to the bereaved and dealing with his/her own grief all in the same moment. The pastor, Oates writes, is also “a person of sorrows acquainted with grief.”¹⁰

Friedman believes clergy who truly care about their churches should be very involved in facilitating the transition and grief process. He accused those who suggest a departing pastor have as little as possible to do with the transition process of interfering with “the natural healing power inherent in the clergy community position.” He noted, “You wouldn’t tell . . . someone terminally ill, or the parents of a child leaving home” they have no part in helping their loved ones through the transition process.¹¹ A departing pastor generally has the advantage of a better understanding of the congregation than the new pastor or even an interim minister. Allowing him/her to minister to the grief even as

⁹ Worden, 107-108.

¹⁰ Oates, 19-20.

¹¹ Friedman, 251. Throop as well describes having to continue to preach, counsel, minister, “pray and play” with the people he would soon be parted from. Throop, 55.

he/she is in the process of leaving can, in Friedman's view, leave a congregation with a lot less baggage.¹²

Determinants of Congregational Grief

If one is going to serve as grief counselor, one should have a good understanding of congregational grief. Dan Moseley defines grief as a process of relearning. "Whenever we lose someone who has been significant to us, we have to relearn our world."¹³ Similarly Wayne Oates believes that when a separation occurs to a healthy relationship there is a time of mourning as the "old things pass away" and, if one does not regress into nostalgia, a 'new life' begins.¹⁴

Writing about grief in general, Worden lists six "Determinants of Grief" (i.e. factors which determine how intensely the feelings of grief are experienced). These determinants include: the role of the deceased person (e.g. spouse, grandparent, sibling, friend, etc.); the nature and degree of the attachment (i.e. the intensity of positive and negative feelings for the person); the manner of separation (e.g. sudden or prolonged, accidental or natural); the history of previous grief experiences; personality variables; and social customs (e.g. funeral rituals).¹⁵ A pastor should keep each of these in mind when

¹² Friedman, 252. Kari Syreeni suggests in the Lukan story of Jesus and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus Jesus functions as "an excellent bereavement counselor" for those sorrowing His own death. Kari Syreeni, "In Memory of Jesus: Grief Work in the Gospels," *Biblical Interpretation* 12 no. 2 (2004) : 185.

¹³ Dan Moseley, "When Congregations Grieve," *Review & Expositor*. 100 no. 2 (2003) : 221.

¹⁴ Oates, 85.

¹⁵ Worden, 29-31.

trying to assist the congregation through the grief process and applying them to the congregation's sense of loss in relationship to the pastor's departure.

Role of the Pastor

The first determinant, which Worden describes as the most obvious, is who the deceased was in relation to the griever. The loss of a child is grieved differently than the loss of a cousin. The loss of a spouse will be grieved differently than the loss of a parent.¹⁶

In the previous chapter it was noted that for the pastor one of the primary feelings of loss often revolves around a loss of role/identity. When pastoral leaders move the congregation can experience a similar kind of loss of role. William Phillips labels the loss related to roles as "organizational loss."¹⁷ Even within Baptist churches where the priesthood of all believers is trumpeted, the role of the clergy is unique and usually key to the shape of the church's ministry. His/her resignation can bring a great deal of confusion and anxiety about how the church will function. Disorganization is not uncommon, but especially so in churches where the leadership initiative has typically been taken by the pastor.¹⁸

Dan Moseley speculates a sense of organizational loss runs deeper than just role confusion. He suggests that churches lose their "orienting center." From Moseley's perspective, congregations understand themselves in relation to their pastoral leader. For some the pastor is always right and they always side with him/her. Others may always

¹⁶ Worden, 29.

¹⁷ Phillips, 35.

¹⁸ Phillips, 35-36.

take the opposite position to the pastor. Either way, “they orient themselves around him. So congregations who lose a minister may lose their orienting center. When we lose our orienting center we become confused.”¹⁹

For Moseley the orienting extends beyond confusion about roles and even beyond one’s personal relationship with the pastor. Confusion can develop in relationships between members of the congregation. Parishioners, who have become used to a pastor’s influence or help in relating to one another, now have to interact with one another without the presence of this “official important person.” They have to relearn how to relate to each other in a new context. Moseley notes, “When we are confused about our relationships, it can be frightening.”²⁰ Friedman refers to a similar type of reordering of relationships surrounding a death. He believes death is the single most important event in changing family processes. There are more reconciliations, alienations and shifts in responsibilities during this time period than at any other.²¹ The loss of a pastoral leader is just as life-altering for a congregation as a death is for a family.

Feelings of the disorienting loss of role were evidenced in statements such as one from a lay person who reported, “We were devastated. I felt the pastor had just got us started. We just finished the building and were looking to see what would come next. I thought we just got to the point we could do something.” An anticipated loss of direction was also implied in another person’s response to the question, “What advice do you have

¹⁹ Moseley, 222.

²⁰ Moseley, 222-223.

²¹ Friedman, 168.

for pastors who are going through the transition process?” The person responded, “You should help the church as much as you can so people don’t panic about what will happen and what we are going to do.”

Nature of the Attachment

Worden lists three relationship factors that go into the nature of the attachment: the strength or intensity of the attachment (i.e. how strong was the love between the two parties); the security of the attachment (i.e. how necessary was the deceased to the survivor’s sense of well being); and the ambivalence in the relationship (i.e. the balance of positive and negative feelings between the two parties).²²

When the lay people were asked what they would remember with fondness about the pastor’s time in the church very few of the responses dealt with ministry gifts or events. Most often the responses were descriptive of the relationship and bonding experiences. Several people described the pastor as a friend. One person said, “My boys played with their boys.” Others made references to working side by side, visits in each other’s homes, and laughing together. While friendship was one of the predominant types of relationship expressed, it was not the only type. Several used terms that alluded to a mentoring type of relationship with their pastor. There were references to Bible study, counsel, prayer, service, mission trips, and other ways the pastor had helped them grow in their relationship with God.

One would hope that positive feelings would outweigh negative feelings in most pastoral relationships, but even when a pastor’s relationship with a congregation has been

²² Worden, 29-30.

rocky there will still be a grief reaction. Those who have bonded with the pastor may express anger towards others in the congregation who are glad for the departure. When there is a heightened level of overt or latent conflict grief will be further complicated.²³ Worden notes that in relationships where positive and negative feelings exist in almost equal proportions there will be a more difficult grief reaction.²⁴ At least one of the congregations seemed to have a high level of ambivalence.²⁵ Comments about the pastor during the lay person interviews were often very critical and revealed a high level of frustration with some of what were felt to be the pastor's shortcomings, and yet there was also a great deal of sympathy for the pastor. There were feelings of relief that the pastor was finally moving on, and yet some of the deepest levels of grief were also reported within this congregation. The reports of conflict and intense emotional reactions made this congregation one of the most complicated and difficult transitions among the ten churches interviewed. It also experienced one of the longest interim periods.

Manner of Separation

Worden states that how the person died will influence how the survivors grieve. The accidental death of a child will be grieved differently than the natural death of a senior. The suicide of a father will be grieved differently than the unexpected death of a young mother. A sudden death will be grieved differently than one which comes after a

²³ Roger S. Nicholson, "Characteristics of the Interim Congregation," in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, ed. Roger S. Nicholson (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1998), 14-16.

²⁴ Worden, 30.

²⁵ It is suspected that the inability to find a lay person willing to be interviewed in another congregation may have been due in part to a very difficult and highly ambivalent relationship between the pastor and the congregation.

prolonged illness.²⁶ Similarly the manner and reasons for a pastor's departure will influence how a congregation grieves its loss. While all of the pastors surveyed resigned voluntarily, the circumstances (i.e. manner of separation) varied as did the observed grief responses to those resignations.

The length of time from the public announcement to the actual completion of ministry was dealt with extensively in Chapter 2. Here it should be noted that a sudden departure is likely to invoke grief similar to a sudden death whereas a longer period does give both the pastor and the congregation time to come to terms with the sense of loss and respond in a constructive manner. For example, a congregation whose pastor resigned shortly before Advent and left just six weeks later found it difficult to pull together a suitable farewell event and did not have a strategy in place for the interim period. A sudden and/or traumatic death often results in delayed grief which is more likely to become pathological.²⁷ Similarly, sudden pastoral departures can produce difficult transitions for both pastors and congregations. Friedman believes that the type of departure which is most likely to have long term repercussions is a traumatic separation from a long term pastor.²⁸ In the church with only six weeks notice there had been at least two previous pastors with sudden departures and the current pastor attributed many of the conflicts he had to deal with during his ministry as unresolved issues from those departures.

²⁶ Worden, 30.

²⁷ Oates, 21.

²⁸ Friedman, 269.

Two pastors resigned before they accepted a call to a new ministry. In one situation this was not the regular custom of the pastor. Stress, frustration and discouragement over a conflict led the pastor to give up before seeking a new ministry. For the other pastor resigning and then searching for a new ministry was a decision based on his convictions. He was leaving in part due to on going conflict, but also felt God was calling him to leave. In his opinion, pastors who wait for a new call before they resign lack faith. “Some pastors are scared to step out in faith and want to stack the odds in their favour before they go. But if God calls you to finish your ministry, He calls you to do that whether you have a place to go or not!”

Both of the congregations whose pastors resigned before accepting a new ministry were among the four churches which experienced unhealthy and difficult transitions. Both reported requests for the pastor to reconsider and withdraw the resignation. Acceptance of the reality of the pastor’s departure did not set in until after the pastor accepted a new ministry. In one case this was almost three months later. Both churches reported a feeling of defeat among the laity. Reports of adversarial conflicts between members of the church were also highest in these two congregations. The pastors’ resignations in these churches invoked a greater sense of rejection than in churches where the pastors had accepted a new call. Lay people in both churches related stories that implied a sense of guilt for either having caused the pastor to leave or not doing enough to prevent his/her resignation. For example, one leader talked about having drafted a letter of support for the pastor and the pastor’s vision for the ministry of the church. The letter was to have been read at the next Church business meeting. The pastor resigned

before that meeting and the letter was never read. The lay person regretted not having written the letter earlier and wondered if it might have made a difference.

Where a pastor had accepted a call to a new ministry the lay people were more likely to talk about the transition as the pastor going to or being called to a new ministry rather than he/she is leaving us. In these circumstances there were more often positive feelings along with sadness. The lay people in these churches were also more likely to use terms associated with God's call for the pastor. They might say, 'The pastor has completed the reason God called him/her to our church,' or 'God needs the pastor in a new place of service.'

History of Previous Departures

Worden warns that if a counselee has had difficult or dysfunctional grief in the past, he/she will probably have difficulty with the current grief process.²⁹ Three of the four churches that experienced difficult transitions had a history of several difficult transitions. In one church even though the current pastor had not been forced out, the previous five had publicly or privately been asked to leave. In another church facing a difficult transition the lay person related that when the three previous pastors left, a significant number of the congregation left as well. One church had a history not only of short pastorates but also very short transition periods. Typically, interviews of prospective pastors, preaching for a call and a congregational vote would all occur on a single Sunday. The lay person said, "I was shocked how quick some of the transitions were."

²⁹ Worden, 55.

A history of poor transitions does not destine a church for another poor transition. Four of the churches that experienced healthy transitions had equally poor transition experiences within the previous six years. Each was an example of a departing pastor intentionally choosing to leave differently than some of his predecessors. One pastor, for example, related how the pastor before him stayed at the church too long, became frustrated and used the last few months of sermons to “really beat up on the people.” By contrast he continually expressed his love for the congregation. From the time he began his ministry to the very end of his ministry he maintained a weekly practice of saying to the congregation, “Jesus loves you and I love you.” Coincidentally, Satterlee states that the fragility of a congregation losing its pastor, along with the potential for feelings of abandonment and betrayal heightens the need for members of church to know that they are loved throughout the whole of the transition process.³⁰ Knowledge of what went right or wrong in previous transitions can go a long way to helping a pastor plan and facilitate a healthy grief process.

Personality Variables

In Worden’s model personality variables include things such as age, gender, ability to cope with stress and anxiety, personality disorders, etc.³¹ Different people grieve in different ways. Dale advises pastors to be aware of those with special needs during one’s final days. These include people the pastor has counseled, the elderly, new converts, children, and antagonists, to name a few.³² Oswald suggests older members who

³⁰ Satterlee, 113.

³¹ Worden, 31.

³² Dale, 183.

have dealt with a lot of grief, or who have seen a few pastors come and go, are more skilled at grief work and deal with it better.³³ By contrast John Bonnell wrote that younger people recover quickly from the sadness of a parting, while for many of the aged a pastor's departure will be a "devastating blow. They will find it difficult to establish new ties. They will sorely miss their beloved pastor."³⁴

Who responded most intensely to the pastor's resignation was not always predictable. Where one senior pastor was leaving the surprise was the grief expressed (i.e. tears) by the children in the congregation and the shock expressed by some of the youth in emails received. An associate whose responsibilities were primarily with the youth was struck by the emotion-filled comment made by an older gentleman who had no children and whose name the pastor did not even know. He said to the pastor, "You will never leave us because you have impacted us so greatly."

Mead does not find it unusual for there to be surprising grief reactions. Congregations often feel the loss of a pastor as deeply as the loss of a family member, especially if he/she has served for a number of years. There will be a natural close connection to some members of a church, but the pastor's symbolic role can trigger some internal emotional responses even among those who have not been personally close to the minister. The minister's presence at the church during significant moments in an individual's life can create emotional bonds of which even the pastor can be unaware.³⁵

³³ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 17.

³⁴ John Sutherland Bonnell, "Pastoral Relationship," *Pastoral Psychology*, 19 (December 1968) : 6.

³⁵ Loren Mead, *Critical Moment of Ministry: A Change of Pastors* (Washington: Alban Institute, 1986), 39.

Social Customs

Worden notes that different cultures and sub-cultures have different guidelines, customs and ritual behaviors to express their grief. Irish grieve differently than Italians and Catholics have different rituals than Protestants.³⁶ A pastor may or may not know how his/her particular congregation says goodbye to its pastors, although in every church surveyed the farewell event included food and at least one gift. Some were events held at special times, and some followed the regular morning worship. Some were filled with music, stories and laughter and others were a simple thank you speech by a lay authority figure. Two churches planned a banquet. The retiring pastor's church produced a thirty minute slide show of the pastor's life and ministry.

However a church chooses to express its grief, the rituals a church designs to convey its appreciation to the pastor should not be underestimated, discouraged or belittled. Nor should they be thought of as simply moments one has to tolerate. They should instead be understood as important moments of ministry. There were two pastors who almost sabotaged their churches plans for farewell events. One did not want a special event, but in the end consented to a simple gathering following his final service. The other pastor's final Sunday was threatening to be a severe storm and he thought it might be good to cancel the whole event. He was convinced otherwise by some of his deacons and fortunately the event went ahead as planned. Final celebrations are important moments for congregations to say "Goodbye" and bless their pastor, an act as important for the church as for the pastor. These events are moments which provide the opportunity

³⁶ Worden, 31.

for a formal and emotional separation that gives both parties freedom to seek a new future.³⁷

Anticipatory Grief

Worden defines grief which occurs after a death as ‘normal survivor grief.’ Anticipatory grief, a term first coined by Lindemann in 1944, refers to grieving that occurs before the actual loss. This most often occurs when one has a longer period of forewarning that death is coming (e.g. a prolonged illness). When there is a forewarning people normally begin to experience the grief process in anticipation of the loss.³⁸ One might think of David’s extreme emotions during the seven days prior to the death of his first child with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:15-24). After he realized the child was dead, and to the bewilderment of his servants who expected him to be completely devastated, David ceased his displays of sorrow and resumed normal hygiene and diet. It was a similar absence of overt signs of grief following a death that Lindemann sought to describe with the term anticipatory grief. He observed that many surviving family members had already experienced the phases of normal grief and “freed themselves from their emotional ties with the deceased.”³⁹

³⁷ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 40. Mead emphatically states, “Saying ‘goodbye’ is terribly important; too many pastors are self-centered at this point, refusing to let people have parties and occasions for saying goodbye, acting as if the celebrations were for the person of the departing pastor. No way.”

³⁸ Worden, 92.

³⁹ Worden, 92.

Oates uses the term anticipatory grief not only for those who are waiting for someone to die, but also for the grief experienced by the dying person.⁴⁰ Knight Aldrich also used the term in this manner in a 1963 paper entitled “The Dying Patient’s Grief.”⁴¹

Properly understood both the congregation’s and the pastor’s grief during the final stages of a pastor’s ministry should be termed anticipatory grief. During this period they are grieving anticipated losses that will come with the parting. There are difficulties associated with this type of grief. A prolonged period of anticipatory grief can produce resentment which leads to guilt and other dysfunctional responses such as early emotional withdrawal.⁴² This was most evident in the congregation who anticipated their pastor’s resignation for several years and where stories of frequent absences made it clear both the pastor and a significant portion of the congregation had disengaged from each other even before the resignation was publicly announced. The pastor identified feelings of guilt and abandonment existing within the congregation.

There are also potential benefits associated with anticipatory grief. A 1975 study determined that thirteen months after the death those who had advance warning and who had begun the grief process prior to the death adapted to the loss better than those who did not know ahead of time. Worden does caution this is only one of the determinants of grief and it might be too simplistic to consider it in isolation.⁴³

⁴⁰ Oates, 20.

⁴¹ Worden, 92.

⁴² Worden, 92 and 94-95.

⁴³ Worden, 92-93.

Four Tasks of Mourning

While Worden acknowledges Kübler-Ross' stages of death, and Parke's four phases of mourning as valid approaches to framing the grief process, he does note some short-comings for the grief counselor. The difficulty with stage models, like Kübler-Ross' work, is that we expect everyone to go through all of them, and this is not always the case.⁴⁴ Properly considered, Kübler-Ross is more concerned with describing the experiences of the dying person than the feelings of those who are left behind. She includes a chapter near the end of her work on the patient's family, where there is insight on the experience of death from the survivors' point of view, but the primary focus is on the family's role in the experience of the dying person.⁴⁵ Parke's work on the phases of mourning is concerned for experiences of surviving family and friends, but the concept of phases implies grief is what happens to a person who passively endures the process before it eventually subsides or is resolved.⁴⁶ For the purposes of a counselor seeking to help the bereaved, or a pastor seeking to help his/her congregation through a transition, the concept of mourning tasks can be a much more useful tool. Worden concludes the defense of his methodology by writing,

There is an obvious validity to both of these approaches. (*i.e. Stages of Death and Phases of Mourning.*) Grieving is something that takes time, the oft-quoted phrase "time heals" holds true. There is also truth to the notion that grief creates tasks that need to be accomplished,

⁴⁴ Worden, 32.

⁴⁵ Kübler-Ross, 157ff. A much more recent work, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005) was co-written by Kübler-Ross and David Kessler shortly before her death. It appears to treat the death process from the perspective of those who survive the death of a loved one. Unfortunately a copy could not be obtained before the completion of this Thesis project.

⁴⁶ Worden, 32.

and although this may seem overwhelming to the person in the throes of acute grief, it can, with the facilitation of a counselor, offer hope that something can be done and that there is an end point. This can be a powerful antidote to the feelings of helplessness that most mourners experience.⁴⁷

Worden lists the Four Tasks of Mourning as:

1. To accept the reality of the loss.
2. To experience the pain of grief.
3. To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.
4. To withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship.⁴⁸

As noted earlier, the final goal of the task process for a church is to be able to enter a new relationship with a pastoral leader in a healthy manner. For Worden, completing the tasks of mourning enables a person to adapt to the loss and come to a new place of equilibrium. If the tasks are not completed, there is incomplete bereavement.⁴⁹

In anticipatory grief, while there is variation in how one works on the tasks of mourning, the first three tasks can begin before the actual loss occurs (i.e. before the pastor leaves). After the actual loss event, this can help the mourner complete all the tasks in a shorter period of time and in a healthier manner. Withdrawal of emotional energy can occur before a pastor leaves, but should be considered an unhealthy coping mechanism.⁵⁰

Task I: Accept the Reality of the Loss

Even when someone dies, there is often a feeling that it is not real. A preference for euphemisms such as ‘passed away’ or ‘fallen asleep’ over blunter terms like died belies our reticence to come face to face with the reality of death. The first task is to come

⁴⁷ Worden, 32-33.

⁴⁸ Worden, 11-15.

⁴⁹ Worden, 10.

⁵⁰ Worden, 93-94.

to terms with the knowledge that not only is the person gone, but that a reunion in this life is impossible. The opposite of acceptance is denial.⁵¹ In anticipatory grief, there can be alternating periods of acceptance and denial, but often as the dying person's health deteriorates there is an increasing awareness of the reality of the impending death.⁵²

The first principle of a grief counselor is to help the survivor to actualize the loss. If the counselee has not accepted it, then he/she is not able to deal with the emotional impact of the loss. Worden suggests counselors help actualize the loss by talking about the details of it: When did the person die? Where did the person die? How did the person die? How did the person learn the news? Where were they when it happened? One may need to go over these details several times before the person becomes fully aware of what has happened.⁵³

Following Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus almost immediately begins to speak about His death (Matthew 16:13-28). Matthew says, "*From that time on* Jesus began to explain to his disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Matthew 16:21 Emphasis added.) Jesus spoke about His death often (e.g. Matthew 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:10-13) and the disciples usually tried to deny it. Peter rebuked Jesus the very first time he mentioned it (Matthew 16:22) but this did not hinder Jesus from speaking bluntly about His impending death. Still, until the moment of His arrest and crucifixion, none of the

⁵¹ Worden, 11.

⁵² Worden, 93.

⁵³ Worden, 39-40.

disciples were prepared for what Jesus had warned them would happen. Kübler-Ross states that denial acts as a buffer between the person and something he/she does not want to face.⁵⁴ In similar vein, Kari Syreeni interprets the disciples' denial as an experience of anticipatory grief.⁵⁵ Perhaps the disciples were like many churches who feel if they do not talk about and acknowledge the possibility of their pastor's departure, then it won't happen.⁵⁶

An almost opposite phenomenon occurs in the separation of Elijah from Elisha (2 Kings 2). The teacher is the one who will not speak openly about his impending departure and the student is the one who is determined not to avoid the reality of the event. Three times on his final day Elijah tells Elisha that he can stay behind and three times Elisha refuses. Patterson and Austel suggest Elijah must have spoken about his impending departure at some point because the prophets at Bethel and Jericho are aware that this is his last day.⁵⁷ Elijah does not openly acknowledge the reality of his departure until almost the last moment. Despite Elijah's secrecy, Elisha is able to deal with the loss in part because he had already come to terms with the reality of Elijah's departure.

To assist one's own congregation with accepting the reality of one's departure it is good to be as open and as specific as possible about the details. These details would include such things as the final date of service and, if applicable, the location of the new ministry one will be serving. Honesty and clarity are keys to helping a congregation come

⁵⁴ Kübler-Ross, 39.

⁵⁵ Syreeni, 180.

⁵⁶ Weese and Crabtree, 14.

⁵⁷ Richard D. Patterson and Herman J. Austel, "1, 2 Kings" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Vol. 4 ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 175.

to terms with the reality of one's departure.⁵⁸ In one congregation a previous pastor resigned without giving a specific ending date. This resulted in a lot of confusion within the congregation and eventually he had to be told it was time to go. Even those pastors who resigned before accepting a new ministry gave a specific completion date.

Anthony Plathe suggests denial is a common experience for churches as they refuse to face the painful reality of their pastor's departure. Among the symptoms of denial he lists are not planning a farewell party and procrastination in forming a search committee.⁵⁹ These symptoms were present in only one congregation where despite having three months notice, a farewell gathering was only arranged within two weeks of the pastor's final service, interim supply was not sought until a couple weeks before the pastor's departure and the Search Committee did not meet until after the pastor had left.

Requests to reconsider a resignation and stay are likely symptoms of a reluctance to accept the pastor's departure. Typically pastors responding to this request tried to help the person envision a better future without his/her presence. One pastor reported telling a man who asked him to reconsider, "The Lord has something in store for this church as He also does for me." Another pastor told a parishioner he had accomplished all he could and felt the Lord telling him it was time to go. He concluded, "God is preparing a new pastor to come and the church will need to be ready for who God chooses."

None of those interviewed suggested there was denial of the pastor's departure (i.e. he/she is not really leaving), but a pastor who was leaving for reasons of conflict and discouragement suggested there was widespread denial about the reason for his departure.

⁵⁸ See the sections on Honesty and Full Disclosure in Chapter 2.

⁵⁹ Plathe, 49-50.

His perception was that most believed he was just moving on as pastors do from time to time and the people did not want to consider why he had resigned.

Several lay people who had been in their congregations for many years made note of the fact that pastors do leave. One man who was observing his fourth pastor leave, said, “I have come to the resolution that ministers only stay four or five years and then they want to move on. That has kind of put some peace within me; knowing this is a normal trend and it is not because he is upset with us or doesn’t feel we are willing to do things he would like to see happen.”

Worden notes how funeral rituals make real the fact of the loss. Seeing the body in particular will bring home the reality and finality of death.⁶⁰ Teague discovered a comparable way to help his congregants see his departure was really happening. He accepted their help in facilitating the move. He had been concerned by the silence and apparent lack of concern expressed in particular by his closer friends within the congregation. What he realized was that up to that point he had not allowed anyone to be involved in the process. It had been his decision, his announcement and his choice. There had not been any opportunity for anyone else to contribute to the process. Teague began to accept offers of help for such things as meals and child care during the hectic packing process, and help with loading and clean up on the moving day. Allowing people to help him prepare to move helped them feel the reality of his impending departure.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Worden, 50.

⁶¹ Teague, 76.

Task II: To Experience the Pain of Grief

White once preached, “It is always traumatic when the pastor leaves. . . . When the pastor leaves, people feel it.”⁶² In essence the second task of mourning is to feel it. It is impossible to lose someone you are attached to without there being some amount of pain. Despite the fact that suppressing or avoiding the pain only prolongs the grief process, many who are uncomfortable with grief claim one does not need to feel it. But a conscious attempt to deny grief usually breaks down and often results in some form of depression. The opposite of denial is to feel it and to know that at some point it will pass.⁶³

Pastors know about the emotions of the transition from their point of view, but few understand what it is like to be a part of a congregation that suddenly hears the pastor is leaving. Clergy and lay people go through the same experiences, but it feels very different depending on where you stand.⁶⁴ For congregants who have been attached to a pastor, the departure can be an emotional blow with all the associated feelings of grief.⁶⁵ As noted with pastor’s grief, Worden lists normal grief feelings as sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, yearning, emancipation, relief and numbness.⁶⁶ Mead puts the list in starker terms citing some of the emotions which could be present as, “unreasonable anger, debilitating depression, simple denial, bargaining,

⁶² Edward White, “What to do Until the Preacher Comes: A Sermon for the Transition Time in the Life of a Congregation,” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 87.

⁶³ Worden, 13-14.

⁶⁴ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 3.

⁶⁵ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 49.

⁶⁶ Worden, 20-23.

and, with luck, acceptance flowing through congregation members – in different proportions and at different times.”⁶⁷

When asked how the congregation was feeling, one pastor responded there were three emotions in churches when any pastor resigns: “Sad, Mad, and Glad.” In his particular congregation he reported that ninety-seven percent of the people were sad. He only knew of one couple who were glad he was leaving. He thought, “Only one in the whole church is not too bad.” In a subsequent interview, this pastor reported the one couple who were glad, were now sad as well. He did not know of anyone who was mad.

Rhyming aside and similar to the pastors, there were examples of most of the emotions of grief found among the congregations. Although there were some instances, very few had reports of emotional expressions as intense as Mead’s adjectives would suggest. One example of something akin to what Mead describes occurred at the end of the last morning service a pastor was conducting. Following the benediction, a man spontaneously stood up to speak words of appreciation to the pastor because he was unable to come to the evening service. His speech was tear filled and sparked several others to offer similar sentiments for about half an hour. The pastor found it very difficult to greet people at the door following the service. He said, “I had no idea there was such grief about this.” Worden notes that strong emotional responses to a loss are normal and one should only become concerned about abnormal grief when these emotions extend for a long period of time, are excessively intense, or become inappropriately directed (e.g. Irrational anger or guilt that becomes self-focused in suicidal behavior).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 49.

⁶⁸ Worden, 23.

Table 4: Emotions/Feelings Reported to Have Occured in Congregation Members

Emotion/Feeling	Number of Pastorates Reported In
Sadness	10
Shock	7
Acceptance	7
Happy for the Pastor	6
Anxiety/Fear	5
Yearning	5
Anticipation	4
Regret	4
Rejection	4
Happy Pastor is Leaving	4
Anger	3
Disappointment	3
Discouragement	3
Ambivalence/Indifference	2
Devastated/Overwhelmed	2
Frustration	2
Guilt	2
Relief	2
Numbness	1

Sadness was the most common expression of grief, being reported in every church. Sadness is most commonly expressed through tears, which Worden warns counselors may be something they need to encourage grievers to do because so many fear the embarrassment they believe comes with such an open expression of grief.⁶⁹ In one congregation a woman told the pastor she would not be present for his last Sunday because she had no interest in “blubbing in front of everyone.” At the opposite end of the spectrum a stoic retired man confessed during an interview, “I cried and cried, as he

⁶⁹ Worden, 43.

(*the pastor*) told me.” Contrary to the fear of appearing undignified, Worden believes crying is most useful and effective when done in the presence of a supportive person.⁷⁰

As important as tears may be, it is equally important to have some understanding of what the tears represent. B.G. Simos wrote, “Merely crying, however is not enough. The bereaved need help in identifying the meaning of the tears, and this meaning will change . . . as the grief work progresses.”⁷¹ So in one congregation the layman stated that the younger couples with whom the pastor worked closely were sadder than some others, indicating they felt the loss of relationship more keenly. In another congregation, the lay person expressed sadness that the conflict could not be resolved and that there were so many hurt feelings and so little forgiveness.

After sadness, the second most common emotional experience was shock or surprise. Among churches reporting this experience it was often the first emotional reaction but usually not long lived. Churches in which there was not a reference to a sense of shock were predictably the ones who knew it was coming either from the pastor’s own remarks or from observing a pulpit committee checking out their pastor, and the congregation whose pastor was retiring. In most congregations, especially in those where the ministry was perceived to be going well, the sentiment was as one pastor put it, “They didn’t see it coming.” Even within the congregation with the longest period of conflict, the lay person reported that people who were not part of the leadership “were very surprised.”

⁷⁰ Worden, 44.

⁷¹ B.G. Simos, *A Time to Grieve* (New York: Family Service Association, 1979), 89. Quoted in Worden, 44.

Worden states that the most common emotion in anticipatory grief is anxiety or fear about the pending separation and also an increasing awareness of one's own death. Fears about the future usually surround the ability to cope and function without the person who will be gone. Generally over time, as people realize it might be difficult but they can manage, these feelings subside. To assist the process, Worden suggests a counselor should help mourners see how they have been able to cope on their own before the loss.⁷² Mead acknowledges the complex issues, the challenges, and the potential for good or for ill make facing a period without a pastor a "scary" time for congregations.⁷³

One congregation in particular expressed anxiety in both initial and follow-up interviews. It was a smaller congregation which was also very discouraged. The fear reported was that they would never be able to get another pastor because of their size, lack of financial resources and location. While the lay person said no one feared the church would close, the common question was, "What's going to happen to our church now?" The pastor noted that most of the leadership in the congregation had never been through this process before, so one might expect there was also a fear of the unknown. In this congregation, as well as at least two others, there was anxiety expressed about the process of searching for a new pastor. In particular, there were concerns about balancing a sense of God's leading with the very practical aspects of assessing the congregation, reading through resumes, contacting and interviewing prospective new pastors and then being able to know who would be the right person to become the next pastoral leader. For one woman who said she was part of a core of ten or eleven families who really liked

⁷² Worden, 93 and 43.

⁷³ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, x.

the departing pastor's "style," there was an anxiety about the unknown new pastor. They did not know what to expect. In another congregation after what was generally agreed to have been a very successful pastorate (i.e. numerical and spiritual growth) the worry was another pastor would not be able to help the church reach its full potential and they might backslide. A lay leader in another church suggested one of the responsibilities of the departing pastor was to help people so they "don't panic about what happens next."

Yearning, defined by Worden as "pining", is a normal grief response which also diminishes over time.⁷⁴ When it has, it can be taken as a sign that a period of mourning is ending. Generally among those surveyed, yearning was anticipated and expressed by the words "I/we will miss" the pastor. Often such sentiments by both pastors and lay people were followed by a "but" and a suggestion that there will be opportunity to see one another in the future. One pastor said he had a cottage in the area of the church he was leaving, so he would likely see some of the people the next summer. Another pastor said there were some friends within the congregation who had a cottage near the new church and so it was expected they might drop by to visit when they were in the area. In another congregation, the pastor reported several congregational members wanted him to come back to do their funerals. In the church of the retiring minister, even though he was planning to remain among the congregation the overall feeling the layman suggested was that his presence and leadership would be missed.

Worden states that anger is one of the most common and confusing of the emotional reactions to a loss. In a death the confusion often centers on anger at the person

⁷⁴ Worden, 22.

for dying and yet knowing that the person did not choose to die. For Worden the root of such anger is a sense of helplessness and frustration that the death could not be prevented and a fear of being left alone. Because it feels wrong to be angry at the deceased, inappropriate blame of others and self is a common result of unhealthy anger.⁷⁵ Plathe thinks misdirected anger can easily occur in congregations,⁷⁶ while Mead believes the level of anger in a congregation often heightens in the wake of a pastor's resignation. Even small errors or miscues which would normally be overlooked invoke outbursts of anger.⁷⁷

While there was reference to anger in three congregations, one in particular stood out as it was the first and predominant emotion identified by the lay person. "A lot of people are angry, the young people in particular." The anger was not directed at the pastor, but at a small group of people whom the angry folks perceived as so uncooperative the pastor was forced to give up and resign. The lay person was concerned particularly for one couple who held and who were being considered for a number of leadership positions. He felt they were angry enough to leave the congregation. The pastor interviewed made no reference to this level of anger and seemed to be unaware of it. He identified the emotions of the congregation to be a few people who were sad, a few who would be glad to see him leave, and a host of people whom he thought were indifferent to his departure.⁷⁸ Phillips might be surprised this congregation directed anger

⁷⁵ Worden, 20-21, 40-41.

⁷⁶ Plathe, 51.

⁷⁷ Mead, 49.

⁷⁸ Perhaps a notable correlation is that the three congregations who reported there were people angry at the pastor's departure were also among the four who reported there were people who were happy about the pastor's departure.

at certain members rather than at the pastor. He suggested people become angry at a pastor when they feel he/she gave up too easily. In such circumstances churches begin to distrust both pastors and the system or institution which supports and installs them.⁷⁹

Mead also likens the feeling of a resignation to a betrayal which invokes mixed emotions of anger and regret.⁸⁰ This was evidenced in one congregation where the pastor said that one couple was quite hurt by his announcement and cut off contact for a few weeks. Before the pastor had left, however, they had come back and were “just as close as ever.” Another pastor observed that outside of family bonds, there is none closer than the pastor and congregational bond. For him anger at his resignation could have been an expected result of people feeling that he was abandoning the church family. Phillips notes something similar when he writes that churches like to assume the congregation’s and pastor’s goals are similar. That assumption is shattered in the light of a resignation and people become angry because they feel as if they have been deceived. The relationship has not been as they thought it was.⁸¹ Both Worden and Kübler-Ross warn that unresolved anger can change to depression when the loss becomes more realized.⁸² No one referred to their congregation being depressed but two of the congregations who exhibited signs of anger also expressed some of the most profound feelings of discouragement.

⁷⁹ Phillips, 37.

⁸⁰ Mead, 6.

⁸¹ Phillips, vi.

⁸² Worden, 28; Kübler-Ross, 85.

As was noted earlier, feelings of rejection were most prominent in congregations where the pastor resigned before accepting a new ministry. However, in one congregation where the pastor was leaving for a new call the sense of rejection was phrased by people in terms which suggested the pastor must think the new congregation is better than ours or he wouldn't be leaving us. In another smaller congregation the pastor reported that one of the initial responses to his resignation was, "We can't get a pastor to stay long enough to love us." Nicholson noted that this is a common response especially among smaller churches and especially when there has been a series of short pastoral tenures.⁸³

Not all feelings related to the pastor's departure were negative. Acceptance and happiness for the pastor were second and third on the list of the most common emotional expressions. These churches, while sad their pastor was leaving, were pleased to think the pastor was going to a new ministry where he would continue to be useful for God's kingdom. One pastor said there was a definite sense among the congregation that they were sending him out with a blessing and even a sense of commissioning him to further ministry apart from that particular congregation. Feelings about being happy for the pastor were more likely to come up in follow-up rather than initial interviews, suggesting sometimes it takes a bit of time for congregations to get to that point.

Plathe suggests once positive feelings begin to occur and plans for the future are being made, then you know acceptance has begun to settle in.⁸⁴ Acceptance was evidenced in several different types of statements. Two lay people simply said, "It was time for him to go." Another said, "I feel good that God has led him to another church

⁸³ Nicholson, 19

⁸⁴ Plathe, 53.

and he is continuing to work for the Lord as he did at our church. Someone else needs him now.” At least two other lay people intimated the idea that if their pastor’s departure was the Lord’s leading then that was both understandable and “okay” with them. Two other lay people, who had belonged to their respective congregations for several decades and seen several pastors come and go, expressed that they were neither anxious nor fearful because this was one of the things that happens in churches from time to time. They had survived it before and would come through this time as well.

Following, or perhaps as a part of, acceptance there is often an anticipation of the future as the church searches for and then engages a new pastoral leader.⁸⁵ Oswald states that for both clergy and laity there is the strange mix of sadness at the parting and excitement at starting new. Most congregants were not quite at the stage of excitement for the new possibilities by the end of the interviews, but one leader who was a part of the pulpit committee said, “I am ready to get on with the task.”

When asked, “Are you doing anything to help your congregation come to terms with their feelings?” the most common initial response from pastors was silence. One responded “I do not know how I could do that.” Others typically referred to regular and sometimes increased visitation during their final months of ministry. One pastor devoted the last two weeks, and another the last week, just to visitation. Another pastor was asked in a follow-up interview if he was doing more visitation than usual. He answered he was doing about the same number of visits but he was targeting his visits to people whom he might not see otherwise, elderly people and those who he thought were really “feeling”

⁸⁵ Plathe, 53.

his impending departure. These pastors' strategies fit well with Oswald's advice on departures. Both in an interview and in his own writing he recommends pastors make a list of people who need a visit to bring closure and another list of people who would be assisted by a phone call. In addition he believes there are certain groups whom the pastor has worked closely with who deserve a gathering together for reflection and to express their feelings to each other.⁸⁶

Principle Two of Worden's "Counseling Principles and Procedures" is to "help the survivor identify and express feelings." His concern is particularly for the emotional response of anger, guilt, anxiety, helplessness and sadness. Because these are unpleasant feelings, many people will either repress them or not feel them to the degree necessary to bring about effective resolution.⁸⁷ Principle Five is to "provide time to grieve." Grieving is a gradual process and not a momentary experience. He suggests critical time periods include three months and one year after the loss experience.⁸⁸ Later in a section on family counseling, Worden makes reference to a practice termed "operational mourning" which is a process of inducing the grief response by directly asking members of the family how they are feeling about the loss.⁸⁹ Principles similar to these are found among the writers concerned for healthy pastoral transitions. Teague came to realize he needed to "give permission" for people to express themselves, especially the men of the congregation. So he began to bring up the subject of his own departure in conversations with parishioners

⁸⁶ Oswald, "The Pastor's Passages," 14; Oswald, Heath and Heath, 12.

⁸⁷ Worden, 40.

⁸⁸ Worden, 45.

⁸⁹ Worden, 105.

to provide opportunities for them to open up if they desired.⁹⁰ Bubna wrote that, like the grief work a pastor does when someone dies, he found it best to listen and let others talk.⁹¹

Suggesting pastors just listen is easier said than done. It can be a daunting, depressing and wearying task to hear people express the pain and grief that one has caused by his/her resignation. Yet, according to Satterlee, listening is the primary and essential tool to enter into people's lives and through which one will understand what is needed to help people enter into the transition process. It is also, he believes, the way pastors discover where God is at work in people's lives. The emotional toll which listening places on a pastor is one reason Satterlee stresses that pastors need mentors to help them come to terms with both the feelings expressed to them as well as the feelings they experience within themselves.⁹²

Most of the pastors surveyed would have known what is necessary to facilitate grief surrounding a death, but did not always associate this as a crucial part of helping a congregation deal emotionally with their departure. For example, a pastor who admitted there was not enough time given to helping the church deal with emotional issues also related the experience of ministering to the death of a teenager as a precious memory. The teen, an active participant in the youth ministry, died suddenly of natural causes. At the youth group meeting shortly after the funeral service the pastor had the whole group sit together in a circle and begin to share and talk about their experiences, feelings and

⁹⁰ Teague, 76.

⁹¹ Bubna, "How to Bid," 121.

⁹² Satterlee, 66-67, 117.

memories. There were tears and laughter. It was difficult, but it resulted in many of the youth growing closer and stronger in their relationship both with one another and the pastor, and the grief process was facilitated significantly. In a similar manner, Mead believes one of the most significant things a pastor can do to help a congregation “unpack our emotional baggage and get ready to move on,” is to tell stories, relate memories, laugh and shed tears about the things they have shared together.⁹³

While sermons generally do not give congregation members an opportunity to voice their own emotions, there can be appropriate ways for the pastor to voice his/her own feelings and set the example of openness with one’s feelings.⁹⁴ Peniston, for example, used a message to speak about what the time spent in a particular church had meant to him.⁹⁵ Daphne Burt on the other hand chose to avoid sharing personal thoughts and emotions in her final sermon and in the end felt her inability to deal with her feelings kept the congregation from feeling free to deal with their pain and grief at her parting. “Because their pastor had not said goodbye, the congregation was disabled from saying goodbye as well.”⁹⁶

According to Satterlee, the most helpful preaching during a transition gives people permission to grieve and the power to face that grief. Pastors, even in their preaching, should resist the temptation to protect people from experiencing the pain of grief. Messages can communicate the ending of the ministry in terms of a death and

⁹³ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 50.

⁹⁴ Teague, 78.

⁹⁵ Peniston, 60.

⁹⁶ Daphne Burt, “When a Church Dies,” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 67.

resurrection motif. Sermons should identify the impending death of relationships, roles, responsibilities and even the death of the pastoral bond with the congregation. Then preachers can assure their listeners that in Christ there is life after death and focus on themes which emphasize the continuity of the church, Christian leadership that transcends individual leaders, along with God's sovereignty and faithfulness. He believes this kind of preaching assures people that churches continue, God is greater than any one pastor and that pastors are each a part of a continuity of God's work.⁹⁷ It might be noted that none of the pastors reported using sermons to speak to the emotions related to the grief process in an intentional and direct way as Satterlee suggests.

Being candid about one's own emotions and open to hearing the emotions and feelings of one's parishioners can be hard and tiring work which takes a toll on the pastor, but it is an invaluable ministry both to the congregation and one's successor.⁹⁸ When there is a large residue of unexpressed emotions, the next pastor needs to deal with the unresolved feelings and to listen to the stories; often several times.⁹⁹ One of the associate pastors discovered this principle when the senior pastor resigned and left a lot of unresolved feelings among the congregation. The associate remarked, "During that time there was a whole lot of hurt and a lot of people leaned on me as the only consistent pastor within the church."

⁹⁷ Satterlee, 114-115 and 118-119.

⁹⁸ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 3.

⁹⁹ Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 8.

Task III: To Adjust to the Absence of the Pastor

Worden's third task of mourning is to adjust to an environment in which the deceased person is no longer there. This will mean different things to different people depending on the nature of the relationship and the role the deceased person played in the mourner's life. Often one does not fully understand the role the dead person played until after he/she has died.¹⁰⁰ With anticipatory grief, this task is addressed as people run different scenarios through their minds about what will happen after the separation. One psychologist labeled this process the "work of worry" and found it did help people to adjust better after the event. Worden believes this time of role rehearsal is an important coping tool, although it can be misunderstood by outside observers as being insensitive, premature or just in bad taste.¹⁰¹ Oates describes grief as a bridge over troubled water on which there is placed a no parking sign. Pastors, in his view, are to keep people looking ahead and moving forward.¹⁰²

Among the churches surveyed six reported no significant change in the relationship between the pastor and congregation during the final months. When asked if there has been any difference in the pastor and congregational relationship, one woman said, "Not really. Those who came to Bible Study, still come; and those who don't come, still don't come." She did note the pastor seemed a little more relaxed. Another man said, "The pastor is still cordial. There hasn't been any difference in the way he treats people."

¹⁰⁰ Worden, 14-15.

¹⁰¹ Worden, 93-94.

¹⁰² Oates, 86-87.

In two of the remaining four churches there was a difference of opinion between the pastor's answer and the lay persons. In one the pastor noted that both he and some people were starting to disengage, and in particular gave the example of not being made aware of a committee meeting he usually attended. The lay person however stated there was no difference and the pastor had not backed off at all. In the other congregation the pastor thought there had not been much of a change, and he still felt very connected with the people, while the layman said, "There is always a drawing back when you know it is over. There is a hesitancy to approach with personal items." He qualified his statement by saying it was nothing major.

In the remaining two congregations there was agreement that there was a difference. In one the pastor in particular noted certain people did not drop by his house as they had before the announcement. When he mentioned this to one of those people, they said, "Oh, we'll be by," but they had not "been by" yet. In the other congregation the difference noted was that attendance increased at both Sunday worship and Bible Study, some people were becoming more committed to service in the church and there were requests to have the services taped so people could have something on record.

According to Glen Ludwig, the most important thing a departing pastor can do is understand that he/she will no longer be the pastor. The next most important thing is to help the church understand that he/she will no longer be the pastor. In one setting the pastor reported he intentionally began pulling back, though it was not easy. He withdrew from certain tasks such as developing the next annual budget and completing an application to a mission agency. When reference was made to certain up-coming events

he would remind people he would not be there and it would be up to them to plan those activities. He concluded, “People are slowly beginning to realize we aren’t going to be there.”

Task IV: Withdraw Emotional Energy and Reinvest It in Another Pastor

The final task of mourning is to withdraw the emotional energy previously given to the deceased and to reinvest it in new relationships. Some people may resist doing this because their experience of loss was so painful they resolve to never love again, while others may resist a new relationship because they think withdrawing their emotional attachment will dishonour the dead person. One of the final tasks of the counsellor is to assist the mourner in forming new relationships.¹⁰³ In anticipatory grief, especially when the dying person lingers for a long time, the difficulty can be an emotional withdrawal which occurs before the person dies and then makes for an awkward relationship. At the opposite extreme is a person who becomes too emotionally connected and over manages the patient’s care.¹⁰⁴

Wayne Oates cites Paul’s instruction to Timothy to tell the elder widows to help the young widows get re-established as an example of this principle of reinvesting emotional energy. “Grief is best managed,” he writes, “by reinvesting life in ministry to others.”¹⁰⁵ His advice to younger widows to remarry, might also be considered advice of a similar type (1 Timothy 5:11-15).

No matter what leads to the separation of a church and pastor, it is crucial that the

¹⁰³ Worden, 15-16, 45.

¹⁰⁴ Worden, 94-95.

¹⁰⁵ Oates, 32.

departure occurs in a way that will enable both the pastor and the congregation to create new relationships and opportunities. The departing pastor and congregation cannot continue the old relationship patterns they have been accustomed to if a new pastoral leader relationship is to be forged with the church.¹⁰⁶ Mead believes the pastor must be completely free from his former roles before a search for a new pastor can even begin.¹⁰⁷

White believes there is one underlying problem behind every church's dysfunctional relationship with a former pastor; the pastor's failure to realize that "goodbye means goodbye in terms of the pastoral role."¹⁰⁸ For White, undermining the new pastor is a betrayal of one's ordination vows. This undermining can include such things as: returning to do weddings, funerals, or baptisms, making pastoral visits, criticizing the new pastor, and putting the new pastor on the spot (e.g. telling someone you will participate in an event if the new pastor agrees).¹⁰⁹ To this list Gillaspie would add continued correspondence with members of one's former church.¹¹⁰

Phillips, Bonnell and Gouedy all believe it is difficult and sometimes even painful for some pastors no longer to identify with their former congregation.¹¹¹ This natural tendency, especially after a long tenure, was noted in one pastor who during an interview

¹⁰⁶ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 11, 90.

¹⁰⁷ Mead, 26.

¹⁰⁸ White, 94.

¹⁰⁹ White, 94.

¹¹⁰ Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 34.

¹¹¹ Phillips, 11; John Sutherland Bonnell, "The Retiring Pastor and His Successor," *Pastoral Psychology* 19 (December 1968) : 8. Gouedy, 23. Bonnell can not think of anything more painful for a pastor than to be separated from a congregation he dearly loves. Gouedy notes the pain he experience when he learned the congregation made what he felt was a disastrous financial decision. Never-the-less, he knew he had to stay out of the matter.

just a few days before his final Sunday was still using the term “we” when talking about the possible future direction of the church. Mark was one of at least three pastors who experienced difficulty with a former pastor who continued to maintain close relationships with the congregation several years after his departure. He described the previous pastor as someone who had been a heavy visitor and who had developed close ties with the congregation. After learning of a death, Mark was told the previous pastor would be doing the funeral. He felt this was unfortunate both for himself and the family. He was unable to establish a real connection with the family as they looked to the former pastor for comfort. As a result they received little pastoral counsel during the period of intense grief, because the former pastor lived at a distance and would not be present for much more than the funeral service. In a second episode, the former pastor was asked to come back to officiate at a wedding. In this instance Mark was asked to assist and to do the premarital classes but he expressed his frustration over the fact that the former pastor was an hour late for the rehearsal and did not know the name of the groom when he did arrive. Mark said it got to the point he had to confront the former pastor. In this conversation Mark asked the former pastor whenever he received an invitation to return to conduct a something to tell the person he wasn't sure and then to call him to ensure it was okay. John Bonnell would likely have agreed with Mark's approach. Bonnell believed that pastors who continue this type of contact with former parishioners are insensitive, callous and selfish. According to Bonnell, the duty of every former pastor is to immediately contact his/her successor when he/she becomes aware of something which requires attention but has been inappropriately brought to him/her (e.g. a death or

hospitalization).¹¹² Mark did not say how much success he experienced with his approach to his predecessor, but he was determined to ensure he had a proper pastoral ethic following his own departure. “I don’t want to shut people off, but I want to be careful to be involved as little as possible.” There were some people he felt a close friendship with, but at the same time he did not “want to step on the toes of the new pastor.”

Mark’s experience could have been avoided had his predecessor followed the examples of Bubna, Gouedy, and Nygren. Bubna believed the bonding process with a new pastor is always impeded when the former pastor returns for special occasions and told his church before he left that it would be best if he was not invited to come back for such events.¹¹³ Gouedy simply says, “When a pastor keeps the old ties after moving, bad things happen, no matter what the intent.”¹¹⁴ Nygren allows room for some continuing contact between a pastor and members of a congregation but the onus is on the departing pastor to establish the terms of this future relationship. In Nygren’s view a minister holds a dual role of pastor and friend, but following his/her departure those roles separate and the departing pastor can only act in the role of friend. Ministers give leadership, and officiate at events like weddings and funerals. Friends can share the joy or sorrow of those events, but do not conduct them. It is up to a departing pastor to make this clear. Nygren states, “The new minister does not cause the change, and should not be made

¹¹² Bonnell, “The Retiring Pastor and His Successor,” 8-10. Similar to Mark’s experience, Bonnell relates the disturbing story of the death of church Board member shortly after the arrival of a new pastor. The former pastor came back and performed the funeral without advising his successor. Indeed, the new pastor did not learn of the death until after the funeral service was completed and the former pastor had returned home.

¹¹³ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 122.

¹¹⁴ Gouedy, 23.

responsible for it.”¹¹⁵ Had this model been followed, Mark would not have been put into the position of confronting his predecessor’s continued presence.

At least two other researchers leave room for some measure of continuing relationship between a congregation and a former pastor. Bonnell believes it would be “callous” to break every bond, but every consideration should be made by the former pastor to ensure the continuing friendship does not interfere with the parishioners’ relationship with their new pastor.¹¹⁶ Friedman advocates former pastors use contacts to help further the separation process. For him the key is for the former pastor to encourage parishioners to bond with the new minister and to refrain from criticism of the new pastor even when, or perhaps especially when, a parishioner makes negative remarks about the new pastor.¹¹⁷

Bubna also allows room for contact after one’s departure and even for attendance at special events, but only if his successor is also present and participates in the event. In that situation he treats the new pastor as his own pastor with the hope that his former congregation will follow his lead. If he felt he could not publicly affirm the new leadership for whatever reason he would, “have no business returning to that church.”¹¹⁸

Joan Mabon has found that continued contact between congregants and former pastors occurs in every congregation, but is most distressed by the “covert” ways in which this contact is maintained. She believes continued contact even if only with a few

¹¹⁵ Nygren, “Ending a Long Pastorate,” 20.

¹¹⁶ Bonnell, “Pastoral Relationship,” 6.

¹¹⁷ Friedman, 260-261.

¹¹⁸ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 122.

people in the church, has a negative impact on the whole congregation and lists ten of them:

1. Negative grief emotions continue to be surfaced.
2. Encourages futile grasping to the old relationship.
3. Discourages working through grief emotions and encourages rivalry between members. (e.g. The pastor calls me.)
4. Private contact deprives the church opportunity for shared grief.
5. Focuses members' energy outside the congregation when it is needed inside.
6. Encourages holding to the past.
7. Confuses people's commitments to new leadership.
8. Makes the new minister an interloper.
9. Invites comparisons and undermines the choice of new pastor.
10. Keeps the new pastor on the defensive and subverts morale and effectiveness.¹¹⁹

There is general agreement that when a resigning pastor stays within the congregation the issues become even more complicated.¹²⁰ For the retiring pastor, whose intention was to remain with the church, staying would depend on whether he felt he was a hindrance or a help to his successor. The lay person interviewed in that church thought the pastor's remaining would make it easier for the church emotionally, but foresaw a potential problem of divided loyalties should a controversial issue arise. John Esau advised that those who remain with their congregations after they are finished as the pastoral leader forfeit any right to be a normal member of the congregation. He believed they should not attend congregational meetings and should never offer any word of criticism. Former pastors "must give up the normal right to be critical about anything. I

¹¹⁹ Joan Mabon, "My Friend the Former Pastor," in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 97-99.

¹²⁰ See for example Umidi, 23 and Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 33. For a firsthand experience from the perspective of the new pastor see Steve Matthewson, "Faces of Change: Three Stories of Pastors who Grew Through Transition," *Leadership* (Winter 1997): 59-60.

am not talking about super critics, but about the normal right that all of us have to evaluate people and events. As a former pastor it is only my right to affirm.”¹²¹

A few writers suggest that pastors and congregations, especially when the pastor is staying in the area, write and sign a post-departure relationship contract. Oswald suggests such an agreement be worked out between the Board and the pastor, and be witnessed by a denominational representative. The document should include items like: why the pastor resigned; the departing pastor will only be affirming in his relationship with the new pastor; the former pastor will not officiate at funerals and weddings; he/she will not initiate contact with church members for the purpose of pastoral care; and he/she will absent himself/herself from the church for one year. The agreement would be shared with the congregation as well as with interim and new pastors. If any side fails to meet any of the expectations, any one of parties is free to identify the breach and begin a resolution process. Oswald believes that a formal agreement helps pastor and people realize how important it is to conclude the pastoral relationship that had existed.¹²²

A formal agreement might have been helpful to George who was going through his first pastoral transition. He had also experienced problems with a former pastor.¹²³

¹²¹ John Esau, “Dear Henry,” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 106.

¹²² Oswald, Heath and Heath, 88-90. Although not as detailed, Rod Reinecke and Keith Reeve advocate for such agreements with similar suggestions for the content of the document. Rod Reinecke “Leaving the Pastorate; Staying in Town” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 103; Keith Reeve, “While You’re Saying Goodbye: A Checklist of Items for a Pastor’s Consideration on Leaving a Congregation, *ibid.*, 112. In Reinecke’s case the agreement did make the future relationship clear to the pastor and the church leadership, but there were church members who still did not understand (101). Reinecke spent one and a half years serving other churches before slowly settling back into his former church. (102) Bubna states the time needs to be even longer if the reasons a pastor left are negative (perhaps more than two years) and that during the separation a pastor should not respond to phone calls or other forms of correspondence. Bubna, “How to Bid,” 122.

¹²³ As an example of his predecessor’s continuing attachment to the congregation, George reported that his predecessor had submitted a resume to the search committee for their consideration.

Despite this experience he said, “I don’t think it is wrong to maintain friendship contacts with people.” He reported receiving seven requests from people to return to perform their funerals. George told them, “When your new pastor comes you will fall in love with him. You will not forget about me, but you will follow him.” When they persisted George said it might be possible, if the distance is not too great, the weather not too bad, the current pastor was okay with it and their wishes had been made known to their family. Although not gathered from the interviews it was learned later that George had returned to do at least two funerals during the interim period. One occurred a little more than a week after his departure and another about three months later.

Ralph Johnson suggests rather than a formal agreement, a kindly worded farewell letter to the congregation requesting them not to ask him to come for weddings, funerals, baptisms, counselling and/or hospital calls should be sufficient.¹²⁴ However one chooses to communicate the nature of the post-departure relationship it is clear from the literature and from anecdotal evidence that the greatest deterrent for a congregation seeking to establish a bond with a new pastor is the interference of a former pastor and the congregation’s lingering attachment to him/her. While all bonds of friendship may not need to be completely severed, for the good of both the church and the former pastor, the former pastoral role needs to end.¹²⁵ Perhaps the best departing gift Bubna gave to his congregation was an affirmation for his yet unnamed successor. “Our church would have a new pastor. He would be different from me. But he would be God’s gift to the church,

¹²⁴ Ralph Johnson, “From the Pastor’s Desk,” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 96.

¹²⁵ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 105-106.

and if they really loved me, they would honor him.”¹²⁶

Farewell Rituals

Customarily grief over a death is facilitated through funeral rituals. These events help develop a sense of the reality of the loss, express one’s feelings, and give time to reflect on the importance and meaning of one’s relationship to the deceased. Funerals also provide a good opportunity to draw upon the support of one’s social network. As Worden states, “Grief is really a social process and best dealt with in a social setting in which people can support and reinforce each other in their reactions to the loss.”¹²⁷ Oates also notes that funerals are a valuable resource to assimilate the reality of the loss in the context of mourning, celebration, worship and social support.¹²⁸ At least one pastor interviewed referred to the farewell event his congregation planned as being like going to one’s own funeral. He intended this to be a negative comment, however, the comparison does not need to be a pessimistic one. Oswald described a farewell event as a “joyful funeral service.”¹²⁹ Farewell rituals are important markers and tools to help congregations and pastors end their pastoral relationship while still holding open the possibility of a new type of relationship.¹³⁰

Friedman refers to farewell rituals as one of several types of rites of passage

¹²⁶ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 122.

¹²⁷ Worden, 35, 50-51 and quote from 56.

¹²⁸ Oates, 26.

¹²⁹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 88. Throop describes observing a funeral where “Jesus Christ is Risen Today! Alleluia!” was being sung to celebrate the triumph of death over life. He called it a “celebration in *the* disguise” of funeral. He compared that service with his own farewell event with its mixture of feelings. Throop, 55.

¹³⁰ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 88.

which enables the healing process and allows people to deal openly with some of the psychological and emotional concerns that come with change and/or loss. He distinguished between the ceremony and the actual emotional passage from one stage of a relationship to another. The passage takes a lot longer than the length of time of a potluck or a worship service. But ceremonies do give a visible and tangible reality to the internal process of transition.¹³¹ Similarly, Cook urges pastors not to dismiss the importance of farewell ceremonies. They are necessary functions to help churches find closure. Like funeral rituals, he believes that farewell celebrations are a natural and loving way for congregations to set aside one pastor in preparation for another.¹³² Farewell events also help pastor's let go. Again using a funeral analogy, Satterlee comments, "The celebration of the pastor's ministry **helps the pastor and congregation to let go** of the ministry they have shared and to begin a new relationship, though for the pastor it often feels like a funeral with the deceased present to hear the eulogies."¹³³ (Emphasis added.)

Friedman advocates that churches become more creative and intentional in creating departure ceremonies. He scolds churches who focus on installation ceremonies more than departure ceremonies, believing the rituals which mark the end of a pastoral relationship are more important to the future of the church than those which celebrate the initiation of a new leader.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Friedman, 162-164 and 167.

¹³² Cook, 145.

¹³³ Satterlee, 121.

¹³⁴ Friedman, 255.

Farewell events can take many forms. There are suppers followed by “roasts” that convey a congregation’s affection for the pastor, special musical evenings, fellowship times following a worship service, guest speakers, picnics, or various other types of special events. Often one or more gifts are given to the pastor and/or his/her family. Oswald suggests when a pastor has served a church for many years the congregation may want to plan several events.¹³⁵ Whatever is planned, it is important that the event and what is spoken realistically reflect the relationship in a way that affirms people with integrity and without offending sensibilities.¹³⁶

Every farewell event reported among the churches surveyed included some form of food and gifts for the pastor. The most common meal was a potluck dinner, although two churches prepared banquets and one congregation had a reception of sweets and sandwiches. Half of the churches scheduled their gathering to follow a regular Sunday worship service while the remaining churches planned special Friday or Saturday evening events. Three churches included not only the congregation, but also invited clergy and community people from outside the church to their event. Most events also included speeches which shared memories and expressed appreciation for the pastor and his/her family. Only one church reported no significant speeches by congregational members. Two events included skits and a “roasting” of the pastor. As noted earlier, a slideshow presentation was prepared for the retiring pastor’s farewell supper. In one church a potluck supper was followed by a musical evening. Most of the congregations gave a gift from the congregation as a whole, and three churches reported there were also gifts given

¹³⁵ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 11-12.

¹³⁶ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 9.

by individuals. One congregation gave the pastor a painting of the church building. Another congregation included a timer among the gifts for a notoriously long-winded pastor. They also gathered a book of memories and well wishes from the members of the congregation.

Along with large final events, several churches reported events hosted by smaller groups within the congregation. As noted earlier, the deacons took one pastor out to a local restaurant for a final dinner. Other groups hosting a special farewell gathering included youth groups, small group Bible Studies, fellowship groups and ministerials. In the multi-church pastorate, there were smaller farewell events in one church and the preaching station and then a larger event for the whole field in the other church.

In one church the deacons decided that on the last Sunday they would have a special commissioning prayer for the pastor and his wife as they left to go to a new ministry. The deacon who made the proposal cited the example of the Antioch church's prayer for Paul and Silas as they embarked on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:3). One of the associate pastors also made reference to a similar commissioning moment when a previous senior pastor concluded his ministry at the church. Other than these two, there were no other reports of worship components being incorporated into the actual farewell event. This is in contrast to several writers who suggest churches should create termination worship services and liturgies.¹³⁷ Umidi strongly suggests that churches follow the examples cited above and include a blessing and commissioning prayer for the departing pastor along with the pastor offering a prayer of blessing for the congregation.

¹³⁷ Along with those mentioned here, Dale (184), Friedman (255) and White (69-72) advocate churches create special worship services to mark the end of pastorate in a way similar to how Induction services mark the start of a pastorate.

He also cites the example of Acts 13 and concludes, “If this biblical action is minimized or ignored, a healthy leadership transition will be hampered.”¹³⁸

One might also note the biblical leadership transitions of Moses to Joshua, Elijah to Elisha and Jesus to the Twelve as examples of the importance of including worship and symbolic acts into the transition process. Much of the text of Deuteronomy might be considered a farewell ceremony as Moses recounts their shared history. In the final chapters he hands over authority to Joshua in words to the people and an exhortation to Joshua (Deuteronomy 31:1-7) as well as by the laying on of hands (Deuteronomy 34:9). Before he leaves, he also offers blessings upon the people for he had led for so many years (Deuteronomy 33). In the transition from Elijah to Elisha, it was Elijah’s cloak left behind and picked up by Elisha which became a symbol of Elijah’s authority now resting with his former assistant (2 Kings 2:11-14). As Jesus handed authority over to His disciples He incorporated several symbols and worship related moments and rituals. One might take note of the washing of the disciples’ feet as a lead into a command to follow His example of service and then a new command, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:1-17, 34) Jesus offered a prayer for His disciples as well as for the church which would be established (John 17:6-26). In the upper room following His resurrection Jesus commissions the disciples and then, in an act that evokes memories of God giving life to the first man (Genesis 2:7), He breathed on them to bestow the Holy Spirit and granted them the authority to forgive or not forgive sins (John 20:21-22). It might also be noted that the Great Commission was given

¹³⁸ Umidi, 20.

in the context of the disciples' worship of Jesus (Matthew 28:17-20).

Douglas Brouwer believes a worship event is helpful even when the transition is a result of conflict. When one of his associate pastors was let go, he adopted a liturgy from the United Church of Christ worship manual. This particular service included acknowledgements of mistakes by staff and congregation, requests and offers of forgiveness, thanksgiving for accomplishments, sharing of memories and recognition of the feelings surrounding the departure. Brouwer remarked that many people, even visitors who were unaware of the difficult circumstances surrounding the departure, were stirred by the care taken in saying goodbye.¹³⁹

Oswald gives several details about what a farewell worship ritual might include such as the handing over of symbols of pastoral authority (e.g. a copy of a Bible, communion vessels, keys to the building, and vestments) to the congregation. The pastor may comment on the significance of each symbol to his/her life and role within the congregation. Once handed over, a suitable representative of the church might say, "We accept these items of pastoral authority from you. We thank you for using them wisely and well while you were our pastor. We will hold them in sacred trust until they can be given to a new pastor who will come to serve us."¹⁴⁰ These same items can be given to the new pastoral leader at his/her installation service. At the end of the ceremony Oswald suggests whoever receives the items should accompany the pastor to the door, the pastor being dressed in street clothes, where the congregation can say their personal farewells to him/her. Oswald concludes,

¹³⁹ Brouwer, 52.

¹⁴⁰ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 97.

Greeting members of the congregation at the door in street clothes symbolizes the fact that the pastor has given up all pastoral authority in this congregation and now is simply a friend. This ceremony helps people realize they should not ask their former pastor to return to conduct a baptism, wedding or funeral. The pastoral relationship is over. A new pastor will have the authority for such rites in the future.¹⁴¹

Summary

Congregations begin to grieve when they learn of their pastor's resignation. This presents the departing pastor with the opportunity to function as grief counsellor to his/her own departure. To the extent he/she is able to facilitate anticipatory grief, he/she will assist both the congregation and their new pastor focus on developing a new relationship and avoid some of the pitfalls associated with unresolved grief when it extends into the new pastoral relationship.

Determinants of a congregation's grief experience include the role the pastor played within the congregation, the closeness of the relationship between the pastor and people and the manner of the pastor's departure. Notably, when a pastor resigns before accepting a new ministry or without a similarly obvious reason (e.g. retirement) the congregation is more likely to experience feelings of rejection, defeat and/or guilt. Where the pastor is going to a new ministry it is easier for the laity to identify the departure as God's calling.

Other determinants of grief include the history of previous departures, personality variables, and social customs. In regards to the history of previous separations, when previous transitions have been difficult this can predispose but not destine churches to continued poor transitions. If there is to be a different outcome the pastor will need to

¹⁴¹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 97. See Appendix 5 for a suggested Farewell Worship Service.

intentionally work towards it. Personality variables are not always predictable, but an observant pastor will make efforts to acknowledge the variety of emotional responses to his/her resignation.

Worden's "Four Tasks of Mourning" provide a helpful model for the pastor who wishes to facilitate the congregation's grief process. Openness and one's own acceptance of one's departure can assist a congregation to "Accept the Reality of the Loss." Personal contact, visitation, sharing of stories and memories, along with giving a suitable period of time before one's departure will facilitate the myriad of emotions as people "Experience the Pain of Grief." Helping people understand a new type of relationship is beginning will assist the church in "Adjusting to the Absence of the Pastor."

More common than one might expect, allowing the congregation to "Withdraw Emotional Energy and Reinvest it in Another Pastor" is problematic for a number of pastors who are reluctant to let go.¹⁴² The literature suggests a former pastor's inability to emotionally separate from a congregation is the greatest deterrent to a new pastoral relationship. Upon completion of a ministry, pastors should discourage and refuse invitations to function in a pastoral role for such things as wedding and funerals. They also need to refrain from being critical of their successors. The difficulties are even more complex when the pastor remains a part of the congregation. Some suggest a post-departure contract be made, while others suggest the pastor simply make the new nature of his/her relationship with the congregation clear to the church through a farewell letter.

Finally, Farewell Rituals can be meaningful moments and important markers to

¹⁴² As noted above, three of the pastors surveyed reported difficulties with their predecessor, which represents thirty percent of the pastors surveyed.

help bring emotional closure. Farewell gatherings, suppers, roasts, concerts, gifts, and other events give visible and audible reality to the inner processes of transition and grief. Farewell Worship services in particular have an under-estimated potential as important events which can help facilitate closure and encourage both the pastor and the church towards a new future.

Chapter 5 - Final Tasks – Ministries

The Central Issue of Leadership

In most congregations the pastor has a key role in the strength and health of the church's ministry. He/she often holds a disproportionate role in congregational life. Mead notes, "In spite of many theologies and politics that talk about things like 'equality of ministry' and 'the priesthood of all believers,' the pastor is not like other members of the congregation in terms of institutional power and influence. Like the animals and pigs in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, all the animals may be equal, but the pigs are more equal."¹ After a pastor's resignation and departure this role is vacant and the church must learn to function, at least for a while, without consistent pastoral leadership. How well a church functions during this transition period is often a reflection of the departing pastor's ministry.

Among the literature, one pastor measured his success by his ability to work himself out of a job. When the church ministries were in a position where they could function without him, he felt he had succeeded.² A similar sentiment was expressed by one of the pastors interviewed. He made reference to Rick Warren's experience of leaving his church for a period of six months and returning to find it had grown in his absence. The pastor concluded, "It is a good sign if you leave and everything does not collapse. You have done something right." Friedman agrees, stating that the measure of a leader is not just the achievement of a goal or a larger audience, but also by the growth within the

¹ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 10.

² Ulstein, 92.

followers and the lasting endurance of the work.³ Stronger disciples and the legacy of longer lasting ministries are just some of the blessings for those who are willing to give time to developing leaders.⁴

When one pastor was asked what ministries would continue after his departure his response was, “Most everything will continue. We have worked through what works and what does not work and nine tenths of the ministries are strong. We have worked very intentionally in developing the leadership, so I expect nothing will stop.” His response reveals one of the most common elements in each of the churches experiencing a healthy transition - the development of a strong lay-leadership team. In at least five of the churches which experienced a smooth start to the transition process, reference was made to an intentional leadership development program within the previous six months to three years. None of the pastors reported using the same leadership development strategy, but each did something to build up the core leaders in their church. The importance of the effort put into developing these lay leaders cannot be underestimated as one begins to examine the effect a pastor’s departure has on the ministries of a church. Weese and Crabtree label the process of leadership development as “Creating Capacity” and list it second among three wind-down principles and one of most crucial factors in determining how well a congregation functions during the pastoral transition process.⁵ Very simply,

³ Friedman, 249.

⁴ Wallace Erickson, “Transition in Leadership,” in *Leaders on Leadership* ed. George Barna (Ventura: Regal Books, 1997), 304.

⁵ Weese and Crabtree, 23, 160-161, 168.

“leaders who enable followers . . . are creating something that can survive their own departure.”⁶

One can observe the importance placed on mature and trained leadership in biblical leadership transitions. From the start of His ministry Jesus used much of His time to develop the understanding and gifts of His closest disciples. In Mark 3:14, for example, the disciples were appointed not simply to follow Jesus but to be actively involved in major components of the ministry including preaching tours. They were also delegated authority to do such things as cast out demons. They were, to a great extent, appointed to replicate and build on the work of Jesus.⁷ Following the resurrection, the biblical records indicate that Jesus did not preach and minister among the crowds, but invested almost all of His remaining ministry time with those who would have key roles in the new church.⁸

Similarly, as Paul, the pioneer missionary to the Gentiles, sensed his time growing shorter, he worked to build up those who would be ministry leaders after him, and he encouraged them to do the same. As he headed to Jerusalem, which he expected would lead to his arrest and the end of his ministry in Asia (Acts 20:38), he chose to pass by Ephesus and not to meet with the whole church. Instead he invited the elders to come to him in Miletus where he shared with them what he felt they needed to know to continue the work after him (Acts 20:16-35). Again, as Paul gives some final instructions to Timothy his desire is for Timothy to continue to be a mature and faithful leader and that

⁶ Erickson, 304.

⁷ Weese and Crabtree, 23.

⁸ See John 20 and 21 in particular, and note Paul’s list of who saw Jesus after the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8.

the ministry might be entrusted to and continue under quality leaders (2 Timothy 2:1-2), especially in light of the danger posed by false teachers (2 Timothy 2:14-19).⁹

Curtis believes the violation of Paul's principle in 2 Timothy 2:2 causes church ministries to crumble following a pastor's resignation. He believes all Christians, but especially pastors, are called to train others to do the work of the Gospel and help prepare people for leadership roles. He scolds pastors who fail to let the laity lead and take on greater responsibilities because they think lay people will not do the work as well.¹⁰ Where there is a lack of lay-leadership development Weese and Crabtree blame pastors who are uncomfortable letting the laity stand alongside them and share the power¹¹ while Erickson believes leaders fear being challenged by other strong and effective leaders.¹²

Whatever the reason for poorly developed lay leadership, there was evidence it negatively impacted the transitions in the churches surveyed. In each of the four congregations which experienced difficult transitions one or more people noted a lack of mature lay-leadership and a concern that ministries would quickly become dysfunctional or cease during the interim period. In one of the most difficult transitions, one reason the pastor gave for his departure was a lack of leadership within the congregation. He felt there was a "void of leadership," and he was not prepared to stay if those in leadership positions did not feel "empowered to help" him. He did not make reference to any efforts on his part to develop current or new leaders. In a second church experiencing a difficult

⁹ Note also Paul's concern for quality leadership in 1 Timothy 3:1-12 where he lists the qualifications for both overseers and deacons, as well as his emphasis on leaders being focused and committed in his analogies in 2 Timothy 2: 2-7.

¹⁰ Curtis, 142.

¹¹ Weese and Crabtree, 24-25.

¹² Erickson, 304.

transition the pastor again noted the lack of young and healthy leaders. He suggested there was a “total lack of leadership” and noted there were no functioning deacons.¹³ When asked if there was anything he regretted, one of the first things this pastor said was, “I wish I would have built up the leadership more.” Notably, the lay person interviewed in this church was frustrated by what she perceived as the lack of the pastor’s leadership. She made repeated references to seeking the departing pastor’s help and advice on how to proceed in various matters and felt she received little helpful guidance. In a third congregation the lay leader identified one of the pastor’s gifts and weaknesses to be “strong leader”. In regards to weakness, the lay leader felt the pastor’s strong leadership style “intimidated” and discouraged others from taking leadership positions.

The Impact of Leadership on the Transition Period

Weese and Crabtree believe one of the key determinants for the success of any ministry is the quality and quantity of its leaders. Good leaders are needed to create vital ministries. Not surprisingly, vital ministries also tend to produce new leaders. Quality leadership not only impacts the success or failure of a ministry, it is also essential for a healthy pastoral transition process.¹⁴ In considering the quality of the leadership, Weese and Crabtree refer to the capability and the maturity of the ministry. By capability they mean the ability of the ministry to effectively fulfill its purpose or vision. By maturity they mean the ministry’s ability to be responsible for its work instead of delegating it to a

¹³ The two existing deacons were an elderly husband and wife who were both recovering from illness.

¹⁴ John Perkins heatily agrees with this as well. John Perkins, “We’ll All be Replaced Someday,” *Leadership* 18 (Fall 1987) : 72.

few or one person (i.e. the pastor).¹⁵ In measuring the capacity and maturing of ministries, they divide the spectrum into four levels. The needs to be addressed and the strategy a church uses during pastoral leadership transitions should be determined by the congregation's level on the spectrum.¹⁶

Table 5: Leadership Level at Time of Pastor's Departure

Level of Leadership Functioning at Time of Pastor's Departure	Number of Unhealthy Transition Churches	Number of Healthy Transition Churches	Total Number of Churches
Zero (Low Performing)	1		1
One (Person-Driven)	3	2	5
Two (Team Driven)		3	3
Three (Innovation Driven)		1	1

Level Zero Churches (Low or Not Performing)

At Level Zero, churches have low levels of capability and maturity. They do not produce an effective ministry which meets the needs or aspirations of the congregation. Most of the people's energy is given to maintenance issues such as settling conflicts and seeking resources. There is a lack of expertise among any who are involved in the ministry.¹⁷

For Level Zero churches things can not get much worse, so a pastoral transition should be viewed as a benefit and an opportunity to move towards a better future. During the transition period there is little need to expend resources on maintaining ministries beyond worship, and time should be given to grieving lost opportunities and failures as well as to conserving relationships among the members as a base for future

¹⁵ Weese and Crabtree, 160-161.

¹⁶ Weese and Crabtree, 172.

¹⁷ Weese and Crabtree, 162.

effectiveness.¹⁸ During the transition efforts should be made to help the congregation prepare for the changes a new leader will bring. In particular an interim leader should help develop a readiness to be led and taught. Weese and Crabtree suggest these churches do not engage in leadership development at this time as they tend to simply “replicate incompetence.”¹⁹

Weese and Crabtree believe this is the state of most North American Churches,²⁰ but this does not appear to be the case among the congregations surveyed. Only one of the ten congregations surveyed could be considered to be operating at Level Zero. It was one of the churches which experienced a difficult transition. In this particular church the lay person noted neither the Board of Deacons nor the Board of Trustees had met for nine months and even the Annual Congregational meeting had yet to take place. It normally would have been held four months earlier. Among the Board members, it was reported that there was confusion over whose responsibility it was to call a meeting. The lay person concluded, “We have never been so hard up for leadership as we have been this year. There doesn’t seem to be anyone who wants to serve and that has caused some problems.” But even within this congregation there were areas of health. The children’s department of the Sunday School, for example, was growing under a very capable Superintendent. A conversation with the lay leader after the pastor’s departure suggested, as Weese and Crabtree predicted for Level Zero ministries, the church actually began to function better without a pastor. People began new ministry programs, existing ones

¹⁸ Weese and Crabtree, 172-173.

¹⁹ Weese and Crabtree, 162

²⁰ Weese and Crabtree, 178.

found new leadership and the Annual Meeting was finally arranged. Edward White observed that when a pastor leaves often a church discovers talents and gifts which had been forgotten because they had not been used. He concludes, “It is a good time to learn to function as a team rather than with one star.”²¹

Level One Churches (Person Driven)

Level one churches produce an effective ministry primarily as the result of the expertise and efforts of one key person (i.e. most often the pastor). Ministries in these settings are usually personality driven and produce heroes without whom the ministry would fold. Members of the congregation who are involved in the ministries usually are only responding to direction given by the pastor.²²

The emotional and ministry crisis created by a pastor’s resignation is usually felt greatest in Level One churches. Weese and Crabtree believe that in churches with little lay leadership development the loss of a highly effective pastor causes an even greater crisis than the loss of an ineffective pastor. In the first situation (i.e. a Level One church) the people lose not only their counselor, teacher and friend, but also the key to their ministry. Such a complete loss can be devastating. The transitional ministry will be almost exclusively focused on grief work, helping members find closure and conserving relationships within the congregation. Conserving programs is usually very difficult. Intentionally or unintentionally, ministries established by the departing pastor begin to unravel. In the second situation (i.e. a Level Zero church) the grief work is focused on

²¹ White, 89-90. Gillaspie observed that when a pastor leaves congregational members can quickly feel a greater “sense of a personal responsibility for the work of the church and give themselves more fully in service for Christ.” *Empty Pulpit*, 43.

²² Weese and Crabtree, 162.

what could have been, but never was, and there are few if any ministries to fail. While there might be sadness, these churches do not have as much to lose and more to gain.²³

Other opinions uphold Weese and Crabtree's assessment of the impact of a pastor's resignation from a Level One Church. Worden notes where a mourner has had a highly dependant relationship with the deceased there will be a number of manifestations of complicated grief. In particular he notes a sense of weakness accompanying an increasingly poor self-image and an undue sense of helplessness which can become overwhelming.²⁴ Others have noted the same effect in congregations. Dale suggests one should expect a great deal of panic when the church has been highly dependant on the pastor, while churches with mature lay leaders and a stable leadership structure often enter into the transition period with greater confidence for the future.²⁵ Erickson quotes John Gardner's observations that dazzling leaders who fail to build strength within the ministry and create dependency upon themselves leave behind a "weakened organization" and a "weakened people."²⁶

Level One churches usually look to call too quickly a new pastor to fulfill the hero role. Weese and Crabtree suggest they should seriously examine whether they want to remain a person driven ministry or become team based. This decision will significantly impact what gifts the church should look for in a new pastoral leader.²⁷

²³ Weese & Crabtree, 168-169.

²⁴ Worden, 54.

²⁵ Dale, 183.

²⁶ Erickson, 304.

²⁷ Weese and Crabtree, 169 and 173.

Of the ten churches surveyed, five could be considered operating as Level One Churches. In these congregations the pastor played the primary role of leading the key ministries. Of these five churches, three were among those experiencing difficult transitions. For two of these churches, the loss of the pastor and his/her family not only meant the loss of their leader, preacher, Bible Study teacher, pastoral care provider, etc., but also the loss of the key position in their music ministries. Most of the programs conducted by the pastor in these congregations were expected to cease until they were either picked up by an interim pastor or a new pastor. In one of these churches it was the pastor's opinion that any ministry which did continue to function would likely be sub-standard and not adhere to guidelines established by the church. Another lay-leader in a Level One Church was concerned about who would keep the church organized during the interim period. She feared things such as the Sunday School Christmas pageant would not occur without the pastor's presence to ensure plans were made and implemented. She also felt the failure of such an event would be very discouraging to the congregation. Relief was expressed in a follow-up interview when plans for a pageant were noted to be in place.

In one of the Level One churches which did experience a smooth transition the departing pastor's ministries were taken up by an associate pastor until a new pastor was called. The departing pastor had little doubt that most all of the ministries of the church would cease if the associate was not present to ensure their continuity. When asked what would be needed in a new minister the pastor responded, "Someone who will give leadership. They need leaders, but they also need persons of faith. There is very little

dependence on the Lord.” While the transition went smoothly, the congregation essentially remained a pastor driven ministry.

In the second smooth transitioning Level One church there were capable lay leaders who were able to fulfill many of the pastor-led ministries after his departure. The pastor described the focus of his ministry as being devoted to developing the strong leadership core which the church sorely lacked. He said when he arrived at the church, “they expected the pastor to do it all.” So when he was asked how many new people he would bring in he replied, “That’s not my job. I will help **you** do the evangelism. If the pastor does it all the church will not grow.” (Emphasis added.) His program of leadership development included studies on spiritual gifts, teaching and preaching on the basics of discipleship and some of the fundamentals on how to study Scripture. Regarding Scripture in particular he said, “They were in the dark on what the Bible was. They had no background in it.” Beyond teaching, he also sought to discern members’ gifts and then help them explore their gifting. He also identified potential new leaders and sought to help the congregation view them as leaders as he involved them in a ministry or leadership role.²⁸ One of his last suggestions to the congregation was to put people into ministry and leadership roles even before a new pastor came. The church, though operating at Level One for most of the pastor’s ministry, was ready and did move up to a Level Two ministry as it entered the interim period.

²⁸ Weese and Crabtree remind their readers that adult learning strategies require teaching which is didactic and participatory. New knowledge needs an opportunity for application to be truly learned. Otherwise, people tend to quickly revert back to what they have usually done rather than what they have been taught (183).

Level Two Churches (Team Driven)

In contrast to Level One churches whose success is tied the pastor's expertise, Level Two churches produce an effective ministry which is planned and coordinated by a team of people who understand how and why the ministry works. There is a high level of both capability and maturity among leaders who are able to do what is necessary to ensure the quality and effectiveness of the church's ministries.²⁹ The grief process in these congregations is usually not as traumatic as Level One churches because the loss is not as great.³⁰ Interim pastoral leadership should be chosen carefully so that the high level of team functioning is maintained. Weese and Crabtree fear interim leaders who operate at a Level One understanding of ministry will damage Level Two churches as they consciously or unconsciously undermine the leadership processes. An interim leader may reason that by dismantling existing leadership processes the new pastor can begin with a clean slate, but as the church slips backwards it actually "sets up the next pastor to fail."³¹

Three of the ten churches surveyed appeared to be operating as Level Two churches. In these congregations the pastor's role was primarily preacher and leader while many of the ministries of each church, including youth programs, small groups, men's and women's groups and so forth, were lead by lay leaders; some by individuals

²⁹ Weese and Crabtree, 163-164.

³⁰ Weese and Crabtree, 173.

³¹ Weese and Crabtree relate the experience of Glendon Community Church where an interim pastor assumed the success and structure of the ministry was a result of the departing pastor's gifts and style. He worked to dismantle the existing leadership structure in preparation for new pastoral leadership. Rather than a well functioning ministry the new pastor "inherited a frustrated and disempowered set of leaders who were thrust back into the role of dependency that they had moved past years before." Weese and Crabtree, 169-172.

and some by teams. In these congregations few concerns were expressed about maintaining the ministries of the church during the transition period.

Remarking about the continuing ministry of the congregation, the lay leader in one of the Level Two churches believed all the ministries of the church would not only continue, they would continue to function very well. He expected the Leadership Board would continue meeting regularly and was more than capable of ensuring the continued healthy functioning of the church. The only thing he felt the church needed was someone to lead the services. He stated, “We don’t need the pastor to set stuff up. We have the leadership in place to move the church. We only need an interim advisor or helper; a catalyst in the background to lend assistance.”³² This particular church had gone through a leadership crisis three years earlier when the entire Board of Deacons and many on the Board of Trustees resigned. The church reorganized its leadership structure and united the functions of both Boards into a single new Interim Leadership Board. They found it easier to recruit new leaders to an interim Board that did not bear the stigma of the name “Deacon” or “Trustee.” Thereafter the pastor began ongoing leadership training and visioning initiatives. Indeed, for this pastor one of the most important final tasks was completing the latest ten week leadership training course.

Weese and Crabtree believe mature leaders will not only have leadership skills but also understand the nature and particular purpose of a ministry.³³ This was certainly evident in one church. While interviewing the pastor, the congregation’s Mission

³² This particular church had supply preachers in place for the first four weeks after their pastor’s departure, which was to be followed by a one year interim pastor.

³³ Weese and Crabtree, 163.

Statement was observed hanging on the wall. The success of the pastor's initiatives in leadership training and uniting the church in a mission became evident during the initial in-home interview with the lay person. When asked early in the conversation how healthy the church was, he responded, "I think we are very healthy and we are going in the right direction. We have a united focus and are . . ." and, without actually referencing it as such, he quoted the church's Mission Statement verbatim. The mission of the congregation was so natural a part of this person's understanding of the church it had become a natural part of the description and evaluation of the congregation.

In another Level Two congregation the only ministry the lay leader was concerned might not function well was the Vacation Bible School program. He felt that the several small group studies, the men's group, children/youth programs and the Sunday School were all sufficiently healthy and had more than adequate leadership to continue effectively during the transition period.

The third Level Two pastor was an associate minister who was primarily overseeing the youth ministries. There were six other adult leaders who were a part of the ministry team. Although called to bring leadership to the youth and children's ministries the pastor wanted to fulfil the role of an advisor and to have the leaders who were already there do the ministry. When asked what the final tasks would be, the pastor stated, "To continue the last of the training sessions so what has started will not end." The intention was not only to finish the training, but also to ensure a vision and plan were in place for the year to come, and to designate a chairperson for the planning meetings. This was to "ensure the transition would go smoothly no matter who would be leading," or how long

it would take to call a new associate. One of the six lay leaders was among those interviewed and felt the group of leaders would be able to function quite well until a new associate was in place.

Level Three Churches (Innovation Driven)

Similar to Level Two churches, Level Three churches are effective and team based ministries. Beyond Level Two churches, however, they also have a level of expertise which allows them not only to maintain and run successful ministries, but also to innovate and maximize the impact of their ministries. There is an understanding of their cultural setting, ministry principles and current ministry trends which allows the church to continually improve its effectiveness.³⁴ Transitions in these types of churches tend to need the least amount of grief work, but the greatest amount of attention to conserving the level of ministry functioning. Because the departing pastor takes away very little of the ministry's capacity, there is not as great a sense of loss as at other levels. The grief is centered mostly on the loss of a personal relationship. In these churches the pastor's role has been to ensure the processes of the ministries continue to move forward in concert with the church's vision. The danger during the transition period is an interim pastoral leader may believe the independent and high functioning ministry teams are mavericks and drag the capability level of the ministry back to a lower level.³⁵

Only one congregation surveyed resembled Weese and Crabtree's description of Level Three ministry. In that particular congregation the pastor had little involvement in the week to week leadership of the church programs, although it had not always been that

³⁴ Weese and Crabtree, 164.

³⁵ Weese and Crabtree, 170 and 173-174.

way. The pastor stated, “When I first came I was very hands on, but the leaders have become strong enough now that I no longer have to have hands on the work for it to work.” The pastor described the previous five years in particular as a “patient building time of the leadership.”

Among the lay people interviewed in this Level Three congregation there were expressions of both sadness at the pastor’s departure and happiness that the pastor was moving to a ministry which offered greater challenges. There were no concerns for the current ministry. The lay people interviewed related a high level of confidence in the ability of the current lay leadership, and expectations that the ministry would continue to flourish. One lay person, referring to the Christian Education ministries in particular, noted there were “good, capable young leaders” who would be able to “carry on without too much problem.” Notably, the pastor said his final tasks would be to say goodbye and to ensure the leadership was healthy.

Conserving Ministry Programs

One of Oswald’s regrets from what he assessed as his poor closure from a particular church was spending most of the time in the last weeks trying to “prop up my programs and see that they would continue after I left.”³⁶ A pastor’s departure often brings changes to a church’s ministry programs. Some pastors are known for their gifts and interest in certain ministries (e.g. youth groups, men’s groups, choirs or worship teams). Some members of a church will see the minister’s departure as an opportunity for change and want to call a new pastor who is gifted in a different area. Mead is critical of

³⁶ Roy Oswald, “The Pastor’s Passages: An Interview with Roy Oswald,” interview by Marshall Shelly and Dean Merrill, *Leadership* (Fall, 1983) : 14.

those who become fixated on a potential pastor based solely on his/her strengths for a certain program area without knowing if such a program will even work in their area.³⁷

If attention has been given to leadership development, many of the ministries of a church will not require extra attention in order to weather the transition process well.³⁸ In response to the question, “What ministries will continue?” the ministries listed were almost always led by lay people. For example, as one pastor began to catalog what would continue he was also able to identify who would be leading the group or ministry. The youth group had “someone who really desires to serve.” “The Bible Study would be led by Darrell.” The Sunday School Superintendent had been the pastor’s spouse, but others had been put in place “so it will be fine.” The pastor concluded, “Pretty much everything will continue because they are healthy.” The pastor went on to say, “We have seen more people involved; more ownership as the church takes responsibility for itself. There are more people serving. That was my goal, to enable more people rather than leaving it just to certain people.”

Another pastor concluded, “Anything I did personally will not continue.” This statement is typical of what occurs in most churches if there is not an intentional effort to sustain the affected programs or ministries. Some ministries do not survive a pastoral change, but there can be within a church certain ministries whose survival a congregation feels are too important to the mission of the church to risk losing during a pastoral transition. Weese and Crabtree identify these as “unique mission components” and urge Boards to develop a strategy to maintain them. Unique mission components are specific

³⁷ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 5.

³⁸ Weese and Crabtree, 149.

ministries for which Weese and Crabtree have four criteria: a proven track record (i.e. it is effectively accomplishing the objectives of the church); customized to the local setting (i.e. it has been tailored to fit the local context); close to the core of the Church's vision (i.e. losing it would be a considerable set back to the church's vision for its ministry); and requires significant oversight by the pastor (i.e. it is so big/important it requires the direct involvement of the pastor). Some examples of these types of ministries include: a community revitalization ministry, work within a specific ethnic community, building or renovation programs, oversight of a large ministry staff, and other specialized programs.³⁹

Strategies to maintain crucial ministry programs through a pastoral transition can vary depending on the interim pastoral arrangement.⁴⁰ However a church or the Board chooses to ensure the maintenance of critical ministries it is important that they at least give consideration to what programs they believe are important to keep healthy during the transition. It can be helpful for Boards to assess the capability and maturity level of individual programs by the same standards as outlined for churches as a whole. Is the youth ministry, for example, operating at Level One (pastor driven) or Level Three (innovation driven)? Is the seniors' group ineffective (i.e. Level Zero) or is there an effective team whose members are able to lead the program well (i.e. Level Two)?⁴¹

³⁹ Weese and Crabtree, 146-148. It might be noted there did not appear to be any programs in any of the ten churches which would meet the definition of a "unique ministry component." There are, however, such ministries among other CABC churches and the topic is worthy of discussion.

⁴⁰ Weese and Crabtree's discussion of a transfer of knowledge between pastors is found in the midst of their section on conserving unique ministry components. For purposes of this paper, those ideas will be presented under Future Considerations. See pages 240-241.

⁴¹ Weese and Crabtree, 167.

While a Board should make these considerations as the church enters into a period of leadership transition, even more helpful is for the pastor long before his/her resignation to determine if ministries are surviving because of his/her own efforts or if they are truly owned by the congregation. If the particular ministry is an important part of congregational identity, but only continuing by the sheer will and energy of the pastor, he/she may begin to consider how to build greater capability and maturity within it before his/her resignation. This early and preventive approach would likely result in better continuity of ministries and fewer panicked leaders at the moment of the pastor's resignation.⁴² Speaking about a particular ministry he had begun, and he felt added vitality to the life of the congregation, one pastor regrettably remarked, "It may not continue unless the new pastor sees the benefit of it."

The interim period is usually a time for congregations to reevaluate the church's vision, priorities and ministries. It is a new opportunity to once again "own what the church is about."⁴³ Ultimately what will survive a transition from one pastor to another are ministries which are substantially staffed and valued by the church apart from the pastor. It is ministry programs with leaders who are equipped to ensure their continued vitality which allow churches to enter a transition grieving only the loss of a pastor and not the collapse of the ministry.

Preparing the Leadership for Interim Leading

Even if a church should chose to call an interim pastor, the key leadership Board of a congregation (i.e. usually the Board of Deacons) will normally take a larger role in

⁴² Weese and Crabtree, 180.

⁴³ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 3.

the continued functioning of the church. Often there are an increased number of meetings as they become responsible for many of the pastor's normal duties. If the pastor has been more directive (i.e. Level One) and set the agenda for meetings, been responsible for devotionals and the spiritual care of the members of the Board, then the Board will discover their roles suddenly changing. Depending on the size and experience of the Board members, it may be advisable to divide the responsibilities among smaller cluster groups.⁴⁴

As this process of taking on greater responsibilities begins, the departing pastor can become either a help or a hindrance to the Board. As noted earlier, most writers and ministry authorities agree the outgoing pastor has no role in the choice of a successor. Some suggest the pastor should become more absent from the Board from the start of the transition process so this inappropriate influence is not exerted.⁴⁵ However, outside of this protocol there is still a role for the departing pastor to help prepare the Board to assume the increased responsibilities and demands which usually come in the interim period. This sentiment was expressed by several lay people and at least two pastors. For one pastor maintaining his level of connection with the Board was a matter of trust. His understanding of the history of previous pastoral transitions led him to believe that the congregation expected pastors to pull back and slack off after their resignation. His priority was to continue on as he had been so the church and the leadership would not lose a sense of trustworthiness in pastors. He observed an initial coldness gradually disappear as they realized he was not abandoning them before his ministry was

⁴⁴ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 3, 5-7.

⁴⁵ For example Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 25 and Weese and Crabtree, 50.

completed. A lay person, who was also soon to retire from a teaching position, observed, “I can’t quit doing my job on June first. I have to work to the very last day. So too the pastor needs to work to the end. There are a number of odds and ends to sort out and meetings which should be used to tie up loose ends so everything moves with some semblance of order.”

Commonly, one of the first responsibilities of the Board is organizing the conclusion of the departing pastor’s ministry and appropriate farewell events. In these tasks the pastor will greatly assist the Board by being open about his final priorities and activities as well as by providing clarity in regards to timing. As has already been noted,⁴⁶ regardless of a pastor’s personal feelings about farewell gatherings and gifts they play an important role for the church in transition. An inappropriate response or discouragement by the pastor can dishearten a Board from the start.⁴⁷

If it has not been done beforehand, it is usually the Board which develops an interim/transition plan and then implements it following the pastor’s departure.⁴⁸ Some of the common tasks might be: helping to maintain existing ministries; developing new ministries; ensuring financial stability; and arranging for interim pastoral leadership. To this list Mead and Oswald also add the responsibility for maintaining and building congregational morale and focus.⁴⁹ Stating the need to reassure the church that things are under control, Mead comments, “Congregations that lose pastors can get panicky. That

⁴⁶ See the sections on Social Customs and Farewell Rituals in Chapter 4 - Final Tasks - Relationships.

⁴⁷ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 24-25.

⁴⁸ Weese and Crabtree, 32, 50-51.

⁴⁹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 5 and Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 25.

doesn't help anybody."⁵⁰ Oswald suggests the Board be as open with the congregation as discretion will allow. They should share prayer concerns and call upon others to assist in planning and carrying out transition activities.⁵¹

There are often things a pastor knows about a church which the Board does not know. Sharing this knowledge with the Board can be especially important for the interim period. Some of these items are routine and mundane, but could easily become irritants. For example, over the years pastors often take on a number of small tasks which many never know about. One of the helpful things a pastor can do for his/her Board is to make a list of all his/her less obvious tasks. The longer one has served a congregation, the more hidden tasks accumulate. Things such as arranging for the mowing in the spring, shoveling in the winter, unlocking the building for various groups, monthly newsletters, could be overlooked in the transition process. Nygren suggests the pastor make a list of such activities and either seek out someone to cover those tasks or make the Board aware of what responsibilities may need to be delegated to other people. Oswald tells Boards if they do not receive such a list, they should ask for one. The new pastor will benefit from this prior delegating of tasks to others. He/she will begin his/her new ministry with fewer expectations and should be able to concentrate on "real ministry" and start up tasks.⁵² A second benefit observed by Phillips is a Board's increased awareness of the administrative needs and ownership of the ministries as a whole.⁵³

⁵⁰ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 25.

⁵¹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 8.

⁵² Nygren, "Ending a Long Pastorate," 20; Oswald, Heath and Heath, 5.

⁵³ Phillips, 21.

The other more crucial and delicate matters concern a pastor's knowledge of what is going on in people's lives (e.g. those who are sick, bereaved, or dealing with a crisis) and the planning of special and seasonal events and activities (e.g. Christmas, Easter, special guests, community events). How much the Board will be involved in these things will depend on the level interim pastoral leadership is arranged. A full-time interim pastor may fill most of the departing pastor's roles, whereas a Sunday supply preacher means lay people should be called upon to offer pastoral care and plan for church events.⁵⁴

In the final weeks of ministry several pastors reported trying to tie up administrative tasks. One pastor filled out several reports for both the church and outside agencies. He said they were much shorter than usual but they were completed. Another pastor spent time introducing those who would be covering some of his tasks to those who would be affected by the changes. Still another pastor was arranging mentors and study materials as follow-up for several people who were newly baptized. He also ensured that the small group leaders had materials ready for the next series of studies.

By way of contrast to pastors who were trying to ensure the administrative tasks were up to date, two lay persons in other congregations expressed concerns that these things were not being attended to adequately. A treasurer was worried about the state of the church office and complained, "I don't know what supplies we need or what the pastor has ordered. We didn't have a bulletin for two weeks because we ran out of toner." The treasurer hoped the pastor would leave the office straightened and organized. Another lay person was anxious about pastoral care issues. She said, "Everyone used to

⁵⁴ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 6.

look to the pastor.” When asked who would people go to for care and support after the pastor’s departure she named a deacon who lived near the church as the likely candidate. Friedman believes the more thoroughly a pastor deals with these types of administrative details the better he/she is able to foster a clean break.⁵⁵

Developing clarity in the relationship between the Board(s) and the Search Committee is another critical issue. In half of the churches surveyed the entire Board of Deacons made up at least part if not the whole of the Search Committee. Surprisingly, five churches had no formal guidelines for the formation of a Search Committee. In one of these churches the custom was for the deacons to invite two or three others to be on the Search Committee with them. Their choices were presented to the congregation, but the congregation did not vote on the make up of the committee. Regardless of how the committee is formed, Mead urges governing Boards and Search Committees establish good lines of communication and in particular Boards ensure that the Search Committee has all the resources needed to complete its task. These resources would include such things as a budget, an understanding of the expected method of finding and presenting a potential candidate (e.g. a committee job description), clear guidelines on what they are empowered to negotiate (e.g. a pastoral job description and salary package), and a willingness on the part of the Board to offer assistance when asked.⁵⁶

One of the most used resources by Search Committees is the Regional Ministers. Most, though not all, of the Search Committees which were formed before the pastor’s departure reported having met with the Regional Minister at least once. Mead suggests

⁵⁵ Friedman, 184.

⁵⁶ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 22 and 28; Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 29-30 and 74-75.

that the denominational officials should be the first call the Board makes after a pastor resigns, stating that they have the experience which can answer many of the Committee's initial questions.⁵⁷ In six of eight churches which contacted their Regional Minister, the Board member obtained the contact information from the pastor. Generally pastor's encouraged the Board to make this contact, although one pastor did report encouraging the Board not to rely too heavily on the Regional Minister because his knowledge of the church would not be as good as the Board's.

The positive effects of a well functioning Board during the interim process should not be underestimated. Oswald writes that the benefits will include such things as: an encouraged and strengthened congregation; attractiveness to potential candidates, and the congregation's rediscovery of its own identity and faith apart from a pastor.⁵⁸ To this end, one of final gifts a pastor can give to a congregation is a strong governing Board. Oswald suggests that three key ingredients will help a Board function well: trust, spiritual grounding, and an understanding of the process. In regards to trust, he suggests time be given to team building activities which allow members to get to know one another better and offer an opportunity for members to feel cared for by one another, "Cared for enough to be willing to listen to others' concerns."⁵⁹ Raising the trust level among the members of the Board not only allows them greater freedom to share openly, but also to be more creative in seeking solutions to issues which will arise.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 73-74.

⁵⁸ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 8.

⁵⁹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 3.

⁶⁰ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 4.

In regards to spiritual grounding, he suggests that the pastor encourage them always to begin with some type of devotion which will help to keep their attention God centered in the midst of very busy schedules. “This is an activity that should never be overlooked.”⁶¹ He also notes the Board will function without its normal chaplain (i.e. the pastor). Because the transition period places a heavy load on the Board, they should either arrange for another person (e.g. an interim pastor) or someone within the Board who will intentionally provide pastoral care to the members of the Board.⁶²

In regards to understanding the process, Oswald suggests a Board become aware of the typical dynamics of transition periods and be encouraged to take time at each meeting to reflect on how the process is proceeding and what if anything may need to be addressed.⁶³ Finzel believes a strong Board is essential to a smooth transition process and needs to set the example for the congregation stating that people follow the Board’s lead. In particular he suggests the Board should be the first group of people to express and show their support for the new pastoral leader.⁶⁴ Coincidentally, when asked what should be the primary tasks of the pastor for the rest of his time in the church, one lay person suggested that the pastor should communicate the need to show support to a new pastor and describe how one might do this.

⁶¹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 3. Ketcham also highlights the importance of including worship as part of meetings. It is a recognition of their dependence on the Holy Spirit and she feels, “worshipping together takes off some of the burden.” Ketcham, 12.

⁶² Oswald, Heath and Heath, 7.

⁶³ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 4.

⁶⁴ Finzel, 176-177.

Leadership Changes

One other common leadership dynamic is worthy of notation. Several different writers suggest it is normal for there to be a number of shifts in leadership and leadership dynamics in the wake of a pastor's resignation.⁶⁵ Some who have been inactive become active, while some who have been active step away from their roles.⁶⁶ One suggested reason for this phenomenon is that people who have worked closely with the pastor no longer feel they will be letting the pastor down if they reduce their level of involvement. Conversely, some people who felt their gifts were not needed now see an opportunity to serve in helpful ways. This apparent shift in leadership can be disconcerting for a departing pastor, but it should not be surprising.⁶⁷

Mead believes leadership changes during the time of transition are not only normal, but should be encouraged. He suggests after a period of time a pastor will tend to draw a group of leaders who have been particularly drawn to his/her leadership style and methods. As he/she leaves, the input and help of more and more lay people will be needed and those who have leadership gifts which have been under-utilized begin to surface.⁶⁸ According to Mead, the other benefit in this leadership shift is the opportunity for newer people to give shape to a new vision for the congregation. If "the old guard"

⁶⁵ Dale, 178-179; Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 10; Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 14; Oswald, Heath and Heath, 76 and 83; Mead, *Critical Moment*, 45; Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 55-57; Laird, 35; Phillips, 22.

⁶⁶ Dale, 178-179; Oswald, *New Beginnings*, 10.

⁶⁷ Phillips, 22; Laird, 35.

⁶⁸ Mead, *Change of Pastors*, 55-57.

continues to hold on to all the leadership positions, the congregation can become dedicated to past, and irrelevant to the future.⁶⁹

In contrast to Mead's views, leadership changes during the transitions were most often reported in churches enduring difficult transition processes. Three of the pastors from churches facing difficult transitions made references to observing changes in leadership. One regarded the changes as a positive sign. In that congregation the pastor noted the rise of younger leaders within the church, as many of the former leaders grew too elderly to continue. In an effort to head off what he saw as the rise of a "power element who wanted to see things done their way," another pastor nominated two new deacons to rotate on to the Board shortly before he finished. In the other congregation, the pastor observed those who had been his opponents were becoming more vocal at congregational meetings and more visible at other church functions. They did not yet hold any leadership positions, but he attributed an increase in church offerings to their return to the church following his resignation. The changes observed in these congregation fit well with Oswald's observations that people who have felt disenfranchised during a pastor's tenure may seek an opportunity to become more active in congregational decision making processes.⁷⁰

Summary

The continued vitality of a church's ministries during an interim period will depend largely upon the level of leadership which remains within the congregation. Pastors who are concerned that the ministry does not fall apart following their departure

⁶⁹ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 45

⁷⁰ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 83

should give time to developing the lay leadership even before their resignation. Among the churches surveyed, one of the most common factors observed in smooth transitioning churches was intentional leadership development initiatives.⁷¹ Where there was a lack of capable lay leaders, ministries were expected to cease or be severely hindered.

Weese and Crabtree's model of Leadership Capability and Maturity illustrates the impact of leadership development on a church's transition process. Level Zero (Low Performing) churches lack the leadership capability and maturity to produce effective ministries. Churches at this level sometimes begin to function better after the pastor leaves as lay leaders who have been frustrated by the pastor's lack of leadership begin to assume new roles. Ministries in Level One (Person Driven) churches are usually dependant upon the strengths and leadership of the pastor. The departure of a pastor from this level of church is typically the most emotionally devastating as the congregation loses both the pastoral relationship and the key to its most effective ministries. Frequently these types of churches look too quickly to replace the pastor. All four of the churches which experienced difficult transitions were operating at either Level Zero or Level One.

Level Two (Team Driven) churches have teams of lay leaders who are capable and mature enough to maintain the ministries. In these congregations the pastor usually functioned as the preacher and the leader of leaders. There are usually few concerns about the survival of ministries and a high degree of confidence about the future. Level Three (Innovation Driven) churches have lay leaders in place who not only maintain but also create and innovate ministries. Grief in these churches is almost solely for the lost

⁷¹ Leadership development programs were reported in five of six smooth transitioning churches.

relationship. Weese and Crabtree's primary concern for the interim period in these churches is for care to be taken to ensure interim ministry plans do not undermine a very capable, mature and functional leadership structure.

Among many congregations there will be unique ministries which, despite having been highly dependant upon the pastor, are so important to a congregation's particular mission that the church will want to make an extra effort to maintain them. The pastor should endeavor to help the Board develop a transition or interim plan specifically for these ministries.

During interim periods it is common for the responsibilities of a church's main governing Board to multiply. A pastor can assist the Board's preparation for a larger role by sharing information about his/her ministry and in particular listing the unique tasks that have been a part of the pastor's duties as well as noting concerns about particular needs (e.g. people experiencing illness, bereavement or personal crisis) and activities (e.g. plans for Christmas or Easter, community events). The pastor will also greatly assist the Board by ensuring administrative tasks are up-to-date, being clear about his/her completion date and not frustrating plans to offer a suitable farewell. As the Board begins to look to the interim period the pastor can encourage the appropriate leaders to make contact with the Regional Minister who should be helpful in the process of searching for a new pastoral leader.

Chapter 6 - Final Tasks – Future Considerations

The Goal is a New Pastor

Every minister should be conscious of the fact the church he/she serves is not his/her church. Pastors are entrusted with leadership for a time and ministry is conducted under the Lordship of Christ. Each minister also serves in relationship to a predecessor and a successor.¹ Paul recognized this continuum when he wrote to the Corinthians, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers, you are God’s field, God’s building.” (1 Corinthians 3:6-9 NIV)

Paul emphasized this continuum of leadership again in his charge to Timothy to build up leaders who would themselves mentor new leaders (2 Timothy 2:2). He had placed Timothy in Ephesus in particular to combat a number of false teachers (1 Timothy 1:3), but he also recognized Timothy’s role was not permanent (2 Timothy 4:9-13). The church would need new leadership. Implied within the command to train leaders who would themselves develop new leaders, is a recognition that even Timothy’s successor would have successors. Quoting his predecessor, Finzel remarked, “Success without a successor is a failure.”²

¹ Bryant M. Kirkland, “The Art of Ministerial Succession,” *Pastoral Psychology* 19 (December 1968) : 16.

² Finzel, 160.

Upon entering a congregation the temptation for a pastor is to ignore those who have come before. Mead laments, “too many pastors enter a parish with the unspoken assumption that ‘these poor folks never had any ministry around here until I arrived.’”³ Bonnell would have pastors remember that no one’s success comes unassisted. “We are all debtors to those who have preceded us.”⁴ Jesus told His own disciples, “I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.” (John 4:37-38 NIV)

As the pastor leaves a congregation the temptation is to forget the congregation will go on without him/her. Dale calls this the sin of destiny. “We think we are at the center of history . . . and forget there is an eternal plan and Christ is at the center.”⁵ As our predecessors shaped the congregation we entered into, so our own ministry will shape the congregation our successors receive.⁶ Perhaps congregations who observe ministers come and go understand this principle better than pastors. One layman commented, “Each pastor has been one in a line of pastors and each one has been completely different.” Another layman speaking about the departing pastor observed, “God sent him here for us to grow and now we will continue. The important thing is we are united in Christ.” Still another lay person who recognized the continuum of leadership remarked that each successive pastor moved the church “further along.”

³ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 42.

⁴ Bonnell, “Pastoral Relationship,” 5.

⁵ Dale, 170.

⁶ Dale, 176.

There are three phases in a pastoral leadership transition: the departure of the leaving pastor, the search and calling of a new pastoral leader, and the start up period for a new pastor.⁷ Macolm Nygren certainly understood his departure was not the end of his congregation's transition. It was as important to him to prepare the church for its future as it was for him to be prepared for his own future.⁸ It is important for departing pastor to recognize the church's goal is not simply his/her exit. The goal is a healthy transition to a new pastoral leader.

Preparing for Change

The transition from one pastor to another is regarded by many as a time ripe for change. It is almost inevitable that a change in pastoral leadership will produce changes in the ministry of a church.⁹ Mead observed, "In people's memories, times of changing pastors reminds them of the times when 'everything' changed. . . . As people look back at their congregation's story, it was when the pastor left and another came that one kind of story ended and another began."¹⁰ The departure of a pastor will create, for example, changes in relationship patterns which will in turn lead to other changes.¹¹ The issue is not about whether there will be change, but whether the change will lead "toward health or toward dysfunction."¹²

⁷ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 9.

⁸ Nygren, "Ending a Long Pastorate," 19.

⁹ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 2; Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, x.

¹⁰ Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, x.

¹¹ See the discussion on the theory of the pastor as the orienting center pages 125-126.

¹² Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, x.

Friedman believes resistance to change is often not a reaction to the actual change, but rather a reaction to a perceived threat to existing and often entrenched relationship patterns.¹³ Similarly, Mead invokes Lewin's theory of institutional equilibrium to describe a pastor's departure as a period when the iceberg which frustrates change becomes unfrozen. Most people assume a pastor's departure will bring changes to a church's ministries. This assumption can promote opportunities for change as members of a congregation feel a little freer to question the status quo without a sense of violating congregational norms.¹⁴

Gary, a resigning pastor, expressed a hope that his departure would inspire change within the congregation. When asked what he thought the church needed for the future, he replied, "A chance to change those who are set in their ways." However, Gary had not brought change to the congregation for some time. Sensing for over a year that God was calling him elsewhere, he made an intentional decision not to introduce any new initiatives within the last year of his ministry. He did not want a new pastor to be hindered by things which might be considered holdovers from his ministry.

By way of contrast, Nygren intentionally introduced changes during his final year of service in an effort to free his successor from his legacy. He recognized that after a long period of service many of the things in his ministry had become hardened habits which could easily frustrate the future for both his successor and the congregation. He feared something similar to the famous phrase, "We haven't done it that way before."

¹³ Friedman, 270.

¹⁴ Lewin's three steps to institutional change are: 1. The frozen equilibrium has to be unfrozen. 2. The desired change has to be installed. 3. The organism/organization then has to be refrozen with the change in place. Mead's study group seeking to break a congregational impasse concluded the "Every congregation gets unfrozen when its pastor leaves." Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 81-83. Quote from 82.

Mead labels these issues as hidden “land mines” for new pastors.¹⁵ To help prepare his congregation for change, Nygren began to change things like the order of service, meeting times, which version of the Bible he used, office hours, etc. The changes were not attempts to improve any procedures, nor were any of them intended to create new long-term programs. Rather, the intention was to tangibly demonstrate that things could be done differently. “The changes weren’t important; their acceptance, however, was.”¹⁶ Acceptance of change did not appear to come to Gary’s former congregation. An informal conversation with his successor revealed the church was still as resistant to change as it was under his ministry.

Congregations are not alone in their aversion to change. Unlike Nygren, many pastors also dislike changes to their ministry or what they view as the legacy of their ministry. Bubna observed that as churches begin to change styles, formats and programs departed pastors feel like their ideas have been rejected. He urges pastors to keep their egos in check and refrain from comments or criticism of the changes which come under their successors.¹⁷

Preaching for the Future

For many pastors the Sunday sermon is the most regular opportunity to speak with the congregation. Dale believes this makes the themes, content and disposition a vital tool in helping people respond to the transition process.¹⁸ In contrast to some of the

¹⁵ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 6. Mead believes these “landmines” include things such as worship routines, fixed leadership styles, and well-established communication patterns.

¹⁶ Nygren, “Wrapping Up,” 124; see also Nygren, “Ending a Long Pastorate,” 19-20.

¹⁷ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 9.

¹⁸ Dale, 184.

pastors who experienced difficult transitions and who gave less time and thought to sermon preparation,¹⁹ Satterlee argues that congregations need our best preaching as they face transition. Ironically, more time is needed to prepare just as the many tasks of closure make less time available. In spite of the time restraints, he urges pastors to give preaching the time and energy it deserves, to not abandon the sound method of study and preparation one expects of good preachers, and to use all of their gifts and skills to present purposeful and meaningful messages.²⁰

As noted in Chapter Four, preaching during the transition offers a pastor an opportunity to give voice to some of the emotions and grief associated with the loss of a pastor.²¹ There should also be opportunity during the departure period to identify the congregation's transition with biblical images and narratives of transition periods such as Israel's journey through the wilderness and then into the Promised Land, Joshua's final words to Israel at the end of the conquest, Paul's journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, and numerous others. This enables one to connect the congregation's transition to God's ongoing work and helps the congregation hear God's Word speaking to them in the midst of change.²²

In the later days of Jesus' ministry with the disciples there was a tendency in His messages to look beyond His own ministry to what would follow not only His death and resurrection, but also the ascension. In sharing His view of the future He consistently

¹⁹ See pages 58-59.

²⁰ Satterlee, 44-47 and 50-51.

²¹ See pages 154-155.

²² Satterlee, 14-15, 23

envisioned a ministry greater than His own through the work of the disciples. Notably Jesus said to the twelve, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in Me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” (John 14:12 NIV) Later, in the same farewell address, Jesus acknowledges their grief, but also envisions the coming of the Holy Spirit whose work will help the disciples expand the ministry beyond anything they have seen so far (John 16:6-15).²³ For Weese and Crabtree these are statements which “envision abundance” for the future and a model for the message pastors need to communicate to their congregations as they leave. Regardless of the current state of the church, a positive vision for the future should be clearly articulated.²⁴

One observes a similar pattern in the final messages of Moses to Israel. Much of Deuteronomy is a recap of the Hebrew history from the exodus to the arrival at the Promised Land, but near the end of the discourses Moses envisions a brighter future even without his leadership. Deuteronomy 33, for example, is a list of blessings for each of the Hebrew tribes. In Deuteronomy 31 Moses speaks about the immediate future and the conquest of the Promised Land. He told the people God would go before them and assured them of a God-given victory. With that vision of the future, he urged them to be strong and courageous. God will not forsake them. What is noteworthy is how Moses anchored a positive vision of the future in a recollection of past victories. “And the Lord will do to them (*i.e. the nations occupying the Promised Land*) what He did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, whom He destroyed along with their land.” (Deuteronomy

²³ Syreeni, 190.

²⁴ Weese and Crabtree, 22-23.

31:4) Just as Jesus assured the disciples the examples they had seen in His ministry would be models for even greater ministry in the future, so Moses assured the people that the God who had secured past victories would assure even greater future victories. Notably, this is also the theme which Joshua emphasized as the people moved ahead into the Promised Land (e.g. Joshua 3:9-11).²⁵

Most of the pastors who preached regularly reported giving one or more messages which focused on the future. None would have characterized their messages as negative visions for the future, but in churches where there was a difficult transition the messages were not necessarily positive. A pastor noted in Chapter One is one example. His last sermon on the Rich Man and Lazerus was intended to convey the message that the “rich guy doesn’t have it all.” The pastor described the focus of other messages during his final weeks as an attempt to tell the people, “You know what you need to do.” These themes are not expressly negative, but neither are they optimistically positive. Another pastor preaching in the midst of difficult transition did a series of the best of old sermons. He reported the themes of most of these messages focused on passion and commitment. When the lay person in this church was asked what the content of the final sermon was, she reported the pastor told them, “If we stayed together God would protect us.” The common vision in both of these sets of messages is a view of the church as a surviving community. One does not gain, however, an expectant vision of a thriving community.

Bubna remarked, “I’ve found people respond positively if I’m positive. . . . If, however, I want my departure to broadcast my disappointments, I can easily sour

²⁵ Pamela Durso, “Living in the Interim Time: Lessons to be Learned from Joshua 1-4,” *Review & Expositor*. 100 no. 2 (2003) : 263.

others.”²⁶ This observation might be illustrated in a comparison of the experiences of two of the churches. In a difficult transition church the pastor’s final sermon was based on Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. According to the pastor, previous messages were on the theme of reaching out to the community. The lay person interviewed in this church made reference to a sermon on the Good Samaritan which he said emphasized their obligation to do more to help their neighbors. He summarized the message as the pastor telling a weary church they were not doing enough. He said, “People are working hard, and have families and are then stressed because they are made to feel they are continually coming up short.”

In another congregation the pastor’s final two months of sermons were also focused on evangelistic themes. The second to last message was based on 2 Timothy 1:6-14. After introducing 2 Timothy as Paul’s personal letter to a beloved son in the faith, the pastor emphasized the giftedness and the Spirit of power God had given them. While still a message on outreach, the pastor chose to focus on the power of God working through the people. This pastor’s final sermon was from Jeremiah 29:11, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”(NIV) Along with the evangelistic theme, it was important to this pastor to emphasize God’s plan and good purpose for that church. The congregation appeared to respond positively to these messages. The pastor reported one lady saying, “You’re getting to be a better preacher and it is just not fair you are leaving

²⁶ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 121.

now.” Similarly, the layman interviewed noted how “much deeper and better presented” the pastor’s preaching became in the final six months.

Nygren spent a great deal of time planning out the themes for his final nine months of messages. He reflected on what he felt would be important for his congregation to remember when he was no longer there. He settled on three overall themes. The first was things which could help his people deepen and sustain their faith. The second was relationships. The third was the transcendent dimension of Christianity. “I wanted to communicate the bigger picture of Christianity, helping my people embrace eternity, where all the stories of those who love God have a happy ending.”²⁷

Bryant Kirkland held up his predecessor, Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell, as a model for departing pastors who want to prepare their congregations for the future. He observed Bonnell’s final messages prepared the congregation by,

. . . holding the pastorate of this city in high esteem and affection before God and the people. He exalted it. He never depreciated it. He encouraged the congregation. He never repudiated them. He enlarged the visions of opportunity here. He never minimized the dangers and the pressures of congregational existence in Manhattan. As a result he left a heritage of a healthy-minded congregation who were prepared to seek the mind of God in the present generation and to fulfill His mission as best they could.²⁸

One of the pastors interviewed in a smooth transitioning church described his experience in that church as a “trial by fire.” The messages in his final months focused on discipleship, spiritual formation and building one’s relationship with God. The final sermon became a reflection on the growth the pastor had observed in the people and the church and his joy at seeing their growth. The pastor observed, “I wanted them to see

²⁷ Nygren, “Wrapping Up a Long Pastorate,” 124.

²⁸ Kirkland, 17.

they have grown in their spiritual walk. When I first resigned their attitude was that they would have to start all over, but now (after highlighting the growth that had occurred) they realize they do not have to start all over.”

Similarly, it was very important to the pastor of another smooth transitioning congregation to emphasize in his final messages the growth and strength present within the church. His final months of messages focused on the qualities of a healthy congregation. His intent was to point out the areas of health and to help the people catch a vision of themselves as a healthy congregation. “I told them they were on the cutting edge. They were doing it and doing it well. They appreciated the compliment. It has been exciting to point to the church and the tools they have and remind them about who they really are.” His final message was on seeking and knowing God’s will. “I wanted to be positive. I wanted to point to the Lord and help them accept this as a part of the reality of God’s timing.”

While there are opportunities to share one’s personal experiences with a congregation, final messages should not become final opportunities to “dump on” one’s church.²⁹ Rather a congregation needs to know the loss of a pastor is not a disaster. It is instead a moment filled with new possibilities and a new future.³⁰ For those who trust in the sovereignty of God and believe He is living and active there is assurance that God is working towards a better future.³¹ Perhaps one of best illustrations for an optimistic view of the future came in an Edward White’s sermon when he compared the loss of pastor to

²⁹ Oswald, “The Pastor’s Passages,” 14.

³⁰ Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 84.

³¹ Satterlee, 15.

the Easter experience, “The end of one pastorate and the beginning of another is an experience of death and resurrection . . . and the promise of a new life.”³²

The Immediate Future - Preparing for the Interim Period

Donald Bubna observed, “The real test of the effectiveness of my ministry would come in the interim between my leaving and the arrival of a new senior pastor.”³³ One of the essential issues for a pastor to consider is the immediate future of the church following his/her departure. Is the church prepared for a time without a settled pastor?³⁴ Even Dale, who believes the resigned pastor is a lame duck, urges pastoral leaders to help their churches create guidelines for the interim period which will provide some sense of stability.³⁵

Interim Period Tasks

William Avery lists five tasks of the interim period as promoted by the Interim Ministry Network:

1. Come to terms with history.
2. Discovering a new identity.
3. Fostering leadership changes during the interim.
4. Renewing denominational linkages.
5. Committing to new directions in ministry.³⁶

³² Edward White, “What to Do Until the New Preacher Comes: A Sermon for the Transition Time in the Life of a Congregation,” in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, ed. Edward White (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 93.

³³ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 120.

³⁴ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 123.

³⁵ Dale, 184.

³⁶ Avery, 143. This list is almost identical to Mead’s categories in *Critical Moment* (39-60) which are themselves listed by Oswald in *Beginning Ministry Together* (75). The list in Oswald’s work reads: 1. Come to terms with your history; 2. Become clear about your identity; 3. Allow shifts in leadership to occur; 4. Rethink the linkages to your denomination and its structures; 5. Make a commitment to new leadership and a new future.

Other writers give similar lists of tasks for churches to engage in during the interim period. Dale, for example, describes the interim as a time to clarify the church's identity and vision,³⁷ while White considers the transition to be a time for a congregation to gain a "fresh appreciation of its past and a new sense of possibility about the future."³⁸ Phillips believes the interim period provides a church one of its few opportunities to understand itself apart from the influence of a pastor. He advocates churches embark in a self-evaluation which includes exploring their history, priorities, theology, and a complete analysis of their context (i.e. the community to which they seek to witness) before they begin the pastoral search process.³⁹ The wise use of time in the interim period can provide a solid foundation for a new pastor and for the health of the church for the years which follow. Unfortunately not every congregation gives careful thought to how to use the interim period productively.⁴⁰

Several lay people who were serving on Search Committees made reference to surveys and evaluation tools provided by their Regional Minister. While forcefully arguing that congregations need to engage in a process of reflection and self-evaluation, Mead is also critical of standard sets of evaluations and procedures provided by denominational personnel. His concern is that congregations confuse completing a procedure (e.g. a survey) with engaging a process. He believes simply completing the

³⁷ Dale, 172.

³⁸ White, 111.

³⁹ Phillips, 38-39 and 41-43.

⁴⁰ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 77.

steps does not guarantee the Board or Search Committee has meaningfully understood or processed the results of the procedure.

A set of procedures does not insure that the process the procedures were invented to get at will be dealt with at all. I have put it another way elsewhere: a procedure is the fossil of a process!

The characteristic of dependence on procedures is that one follows the steps carefully, but does not connect the steps to each other or look to the underlying reasons why the step is important. In pastoral placement procedures, this means dutifully doing everything the bishop, executive or deployment officer says to do, then saying, “Now that we’ve done all those things, isn’t it time for us to call somebody?” The study of the community and congregation is not seen as relating to what kind of program and leadership might be needed. It is seen as some kind of hoop the bishop makes the people jump through before a list of names is approved and made available.⁴¹

In four congregations lay people made reference to having to complete a congregational survey and return the results to the Regional Minister as a prerequisite to obtaining a list of possible candidates. The impression communicated during the interviews was that the surveys were a required procedure before calling a new pastor. The lay people felt this tool provided some interesting information about the congregation, but there appeared to be a lack of discernment about the implications of the survey results. For example, the chair of one Search Committee which nominated a pastoral candidate during the interview period, noted that the candidate was almost the exact opposite of the profile which had been developed from the congregational survey. A similar lack of understanding about the importance of developing a congregational identity and how usefully to interpret the results of the survey was observed in the other three churches. Notably, three of the four churches planned to function with supply

⁴¹ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 14-15.

speakers because they expected to call a new pastor quickly. However, interim period tasks such as self-evaluation and developing meaningful priorities are not usually quick processes.⁴²

Among the literature there is general agreement that churches need a reasonable period of time to work through the various processes which should be part of an interim period. Friedman, for example, urges congregations and the denominational leaders who advise them to set aside at least a year to pass through the transition period.⁴³ Oswald encourages a slower and more introspective interim period which gives a congregation time for self-reflection that recognizes any problem, identifies potential growth areas and discerns the characteristics which will be needed in the next pastor. “In short, a longer transition will allow an opportunity for congregational renewal.”⁴⁴ Gillaspie and Ketcham believe that Search Committees cannot make a wise and discerning search for a new pastoral leader without engaging in some of these interim tasks.⁴⁵ Unfortunately the time and energy required to complete these processes are often short changed in churches which rush to fill a vacant pulpit. Reference was made in Chapter Four to one congregation which had a history of notoriously short transition periods. Perhaps no period of transition was shorter than one noted by a departing pastor. Clyde arrived and

⁴² Ketcham urges congregations to use not only surveys, but also “suggestion boxes, conversations with past lay leaders, small group meetings, and personal interviews with key people” to develop a complete and truly reflective congregational self-study document which she also states is essential to developing appropriate criteria for a pastoral search. Obviously this vision of what a self-study should encompass is more in depth and time intensive than can be accomplished in few months. Ketcham, 4.

⁴³ Friedman, 255.

⁴⁴ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 75.

⁴⁵ Gillaspie, *Empty Pulpit*, 34. Ketcham, 3. Gillaspie gives an extensive check list of what should be included in the results of such a self-study (63-65).

began his ministry the Sunday immediately after the final Sunday of his predecessor. The departing pastor had served the church for over a decade and was still moving out of the parsonage even as Clyde was moving in. While others may lead the congregation through a period of reflection, self-evaluation, and envisioning the future direction of the ministry, departing pastors should urge the church leadership to create an interim ministry plan which allows them the time required for these important interim tasks.

Interim Ministry Options

Oswald suggests planning for interim pastoral services should always begin before the pastor leaves. The ministry of an interim pastor, however, should not begin until after the departing pastor has completed his/her work. He identifies three kinds of interim ministry: 1. Supply Ministry (i.e. someone to conduct Sunday worship and other special services and who may also visit the sick and elderly). 2. Simple Interim Ministry (i.e. someone to perform most of the functions of a regular pastor including worship services, pastoral care, and leading Board or Committee meetings, but without initiating significant changes). 3. Intentional Interim Ministry (i.e. someone with special skills or training to help the congregation identify and address particularly difficult issues).⁴⁶

Table

6:

Interim Plans	Number of Churches
Supply Ministry until New Pastor ^a	4
Short Period of Supply (month or less) followed by a Simple Interim	1
Short Period of Supply (month or less) followed by an Intentional Interim	2
Ministries Covered by Associate Pastor	1
Ministries Covered by Lay Leadership ^b	3

⁴⁶ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 20.

Interim Ministry Plans

^a One congregation was planning to use lay leaders as some of their Supply preachers. This church is included in both the “Supply Ministry” and “Ministries Covered by Lay Leadership” lines.

^b The two remaining “Ministries Covered by Lay Leadership” were for departing Associate Pastors. Some of their responsibilities would be covered by lay leaders, some would be covered by the Senior Pastor and some would go undone until a new pastor was in place.

Among the churches surveyed the most common interim plan was supply ministry. In most cases this was not a monetary issue (i.e. Sunday supply would be less expensive), but because the church did not anticipate a long interim period. They expected to call a new pastor within a short period of time. This did not always happen. Of the four churches who relied on supply speakers one had a new pastor within four months of the departing pastor’s final Sunday. Another church called a new pastor after seven months. The remaining two churches relied on supply speakers for over a year. These examples and the general consensus among the literature suggest that churches typically underestimate the time it takes both to adjust to the loss of a pastor and to call a new pastor.⁴⁷

There is understandable desire on the part of congregations to replace their pastor quickly. Many people believe only a new settled pastor can restore stability and normalcy to a congregation.⁴⁸ In one of the churches which planned to use supply speakers, the lay person advocated for a very short interim period to preserve the ministry of the church. The lay person said, “We don’t want to see stuff slow down, which it will if the transition

⁴⁷ William O. Avery, *Revitalizing Congregations: Refocusing and Healing Through Transitions* (Herdon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 2002), 145. The lay person interviewed in one congregation suggested the church did not need to rush to get a new pastor. He believed the process could take as long as “a few months.” It was exactly a year before that particular church called a new pastor.

⁴⁸ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 12.

is too long.” These types of comments reflect a functional and business model of church ministry and do not give enough consideration to the relational aspects of congregational life.⁴⁹

Mead acknowledges the common wisdom is that an interim period is at best a “necessary evil,” but in his opinion the “common wisdom is just dead wrong.”⁵⁰ He also believes the typical haste to call a new pastor is due to fears that the church cannot function properly without a settled pastor. He labels this view as a “clergy-centered understanding of ministry,” and an insult to the lay leaders who are at the heart of most congregations.⁵¹ Contrary to fears the ministry will fall apart, and based on his own observations, he believes the interim time is a strength building period which is full of opportunity. It can be a remarkable time of growth if people choose to use it so.⁵² Weese and Crabtree are in agreement with Mead. They believe a church needs to recognize the strengths and capabilities it possesses and which remain with the congregation independent of the presence of a settled pastor.⁵³

There is general agreement among the literature that an interim pastor is needed after a pastor’s forced departure. The guilt, anger and grief which typically results from having fired a pastoral leader, for example, makes the use of a skilled intentional interim

⁴⁹ Schaller, *Survival Tactics*, 205.

⁵⁰ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 39.

⁵¹ Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 22.

⁵² Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 22; Mead, *Critical Moment*, 39. Mead compares a short interim period to a quick remarriage after being widowed. Just as there are pastors eagerly seeking a job, there are “possible matches out there, but many of the hasty marriages formed at such a time result in plenty of regrets and miserable matches. ‘Marry in haste: repent at leisure’ – the old saying is worth paying attention to.” Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 21.

⁵³ Weese and Crabtree, 139.

imperative.⁵⁴ There are other challenging circumstances which are generally felt to require the use of an intentional interim pastor. These types of situations include: following a long pastoral tenure (i.e. more than ten years); following several short pastoral tenures; a pastor's sudden death or long term illness; churches which face chronic monetary problems; stagnant congregations; multi-staff churches; when a church has split or where there is significant division among the congregants.⁵⁵ In general, evidence shows that the larger the crisis the greater the need to use an intentional interim minister.⁵⁶ Similar opinions about the use of an interim pastor were found among people surveyed. One pastor thought his church would not need to use an interim minister and should quickly seek a new pastor because there were no major issues in the congregation. In one of the most difficult departures, both the lay person and the pastor felt an intentional interim pastor would be required because of the divisions within the congregation.

Mead lists a number of benefits for churches which choose to call an interim minister. These include such things as intervening with a meddling former pastor, shaking up poorly operating churches, helping Boards work with denominational personnel and

⁵⁴ Biddle, 12; Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 70.

⁵⁵ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 75; Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 70-71; Oswald, "The Pastor's Passages," 18.

⁵⁶ Avery, 151.

helping congregations manage relationships.⁵⁷ Regarding relationships, Avery highlights the interim pastor's role in resolving conflicts after a difficult departure, ministering to grief after the loss of a well loved pastor, and providing pastoral encouragement when a transition progresses slowly. He also emphasized the helpful role interims can play in guiding churches through the interim tasks of discovering their identity and setting future goals which will impact their choice of a new pastor.⁵⁸ John Vonhof succinctly points out if a congregation needs ministry to grief, if the leadership wants pastoral guidance, if the church would like people visited, and if there is desire for some consistency in the pulpit, then a church should call an interim pastor.⁵⁹ Vonhof's list would apply to almost any congregation experiencing a pastoral loss.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of an interim minister is alleviating the panic to secure a new pastor quickly. It was to avoid the rush to call a new pastor that Avery advocated for a greater use of intentional interim pastors. In his view one of the most important roles of an interim is to help congregations thoughtfully develop an

⁵⁷ Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, 72-73. Bonnie Bardot also highlights several benefits an interim can bring to a congregation. Among these are: helping the congregation and the former pastor adjust to a new relationship, ministry to unresolved grief, and getting the church to focus on strengths at a time which can be discouraging. In particular, she holds up interim ministers as the "ideal" people to help churches come to terms with their history. Bonnie Bardot, "Coming to Terms with History," in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, ed. Roger S. Nicholson (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1998), 65-71 and 73. Linda Snyder's article in the same book focuses on the interim pastor's ability to assist a congregation with the interim task of developing a new identity. Linda Snyder, "Discovering a New Identity," *ibid.*, 75-85.

⁵⁸ Avery, 143-147. In an April 2000 edition of the job description for Regional Ministers, the fifth item under Job Dimensions refers to identifying, appointing and training "Transition Consultants" in consultation with the Regional Working Groups. These consultants were to be a resource for local churches who desired to do the work of self and/or community analysis and develop a church vision as part of the process of seeking a new pastor. The researcher is unaware of any "Transition Consultants" being appointed within the CABC, but from the description of the role they were intended to satisfy, the position of a well-trained intentional interim pastor would seem to fulfill a transition consultant's functions.

⁵⁹ John Vonhof, *The Alban Guide To Managing The Pastoral Search Process* (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 1999), 17-18.

understanding of their identity, needs and desired future direction. Interim ministers, “help ease the panic of transition and the accompanying frenzy to find the perfect next pastor as soon as possible. ... Intentional interims help stop this panic, allow congregations time to bring out and heal the pain, establish an identity appropriate for a new pastor and decide what gifts they want in a new pastor.”⁶⁰

Encouraging the Use of Interim Pastors

While a more extensive description of the role of an interim pastor is outside the purview of this thesis project, the literature and observations made in the survey indicate they are under-utilized. The benefits an interim ministry could bring to a church, especially when compared to a supply ministry, could apply to almost all pastoral transitions.⁶¹ Despite these advantages, less than half of the churches undergoing pastoral leadership transition engage the services of an interim minister.⁶²

Progress towards encouraging greater use of interim pastors could potentially be made by departing pastors. Oswald suggests the most influential person in helping a church determine an interim plan is the denominational personnel,⁶³ but observations during this research project suggest the departing pastor may be one of the greatest influences on the decision. There was an obvious correlation between what a departing pastor believed was the best course of action for the interim period and what the church

⁶⁰ Avery, 146-147. Along with all the other benefits mentioned above, Schaller states that the use of an intentional interim pastor greatly increases the chances of the new settled pastor having a longer and more effective ministry. Schaller, *Survival Tactics*, 205.

⁶¹ Ketcham, 5.

⁶² Avery, 152. Table 5 shows that only three of ten churches planned to call an interim minister. Gillaspie over thirty years ago urged denominational agencies to be more active in providing interim pastor for churches as they engaged in the search process. Gillaspie, *Empty Pulpit*, 36.

⁶³ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 20.

ultimately planned to do. In six congregations the pastor reported expressing his/her opinion to a Board or Search Committee on what option for interim ministry he/she thought the church should pursue. In every case the preference of the pastor was almost identical to the choice of the congregation.⁶⁴ In a seventh congregation there was no report of the pastor openly verbalizing his opinion, but the pastor's preferred choice identified during an interview was the choice made by the congregation. Although the pastor may not be there to go through the experience with the people, he/she does seem to have some influence on how church leaders choose to proceed through it.

Luke indicates that Jesus was the One who came up with the interim plan for the disciples. "On one occasion, while He was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard Me speak about. John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" (Acts 1:4-5 NIV) Following Jesus' ascension they did actively wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. They spent time in prayer, Scripture study and carefully considered whom God was leading them to call to replace Judas (Acts 1:14-26). They both followed the instructions of their Lord and took time to reflect on their identity.

It should be noted that the pastor's advice about the interim period was usually solicited. Churches looked to their pastor for some guidance about the interim period. For example, when one lay person was asked if the pastor had given any input into the

⁶⁴ "Almost" because one pastor suggested a part-time interim and the church actually chose a full-time interim. Two of these six churches were among the four difficult pastoral transitions. Despite a conflicted relationship with their pastor, the churches still chose the interim plan suggested by the pastor.

transition, she responded, “I hope he will tell us about the process. I hope he will tell us how to contact the Convention. I hope he will tell us what to expect.”

Another Board asked their pastor his opinion about how they should proceed. His advice included being prayerful about the process, remembering the vision they had developed for the church, and engaging a part-time interim pastor. He emphasized his advice was his suggestion but certainly not a “Word from the Lord.” When the lay person in this congregation was asked, “How much input did the pastor give to what would happen after he was gone?” he said that the pastor helped them explore various options for what would follow his departure. He described the assistance as very helpful. In the end, this particular church chose to go with a full-time interim pastor.

In the case of one of the associate pastors, advice for the interim period was sought during an exit interview. This pastor advised the church to rely on the lay leaders to lead the ministries that had been a part of the pastor’s purview, while the Board took time to examine the role and job description of the associate pastor before seeking to call a new pastor to that role. The congregation was planning to heed that advice at the time of the final interviews.

Only two of the ten churches had no report of the pastor giving advice to a Board or committee about the interim period. In both cases these churches chose to go with Sunday supply speakers. One of these churches was a difficult transition which, based on the criteria of Oswald, Mead and Avery, would have greatly benefited from the ministry of an intentional interim. It would appear when no direction is given, churches tend to choose supply preachers.

Only one pastor's preference for an interim ministry plan conflicted with the choice made by the Board of Deacons. In this church the pastor reported he intentionally did not make his opinion known. During an interview he expressed his feeling that a specific person should not be called to provide interim ministry. The Board of Deacons chose this person to act as interim pastor.

Only one lay person commented that he wanted no advice from the pastor regarding the interim process. "Other than just the basic information about who to call, I don't believe you (i.e. a pastor) should be involved in any part of the process." The only exception this lay person made was for a retiring pastor whom he felt would be in a different position than a pastor resigning to go elsewhere. It might be noted the Board of Deacons in this instance did ask for the pastor's advice and followed his suggestion.

Despite this last lay person's sentiment, if more congregations are to avoid a panicked and hurried search for a new pastor and benefit from the ministry of interim pastors then more congregations will need to be encouraged to seek simple and/or intentional interim ministers. The reports of both lay people and pastors indicate departing pastors are likely to be in the best position to do this.

The Long Term Future - Preparing for a New Pastoral Leader

Affirming the New Pastor

Kirkland tells the story of one of John Bonnell's final messages. He spoke to the congregation about an unnamed minister who followed a well-known and well loved pastor. The new minister became increasingly frustrated as the people constantly spoke the praises of his predecessor. After one particularly difficult visit where the pastor's ego was

bruised by comparisons with the magnificent former pastor, Bonnell said the pastor stomped out to the sidewalk and audibly yelled, “Damn Mr. So and so. Damn Mr. So and so,” using the name of his own predecessor. Kirkland remarked that Bonnell’s willingness to share humorously his own struggles when he followed a beloved pastor helped to relieve some of the congregation’s inherent tension about his impending departure and gave them some insight into the challenges their new pastor would face.⁶⁵

John Bonnell himself stated that severing the pastoral relationship with a congregation is one of the greatest tests for any minister. He believed a pastor’s greatest fear was not that one’s successor might destroy the ministry one had worked so hard to build, but that a successor’s wonderful success might overshadow the place of the departing pastor in the hearts of the people. He admired one retiring pastor who not only directed his congregation to show to their next pastor the same, “loyalty, the assistance and the love you have unfailingly given to me,” but also quoted the sentiment of John the Baptist who told his followers, “He must increase; I must decrease.”⁶⁶

Every pastoral leadership position is a trust from Christ for a season. Each pastor will be followed by another.⁶⁷ One of the assuring messages a pastor can give to his/her congregation is that the end of the transition process will result in the choice of a new pastor.⁶⁸ It is equally important for the departing pastor to express his/her acceptance and confidence in the successor. Butcher believes a departing pastor has three options in

⁶⁵ Kirkland, 17.

⁶⁶ Bonnell, “Pastoral Relationship,” 5.

⁶⁷ Bubna, “How to Bid,” 121.

⁶⁸ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 35.

relationship to his/her successor: open support, open opposition, or silent neutrality. However, he believes silence most often functions as an opposing force with only negative results.⁶⁹ There is a natural tendency for a departing pastor to be concerned that a new minister will not know the people as well and not be able to do as good a job as he/she would do. Finzel reminds pastors to remember they were once new to the church, to have faith in others' ability to grow into the role to which God calls them, and to simply, "come to grips with your own dispensability."⁷⁰

Similarly, there can be a normal fear among a congregation that a new minister will not perform as well as a previously beloved pastor. Being assured that a new pastor will come does not guarantee the church will be committed to the new pastoral relationship. Without a commitment to a new leader and to a new future, the complaints and resistance which will inevitably follow will seriously undermine the leadership of the new pastor.⁷¹ Bubna began to work to counteract this tendency long before his resignation. Subtly, from the start of his ministry and without a threatening tone, he would in appropriate contexts make reference to the long term future of the congregation of which he would not be a part. After his resignation, he repeatedly affirmed not only that a new pastoral leader would come, but also that he would accept and welcome the new minister. Bubna wrote, "My acceptance became contagious."⁷²

⁶⁹ Butcher, 98-99.

⁷⁰ Finzel, 175

⁷¹ Osawald, Heath and Heath, 77.

⁷² Bubna, "How to Bid," 121.

Bubna's sentiments were echoed by at least one pastor for whom it was very important to encourage the congregation to accept whoever would be the new pastoral leader. His own experience as a lay person helped him to understand the fears and anxieties about a new pastor. He said, "I know from the experience of being in a church where the pastor resigned that you wonder about the next person coming in. I want to assure them the Lord has not abandoned them and they can trust their next pastor." Bubna not only spoke to his congregation about the need to embrace their next pastoral leader, he also used positive examples of how the congregation had been kind and accepting of him and offered practical advice of how the congregation could do even more for the pastor who would come. As a servant of Christ, he felt that both love and pastoral ethics required he recognize the new leadership and do what he could to prepare for the leader, even if it might turn out he did not agree with the leader.⁷³

Exit Conversations

Increasing frequent references have been made over the last couple of decades to pastors and church leaders engaging in what is commonly called an "Exit Interview." The earliest reference found was in a 1983 interview with Roy Oswald. When asked to describe an example of good closure period, he describe meeting with a colleague who was completing his ministry at another church. Oswald interviewed the pastor, asking questions about the positive and difficult aspects of the pastor's ministry experience as well as what the pastor would find difficult to leave. The candidness and emotions expressed in the interview surprised even the pastor. A transcript of the interview was

⁷³ Bubna, "How to Bid," 122-123.

then circulated to the church's Board. In Oswald's opinion, the frank nature of the interview encouraged the church leaders to be equally open and set a healthy tone for personal visits the pastor made with the leaders afterwards.⁷⁴ Another early reference is made by Cook who endorses the concept as beneficial to both the congregation and the pastor.⁷⁵ Later references to Exit Interviews, including some of Oswald's own works, wisely suggest that the church leadership be included in the interview process. In most cases the church leadership would include the Board of Deacons and/or the Search Committee.⁷⁶

The term "Exit Interview" comes from the business sector⁷⁷ where it is usually conducted when an employee moves from one position to another. The purpose of the interview in that setting is usually to gather information about the person's position, responsibilities and functions so that a suitable replacement can be found and perhaps trained to work even more efficiently. Often the interview is conducted by someone previously unknown to the employee and whose concern is solely for the company's interests.⁷⁸

The business model should be considered too one-sided for use within a congregational setting where the purpose should be for the benefit of both the

⁷⁴ Oswald, "The Pastor's Passages," 14-15.

⁷⁵ Cook, 146. Cook's book was published in 1983. He wrote two paragraphs on Exit Interviews and presents it as a new concept which churches might be interested in requesting.

⁷⁶ See for example, Mead, *Critical Moment*, 21; Phillips, 8; Umidi, 19 (who also suggests the inclusion of other pastoral staff where applicable); and Oswald, Heath and Heath, 17.

⁷⁷ Dale, 184. He advocated interviews be modeled on business style.

⁷⁸ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 17. One might note the similarity of this description to the process Oswald used with his colleague in the previous paragraph.

congregation and the pastor. Oswald's 2003 work rightly prefers the use of the term "Exit Conversations." This term implies a flow of information both ways and for the benefit of both parties. The information shared by the pastor can provide insights to those involved in the transition and those involved in the search for the new pastor. The information shared by church leaders can assist the departing pastor's efforts to bring closure to the present pastorate and help him/her reflect on what he/she may need to do similarly or differently in the next ministry.⁷⁹ Mead notes the benefits to the pastor who is having difficulty letting go of his/her pastoral role. He suggests the Exit Conversation allows the pastor an opportunity to provide legitimate input to the process and having done that to then be encouraged to let go.⁸⁰ Similarly, Ketcham suggests that an Exit Conversation is a freeing experience which makes it easier for the church leadership to say goodbye at the appropriate time.⁸¹

Phillips advocates for the use of Exit Conversations to resolve negative feelings before a pastor's departure. He describes the event as a "non-judgmental conversation between the pastor and a few key lay leaders."⁸² In Phillips' and Cook's views, the conversation provides the pastor the opportunity to identify openly and specifically the reasons for his departure and the sources of his/her disenchantment with the

⁷⁹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 17. Oswald, Heath and Heath's 2003 outline of Exit Conversations still does not have the pastor and lay leaders sitting in the same room. They envision a process where the pastor and the church leaders meet with a third party separately and then transcripts of these conversations are exchanged between each party. (18-19) Despite calling this process Exit Conversations, it would seem to this researcher that Oswald is describing two interviews and erecting barriers between the two parties which impede an actual conversation.

⁸⁰ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 21.

⁸¹ Ketcham, 10.

⁸² Phillips, 8.

congregation. On the other side of table, the congregational leaders are also able to identify elements of the pastoral relationship and congregational life upon which they feel the pastor needs to critically reflect.⁸³

There are obvious benefits from Exit Conversations beyond simply resolving difficult feelings. When both clergy and laity take time to listen to one another, Exit Conversations have the potential to be important “teachable moments.”⁸⁴ For both church and pastor the process can help them develop a thorough understanding of the church and pastor relationship which is ending. The pastor can offer his/her insights, cautions and encouragement which will aid the Search Committee’s task and give the congregation the historical perspective of the pastor. A pastor can also share some of his/her views on the challenges the church will face in the interim period as well as important tasks he/she has had to leave incomplete as his/her tenure comes to a close. Items shared by the church leadership can assist a pastor entering a new ministry as he/she reflects on his/her ministry style.⁸⁵ Umidi believes the desire to accept the wisdom and insight of a departing pastor honors and affirms that leader’s experience with the congregation.⁸⁶

Most of the literature agrees a third party should guide the Exit Conversation process. Mead and Cook suggest a denominational representative would be the most likely candidate.⁸⁷ Whether it is a Regional Minister, another clergyperson, or someone else, the person chosen should be objective, interested, experienced in facilitating these

⁸³ Phillips, 4, 8 & 9; Cook, 146.

⁸⁴ Phillips, 9.

⁸⁵ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 18, 20.

⁸⁶ Umidi, 19.

⁸⁷ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 21; Cook, 146.

types of conversations, and mutually trusted by the lay leaders and the pastor.⁸⁸ Oswald makes allowance for the use of a member of the congregation as a last resort, but correctly observes that an insider may be reluctant to address sensitive or controversial issues.⁸⁹ A good facilitator can help the conversation address these difficult issues which need to be faced so that improvements can be made in future pastoral relationships. While the conversation might be uncomfortable the facilitator can remind both parties the purpose is not about finding blame, but being able to learn from experience and reflection.⁹⁰ A facilitator can ensure the conversation is more than simply short answers to factual questions while also working to keep the conversation flowing, focused and relevant rather than series of digressions to less productive topics.⁹¹

The topics and questions which form an Exit Conversation can be varied. Oswald believes the topics should include such things as the pastor's understanding of his ministry, how the congregation has changed or developed, and an assessment of the current state of the church. Also to be included are matters related to the transition process, the pastor's current situation and other things which would be of historical importance and interest.⁹² Phillips would add to this list a discussion about the expectations the leaders had of the pastor and the pastor of the laity (e.g. What were they? Were they reasonable? Were they met?). He would also have the conversation address the

⁸⁸ Phillips, 9; Cook, 146.

⁸⁹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 17.

⁹⁰ Umidi, 20.

⁹¹ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 18.

⁹² Oswald, Heath and Heath, 18.

issue of each party's understanding of the church's mission and how well it is being fulfilled.⁹³

Umidi lists nine questions he believes should shape the structure of an Exit Conversation:

1. How was our church family different from what you expected when you first came?
2. How are we as leaders different from what you expected when you first came?
3. What do you perceive to be our main strengths?
4. What changes do you believe our church body should make?
5. Were there any goals you had hoped to accomplish but didn't?
6. What would have helped you accomplish these goals?
7. What agenda do you think we should complete before we call a new pastor?
8. How do you perceive your relationship with this church family after you leave?
9. Is there any thing else you would like to share with us?⁹⁴

Umidi also reminds pastors and leaders to begin Exit Conversations with a time of praise, prayer and Scripture which set the proper tone for the whole meeting.⁹⁵

The concept of an Exit Conversation (or Interview) came up in five of the ten ministry settings interviewed. Actual formal Exit Conversations only occurred in two churches. Two of those churches where the idea was contemplated but not followed through were churches which experienced difficult transitions. In one of these churches the pastor reported writing a letter to one of the governing Boards and speaking

⁹³ Phillips, 9.

⁹⁴ Umidi, 19-20. For another more extensive list of suggested Exit Conversation topics and questions see Oswald, Heath and Heath, 91.

⁹⁵ Umidi, 19 & 20.

individually with those who specifically sought his reflections on the church. He did not initiate any of these conversations.

In the other difficult transition both a lay person and the pastor expressed an interest in some type of exchange of perspectives. The lay person expressed an unmet desire to hear feedback from the pastor. She hoped the pastor would share some of his insights when he was invited to attend the initial meeting of the Search Committee, but she said, “I guess that wasn’t what he was there for.” She asked him personally to share his ideas for the church with her, but she reported, “He wouldn’t share because he wanted us to come up with our own vision.” Her comments were in contrast to the pastor who in an earlier interview had stated, “I feel there needs to be an opportunity to debrief because a pastor has many insights that others may not know.” He cited examples related to work he had done which he felt went completely unnoticed by the congregation. He also thought the departing pastor could have a role in helping the church think about what they will need in the next pastor. Despite these expressed desires for something akin to an Exit Conversation, there was no formal attempt to arrange one.

In a third church the pastor brought up the idea in the initial interview as something he was thinking about. It had been a suggestion made to him by another colleague in ministry. At a follow-up interview, he was asked if there would be an Exit Interview. He responded, “I am not going to do it. I am not interested in going there.”

In both cases where an Exit Conversation did take place there was positive feedback about the experience. In the first example the pastor met with a small committee of three or four leaders over coffee for a, “heart to heart on what it has been like, what I

see as the key issues, and what needs be done.” In the other case the pastor met with the Search Committee (which included the deacons) for approximately a two hour conversation. The Committee asked numerous questions about the current state and potential future of the church. He said, “They kept telling me to be honest, so I held nothing back.” He reported sharing with them his evaluation of their strengths and weakness and his opinion on the future direction of the church.

In both cases where there was an Exit Conversation the request was made by the laity. The first pastor remarked there was a freedom to speak because “they have asked for it.” In the second situation the request from the Search Committee came as a result of the advice of their Regional Minister. It is unlikely that the committee would have thought to make such a request without the Regional Minister’s suggestion. It seems from these examples that if an Exit Conversation is going to occur and be well received by the laity then it needs to come as their request. Carefully organized and executed Exit Conversations have such a great potential to assist congregations and clergy towards healthy transitions and farewells, it is unfortunate that more churches do not avail themselves of this opportunity.⁹⁶ Perhaps this will occur as more Regional Ministers broach the idea with Search Committees.

Relationship and Communication with a New Pastor

A pastor’s relationship with his/her former congregation was outlined in Chapter Four. This is an issue Weese and Crabtree ignore for the most part. Instead they include

⁹⁶ Umidi, 19; Oswald, Heath and Heath, 19. Oswald, Heath and Heath see the Exit Conversation as such a valuable tool they also recommend it be done at the end of the ministry of an Interim Pastor. They also suggest that recordings and transcripts of Exit Conversations make a valuable addition to church records and archives. The final copy of such transcripts would be subject to editing and final approval by all those present during the conversations. Oswald, Heath and Heath, 18-19.

within their work extensive details on the relationship between a church's former and new pastor. They outline three options for a church to consider. The first is a period of "overlap" when both pastors are present and serving the congregation together for a period of weeks or months before the former pastor ends his ministry. A second option is "sequential." One pastor completes his/her ministry and almost immediately the new pastor begins (e.g. Clyde's experience). The third option is "delayed." There is an interim period of time between the departure of one pastor and the arrival of the next pastor.⁹⁷

The delayed option would seem to be the most common experience among the CABC. Nine of ten ministry settings interviewed followed this pattern. This is not surprising given the size of most Convention congregations. Weese and Crabtree observe that most small churches can not afford to support two pastors even for a short period of time.⁹⁸ The only exception among the churches surveyed was in the retiring pastor's church where there was a combination of the first two options. The new pastor formally began service immediately after the retiring pastor's employment ended. However, the former pastor still has a presence within the congregation and has taken on some volunteer roles.

Weese and Crabtree also outline three options for the type of relationship which could exist between a former and new pastor. The first is "firewall," which simply means there is no relationship. An "impenetrable boundary" is established between the two in order to protect the new pastor from the "biases, preferences, and undue influence of the

⁹⁷ Weese and Crabtree, 140-141.

⁹⁸ Weese and Crabtree, 141.

departing pastor.”⁹⁹ A second option, “downloading,” has the departing pastor sharing important information about the congregation and church ministries with the new pastor. The third option is “mentoring,” and envisions the former pastor offering guidance and counsel to the new pastoral leader as he/she assumes his/her new role.¹⁰⁰

Among those surveyed only one church had chosen a new pastor before the end of the interview process. This meant that there was not an opportunity to explore the actual relationship between a former and new pastor. However, every pastor interviewed expressed a willingness to talk with pastoral candidates which suggests they did not feel it necessary to erect a “firewall” between themselves and their successors. This would please Weese and Crabtree who believe a transfer of knowledge between pastors is crucial. They believe it is so important that whatever method a church chooses to accomplish the transfer they should require the participation of the new and former pastor. To add weight to its importance, they also suggest the church compensate both pastors for the time and expenses incurred to complete the process.¹⁰¹ They outline three general methods of transferring knowledge from one pastor to another.

The first method of transferring information is through a “bridging resource.” This resource could be an interim pastor or another form of transitional leadership. In this method the departing pastor transfers his knowledge to the bridging resource who

⁹⁹ Weese and Crabtree, 141.

¹⁰⁰ Weese and Crabtree, 141.

¹⁰¹ Weese and Crabtree, 156.

eventually passes it to the new pastor after his/her arrival. This strategy requires the least amount of intentional coordination.¹⁰²

The second option for a transfer of knowledge is a “pastor to pastor debrief.” Debriefing of the former pastor is done by the new pastor. These conversations could occur during an overlapping period of ministry, or through a series of conversations following the conclusion of the first pastor’s ministry. The advantage of this method is direct communication which is less likely to be distorted by a third party. Weese and Crabtree emphasize that such a meeting should take place within six months of the leadership transition.

The third method is to use a transition consultant who facilitates a conversation between the two pastors. The consultant helps identify what information is important to be transferred and facilitates the conversation between the two ministers. The advantages of this method are the removal of the burden of an agenda from the two pastors and the presence of an outside party to negotiate issues of confidentiality and biases.¹⁰³

Weese and Crabtree developed a “Pastor to Pastor Debrief Checklist” of almost seventy items which could be included in a transfer of knowledge between a former and new pastor. The list is divided into six categories: Pastoral (i.e. information about members of the congregation), Worship (e.g. styles, attendance, special services), Programs (i.e. a list of programs identifying which are in need of support and which are more self-sufficient), Administrative (e.g. Board and committee structures, financial trends, report formats, keys), Personnel (i.e. church staff and related issues), Church

¹⁰² Weese and Crabtree, 151-152.

¹⁰³ Weese and Crabtree, 152.

Climate (e.g. friendliness, theological tendency, openness to change), and Unique Mission Components.¹⁰⁴

An intention to exchange information with a new pastor at the level described by Weese and Crabtree was not evident among any of the pastor's surveyed. This would not surprise Weese and Crabtree. They believe church culture and an outdated ministry paradigm prevent pastors and laity from participating in what most other professions would intuitively understand as beneficial. They cite the example of medical professionals who as a matter of course transfer critical knowledge for the benefit of their patients. In their opinion, without this strategic and intentional transfer of knowledge from one pastor to another it is unlikely that congregations will experience lasting ministry and leadership development. A church is simply doomed to dismantle former progress and begin over again with every new pastor.¹⁰⁵

While not at the level envisioned by Weese and Crabtree, one pastor did report having a lengthy conversation with a potential successor. A candidate was interviewed before the departure of the former pastor. He subsequently contacted the pastor and asked if it would be okay to visit with him. The pastor agreed and the two met for about two hours to discuss the pastor's experience with the congregation. In this case the meeting

¹⁰⁴ Weese and Crabtree, 153-154. See pages 191-192 for a description of Weese and Crabtree's understanding of Unique Mission Components.

¹⁰⁵ Weese and Crabtree, 150-151.

was not to transfer knowledge to a new pastor, but part of the process the candidate was using to determine if he was being called to this congregation.¹⁰⁶

In my own experience a pastoral debriefing was very helpful when I began my ministry at First Cornwallis. During the interview process it became very obvious the previous pastoral relationship had been very difficult and ended with a forced termination. The level of dysfunction related by the Search Committee seemed unbelievable. Within a month of beginning at the church I visited with my predecessor and over a period of about three hours asked the pastor to share with me his perspectives and experiences with the congregation. It was not surprising that the pastor's version of the events did not match what had been related by the Search Committee. However, having had an opportunity personally to interact with my predecessor it was readily apparent that as incredulous as the Search Committee's stories had been, they were likely more accurate and objective than I had expected. This was invaluable knowledge at the beginning of my ministry with the church.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Goetz, notably, found that the greatest regret of terminated pastors was not talking with their predecessors before accepting the call to the church which eventually fired them. Goetz suggests contacting two or three of the previous pastors to see if there are patterns one should take note of before accepting a call. Goetz, 45 and 47.

¹⁰⁷ Although somewhat dated, a very helpful and convincing statement about the importance of a new pastor understanding both the ministry and person of his/her predecessor is made in the second chapter of Schaller, *Survival Tactics*, 36-63. While this is not the place to outline all of his points, Schaller believes it is essential to gain a sense of what the church was like under one's predecessor if one is to understand and successfully negotiate through the changes a congregation experiences as it engages with a new pastoral leader. The opportunity to meet and debrief with one's predecessor would seem to be an invaluable tool for this process.

Among the literature a more commonly reported and suggested method of transfer of knowledge is in a written form commonly known as a “Successor File.”¹⁰⁸ Shawn, one of the pastors interviewed, related discovering a box of files when he moved into the parsonage. Inside the box he found a note addressed to his predecessor from the previous pastor. In short, the note stated the box contained relevant information to the functioning of the church and the previous pastor’s new phone number should Shawn’s predecessor ever want to call for clarification or to ask questions. Inspired by this example, Shawn compiled a series of documents on CD which he intended to leave for his successor. These documents included the Constitution, the church’s vision statement, membership lists, several annual reports, and deacon’s meeting agendas. He considered including some personal reflections, but reported running short on time before it was completed.

There are numerous suggestions of what could be included in such a file. They can be summarized into five categories:

Documents: These are the written records and documents. They might include copies of the Constitution and By-Laws, several years of Annual Reports, financial statements, current and projected budgets, policy statements, vision and/or goal statements, attendance records, membership lists, members’ and adherents’ addresses, pictorial directory, and a year or more of bulletins.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ David Smith, “How to Leave a Successor File,” Lifeway: Biblical Solutions for Life, http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page10,1703,A%3D160432&M%3D150036,00.html (Accessed January 31, 2006). Other examples include Reeve, 112-114, Antal, 86-87, and Schaller, “How to Help Your Successor,” 93-97.

¹⁰⁹ Reeve, 112-113; Schaller, “Helping Your Successor,” 93-94, Smith, 1. Reeve suggests three years of bulletins be included in the file.

Important But Unwritten: During my own first year at First Cornwallis there were several things which the congregation expected a pastor would know, but which were not written anywhere. For example, it was expected that the pastor would always act as greeter at the door for the annual Strawberry Supper and would send those who had to wait in the sanctuary to the basement assembly room when a seat was available.¹¹⁰ What was not communicated was how one might remember the order in which people arrived and subsequently be sent for supper. It was not until the second year when I discovered each customer was given a numbered ticket. While this example may seem trivial, it was an unnecessary and at the time a frustrating complication.

Strawberry Suppers are but one example of things it would be helpful to know about, but which are unwritten and often not communicated. Other things could include worship styles, traditional roles and responsibilities of various leaders and staff, local traditions surrounding weddings and funerals, contentious issues, where to park, where to find keys, procedures for cancelling meetings or services due to inclement weather, who unlocks the building or turns on the sound, who should be called when something goes wrong at the parsonage, and so forth.¹¹¹ Schaller suggests a departing pastor detail a weekly and monthly schedule of church programs and note which programs are strongest and if any new programs are in the planning stage.¹¹² Reeve and Antal suggest preparing a one year calendar with the traditional dates of special services, congregational

¹¹⁰ That the church even had regular fund raising suppers was also not communicated until almost six months after I began when people started planning the Strawberry Supper.

¹¹¹ Reeve, 112-113; Schaller, "Helping Your Successor," 94-95.

¹¹² Schaller, "Helping Your Successor," 94.

meetings, and local community events in which the pastor is usually expected to participate.¹¹³

Context: Schaller suggests a map of the community be left for one's successor marking the location of homes of members. Along with the map, he would leave several lists such as a list of schools, hospitals, nursing homes, community groups with contact information and the traditional role the pastor has played in each of the settings (e.g. participation in the High School Baccalaureate Service). To this he would add a list of neighbouring churches and pastors with comments on the relationship which exists with each of them (e.g. customary joint services at Easter or Thanksgiving). In addition Schaller suggests a departing pastor encourage other local pastors to take the initiative to meet and welcome the new pastor to the community.¹¹⁴

Relationships: Beyond a simple list of the membership, several authors suggest former pastors leave information about the people. Reeve would like pastors to note things such as birthdays, anniversaries, dates of baptism, active or inactive status, as well as a list of people who attend but are not members. To this he would suggest a list of shut-ins who have been regularly visited, those recently bereaved, married or divorced or suffering traumatic illness.¹¹⁵ Edward Friedman believed one of the most helpful things for both pastor and congregation would be for ministers to create, and keep up-to-date, a congregational genogram which describes the various familial relationships within a congregation. Beyond a simple diagram of family relationships, Friedman urges pastors

¹¹³ Reeve, 113; Antal 86.

¹¹⁴ Schaller, "Helping Your Successor," 95-96 and 97.

¹¹⁵ Reeve, 112-113. Antal suggests not only listing the shut-ins, but also the visitation schedule one has kept. Antal, 86.

to note how the families function during acute events and passages. A file of this type, he suggested, “would immeasurably increase their successor’s ability to serve those families in the future.”¹¹⁶ Friedman is not alone in suggesting more personal as well as factual information be included in a Successor File. Smith suggests including the strengths, weaknesses, and level of commitment of the various congregational leaders.¹¹⁷ Schaller properly notes that such revelations are the fulfillment of the laity’s worst fears and in particular advises that descriptions of people’s faults are to be avoided. However, along with noting who is related to whom, Schaller does encourage pastors to identify people they believe might possess untapped potential.¹¹⁸

Personal History: Smith included within his Successor File a short sketch of his own life and ministry which included his future plans as well as some of the highlights of his time with the congregation. He felt this might help his successor understand why he did some of the things he did while he was in that congregation.¹¹⁹ Schaller embraces the idea of a list and description of the six most meaningful highlights of one’s ministry and the six most serious mistakes one made within that congregation. While such lists might be personally challenging, he believes it would provide one’s successor with invaluable insights into the ministry which preceded his/her own time.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Friedman, 190. See also page 272.

¹¹⁷ Smith.

¹¹⁸ Schaller, 96. Cook relates a disturbing story of a pastor whose predecessor left him a list of all the “nasty people to stay away from.” The new pastor discovered that many of the people were much better than they had been described on the list. Cook, 147.

¹¹⁹ Smith.

¹²⁰ Schaller, 97. Bonnell believes that is it very import for a former pastor to tell his successor about people or families with whom he/she had personally failed. Bonnell, “The Retiring Pastor and His Successor,” 10.

Smith has two final guidelines for a pastor who wishes to create a Successor File. First, if one's ministry did not end voluntarily, do not create a Successor File. There is too great a temptation to simply vent one's anger. Secondly, leave the file with a trustworthy person who will deliver it to the successor personally. He suggests possibly the chair of the Board of Deacons. He also believes that hand delivering adds an "air of importance" to the package, as well as ensuring that the new minister receives it.¹²¹

It might be noted that while only one pastor created a Successor File, at least one other pastor made an effort to ensure certain information was passed on to his successor through a letter written to the Board outlining what he perceived would be concerns which should be made known to future pastors. In addition a Search Committee chairperson in another church commented, "In fairness, a new pastor will be fully informed about what has happened with our departing pastor."

Summary

It is important for a departing pastor to recognize the end of the process for the church is not his/her departure, but the calling and accepting of a new pastoral leader. To this end a departing pastor is in the unique position of urging the congregation to move towards a future of which he/she will not be a part. Pastors should use their final months with a church to encourage them to prepare for the inevitability of change. Sermon themes should be both relevant to the local circumstances and designed to help the church catch an optimistic vision of the future God has in store for them.

¹²¹ Smith. Also see Butcher for a description of the Successor File which he left with the Church secretary to give to his successor. Its existence was also communicated to the Board. Butcher, 99.

As churches prepare for the interim period, pastors can help encourage congregational leaders to create interim plans which will allow them time to earnestly engage in the interim tasks which help them make wise decisions about future pastoral leadership. The calling of an interim pastor, even for transitions which are not considered especially difficult, most often is the best option because it allows a congregation the time and freedom to conduct a thoughtful pastoral search process. The influence of departing pastors regarding interim ministry plans can be useful in helping congregations consider the benefits of this option.

Though not widely employed, Exit Conversations are increasing being used as a method both of closure and as a starting point for congregations who desire to reflect on their ministries as they enter the interim period. It can provide a good foundation for the interim ministry tasks. Departing pastors should willingly, honestly and sensitively participate in Exit Conversations as requested by a congregation. They should view it as an opportunity to benefit from the feedback they receive from the church leadership.

An exchange of information, if not a relationship, between former and new pastors is increasingly being viewed as beneficial for pastors as they enter and seek to understand a new congregation. Churches also benefit by having pastors who gain a better grasp of their recent history. In the literature the more common method of accomplishing this sharing of knowledge is the use of a Successor File which is compiled at the initiative of the departing pastor. Less common, but perhaps more helpful, is a meeting of the two pastors. This would normally come at the initiative of the new pastor,

or by request of the congregation. Former pastors should view this as a part of the continuing ministry of building the Kingdom.

Chapter 7 – Planning a Healthy Transition Period

Two Perspectives

Many pastors do not know what it is like to be in a church without a minister because they have not been a part of a church during such a period. Pastors are usually the ones who create the interim period by their departure or end it by their arrival. What happens in between can be a bit of a mystery for some clergy.¹ For those who have gone through that process, the experience can be invaluable. One of the healthiest starts to the transition process was led by pastor who entered ministry as a second career. Even though he was resigning from his first church, he had specifically mentioned, “I remember what it was like to be in a church where the pastor resigned.” Perhaps he had an experiential advantage over another pastor who led one of the most difficult church transitions. He resigned from his first congregation as well. His reflective comment was, “This is harder than I ever thought it would be.”

Churches and pastors have very different experiences in the interim period. For the laity the interim period might last for a few months to more than a year. For many pastors the interim period can be as short as a week as they bid farewell to one church on one Sunday and step into a new pulpit the next Sunday.² In his 2003 work, Oswald urges congregations to become more aware of the departure from the pastor’s perspective. He rightly points out that clergy have to balance the emotional and personal effects of their leaving with the myriad of pastoral responsibilities which are part of departure process.

¹ Parmley, 44.

² Five of the eight pastors who were going to new ministries finished at one church one Sunday and began at a new church the next Sunday.

The pastor has to give a proper goodbye and leave the church affairs in good order.³ But in his 1978 work, Oswald urges the clergy to become more aware of what transitions are like from the laity's perspective. In particular he asks pastors to consider the consequences their methods and styles of departure have for the congregation.⁴ It is likely both of Oswald's wishes need to be granted. Churches should become more aware of transition from the leader's perspective,⁵ but pastors should also become more aware of the laity's perspective. Laird, for example, resigned in haste without realizing the depth of attachment he and the people had for each other, nor the emotional impact his decision would have on his congregation. "In my hurt, I didn't realize I was about to hurt others by quitting. Out of our mutual pain over my resignation, I finally realized how much my flock loved me. It astounded me. . . . Since that experience, I have resisted the thought that life as a pastor is harder than the lives my people lead."⁶

The absence of consideration of the process from the congregation's perspective was a distinguishing feature of those who led difficult transitions. Typically these pastors' perspective of the process was more self-focused. For example, one pastor felt the sadness in his congregation was unavoidable if he was to fulfill his life's goal. "I am sure there are some who may be devastated by our leaving, but we still have to pursue our own goals and dreams in life. When you love someone you want to see them pursue their dreams." Later, when describing the feelings of some of his parishioners, he measured

³ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 12.

⁴ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 4.

⁵ Leith Anderson, for example, urges Search Committees to see the process through the eyes of the clergy. Leith Anderson, "Search Committees: A Strategy for Success," *Christianity Today*, 18 April 1980, 34-35.

⁶ Laird, 34.

them against his own. “There are a few hurting people and they are going to grieve far more than I will grieve because I am moving on to more health and to a more dynamic situation.”

Another pastor announced his resignation on one Sunday and immediately left on vacation. Upon later reflection he wondered if it had really been a wise course of action. He described going away for a week as a great relief, but he did not consider the effect it could have on the congregation until afterwards. He pondered later, “Maybe I should have been more sensitive to sticking around and helping to care for their feelings.” With a third pastor even the resignation date was not dependant upon a commitment to the congregation but by the volatility of the housing market. In his resignation letter the pastor wrote, “I would like to submit my resignation as pastor effective *specific date*. However, if our home sells before that date, I would like to be released from the two months as stated with-in (*sic*) our constitution.” The pastor’s house did sell early and he completed his ministry seven weeks ahead of the date he had specified.⁷

In contrast, in one of the smoothest transitions the pastor was very conscious of his continuing commitment to serve the congregation’s needs until his last day. When asked if he was relating to the church any differently he responded, “I don’t think so.” However, he later amended his answer. He had been one who was open about all aspects of his life, but had intentionally tried not to be openly excited about the new ministry. “I haven’t told them how much we love the new house. I try not to talk about the new church in front of people. I didn’t really describe it so they didn’t feel badly.” This same

⁷ The constitution required a minimum of two months notice, but the pastor gave three months in order to allow time for the sale of his home. The home sold within two weeks and he finished in one-and-a half months.

pastor reported a compliment given by one of his leaders. The leader said, “I have really appreciated how in the midst of the move you are still focused on the church and on helping us.” The pastor said, “I appreciated that because that is what I wanted to do. I wanted to help them out the best I could in the transition period. I think it is very meaningful to me personally to do that for them to the very end.”

In another church, when a layman was asked what his pastor had done right during the departure, he responded, “He has been very open and cooperative and helpful. He was even willing to let a candidate speak with him. He has carried on his duties and hasn’t done anything negative to the church.”

As noted in chapter one, Oswald’s study revealed a similar difference between Military Chaplains who brought positive closure and those who left a bad taste in their congregation’s mouths. Those who brought positive closure were described as continuing to be conscientious about their duties, considerate of all groups (i.e. family, friends, commanders, and congregation), and working intentionally to develop an acceptable climate for a new chaplain. They were also open to invitations to homes which allowed people an opportunity to express their personal feelings. In other words, they continued to consider the needs of their congregation, sometimes even over their own discomfort. For example, one chaplain had requested there not be a farewell party, but later changed his position because “he felt the parishioners needed it.”⁸ Chaplains whose departures left their congregations confused and hurt were focused on preparing for their next ministry, described as manipulative and closed, and blocked efforts by others to bring closure.⁹

⁸ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 5.

⁹ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 5.

Those pastors who were more self-focused during the departure period were not necessarily better off for it. Most had more and stronger reports of personally negative emotions. They were also more likely to report physical illnesses.¹⁰ At least two of the four pastors from difficult transitions entered difficult new ministry situations.¹¹ Jesus' words come to mind, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the Gospel will save it." (Mark 8:35) If Jesus is to be our model, it might be observed that during His most difficult hours four of the seven sayings from the cross were directed to the needs of others.¹²

Churches Need Their Pastors to Function Well

It became clear over the course of this study that as churches enter a pastoral leadership transition one of the most important determinants for a healthy transition is the emotional and spiritual health of the pastor. Churches need their pastors to function well if they are to enter transitions in a healthy manner. In Chapter One – Deciding to Leave, it was apparent the reason a pastor chooses to leave affects how he/she functions during the departure. Pastors who were unable to come to terms with the reasons for their departures were not able to assist their congregation deal with their departure in a healthy manner. In Chapter Four – The Pastor's Transition, it was shown that pastors who are unable to deal with their own grief and loss issues in a healthy manner are unable to facilitate the

¹⁰ Three of the four pastors in difficult transitions reported periods of physical illness as compared to one of the remaining six.

¹¹ A third pastor left the new ministry setting within twenty-four months, but the circumstances which resulted in this departure are unknown. Of the remaining six pastors only one is known to have faced unusual difficulties in a new ministry.

¹² Specifically: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34); "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43); "Dear woman, here is your son. . . . Here is your mother." (John 19:26-27); and "It is finished." (John 19:30) which signified the completion of His mission to secure salvation for the world.

congregation's grief process in a healthy manner. Friedman concludes the key factor which determines how well a family or a congregation functions, and if they will even survive, is the role of their spiritual leader. He observed, "The effect of loss on any family depends primarily on the functioning of the leader, but when the loss is the leader, the effect is primarily as a result of how the leader functioned before he or she was lost."¹³ This is because both families and churches are organic by nature and "an organism tends to function best when its head is well differentiated."¹⁴ More simply put, when a leader becomes dysfunctional the whole body is affected.

Edward White, using Friedman's work, outlines a number of elements which should be considered a part of a healthy functioning pastor's exit. For example, the pastor should be a non-anxious presence through the process. This means they should respond but not react to people's reaction to their decision. They should allow congregants to work through and let go of their feelings so they can get on with their future. White also advocates for Exit Interviews which he believes can be mutually helpful to pastors and lay leaders. And while pastors should not select their successor, a supportive friendship between the former and the new pastor can be positive for the congregation.¹⁵ To White's suggestions, Weese and Crabtree would add, and stress, that pastors should keep any promises to help their church through the transition process.¹⁶

¹³ Friedman, 220.

¹⁴ Friedman, 221.

¹⁵ White, 95.

¹⁶ Weese and Crabtree, 50.

More ominous for pastors personally is Oswald's suggestion that the way one closes out his/her ministry is a pattern which will be repeated as one closes out life. "Clergy should ask themselves, as they prepare to end a pastorate, "Is this how I want to die?" and "Is this how I want to support people as they face their deaths?" If the answer is no, some changes are needed."¹⁷

Transitions are Emotional and Organizational

Weese and Crabtree describe a pastoral leadership transition as a "triple whammy."

The end result is that the congregation is left with no alternative but to experience the triple whammy of emotional, "organic," and organizational change all at the same time. As a whole, the church is a living, breathing organism and experiences all of the same emotions as an individual. At the same time, it is also an institution that experiences change at an organizational level as well. Thus, the triple whammy.¹⁸

While this thesis has sought to deal separately with the various aspects of transitions (i.e. relationships, ministries and the future), it became apparent there is an interconnectedness of each aspect. In Chapter Three, for example it was noted that the external changes which come during a transition triggered emotional responses.

Oswald's study of the departure styles of Army Chaplains determined they tended towards one of three orientations during their final weeks of ministry: people, program or future. Oswald felt all three areas needed some attention, but believed those chaplains who were most appreciated were the ones whose exit style was people (i.e. relationship)

¹⁷ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 105.

¹⁸ Weese and Crabtree, 15.

orientated.¹⁹ To a certain extent, this trend was also evident in the ten pastorates studied for this thesis. For example among all four difficult transitions there were reports by both the pastors and/or the lay people of a lack of relational engagement during the final period of ministry. But it was also observed in these four churches that ministries and an optimistic view of the future also suffered. Bible Study groups were the most frequent ministry to cease in these churches. Other examples of faltering ministries included youth groups, music ministries, Committee and Board functioning as well as other programs. These four churches were also the least prepared for the interim period. At the time of the departure, none had developed plans for interim ministry except for a few weeks of Sunday supply and only one of the four search committees had met on any more than one occasion.

By way of contrast, in the six churches where the transitions could be described as smooth, the pastors remained relationally engaged with their congregations. At the same time, very few ministries suffered or ceased. Lay people were already or were being placed into leadership roles. These churches were also the most likely to have confirmed plans for interim pastoral leadership, and to have active search committees in place. One could conclude there is an inter-relationship between the three areas such that positive or negative impacts in one area correspondingly affect the degree of health in the others. Failure or success in one area was most often reflected in a similar level of failure or success in the other areas. For example, in one congregation there were prominent relationship tensions between the pastor and much of his congregation. His inability to

¹⁹ Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, 5.

reconcile these issues led to an emotional withdrawal which manifested in a breakdown in the few ministries that were present and a legitimate concern that very little would happen in the congregation during an interim period. These struggles led the lay person to voice concerns about a bleak future and in particular if any pastor would ever want to serve in that church.

At the opposite extreme, a lay person in another church was asked, “What ministries you think might cease when the pastor leaves?” The person could not think of anything that might suffer. There were plenty of capable leaders and preparations were in place for the maintenance of each program. The pastor in this setting was described as love incarnate,²⁰ suggesting that relationally things were going well. While there was sadness about the pastor’s impending departure, there was also a genuine desire to see him do well in his new ministry. The lay person was also very optimistic about the future of the ministry and had little fear that another very capable pastoral leader would follow. It would seem in this congregation a lack of anxiety about the strength of the current and future ministries allowed room for a healthy approach to dealing with the relationship loss. Conversely, Vonhof and Satterlee observe that when grief issues have not been addressed it will adversely affect the interim tasks and hinder the search for a new pastoral leader. Specifically they believe the unresolved grief will impair sound and wise decisions especially when it comes to calling a new pastor.²¹

²⁰ The specific statement was, “He is love.”

²¹ Vonhof, 19; Satterlee, 115.

Transition as a Growth Process

The main intent of Weese and Crabtree's work is to help churches begin to plan for the inevitable, the loss of a pastor. They provide a guide for developing a healthy transition plan which will at the least avoid decline and at its best lead to further growth. They rail against what they label the common illness-based model of pastoral transitions. This model regards a church without a pastor as broken or sick and in need of healing and recovery. "An illness-based model assumes that the successes of the church are so inextricably linked to the departing pastor that many of the most effective ministries of the church either have to be intentionally dismantled or allowed to weaken in preparation for a new pastor who will come and resurrect them using a new style, methodology or allocation of resources."²² They believe this view of the congregation's status during a pastoral transition sets churches up for a period of failure.²³

While not all of Weese and Crabtree's strategies for a healthy transition can easily translate into Convention churches, their premise that churches in transition do not need to be regarded as problems to be fixed or illnesses to be healed is worthy of consideration. Normal grief is not a sickness; it is a common response to a sense of loss. It is not something to be avoided, it is to be experienced. Pastoral leadership changes are a normal part of congregation life.²⁴ It is an opportunity to learn and to grow. Kübler-Ross once described death as the final stage of growth. It presents one with the

²² Weese and Crabtree, 139.

²³ Weese and Crabtree, 139.

²⁴ Ketcham, 5.

opportunity to come to terms with one's relationships, values and life.²⁵ Similarly, Friedman believed viewing a spiritual leader's departure as an opportunity for growth is a more pastoral approach to separation. "Where the terminal period in our relationship with a congregation can be treated as an opportunity for emotional growth, rather than as a painful period to be shortened or avoided, the long range benefits, for both the congregation and for ourselves, are numerous and fundamental."²⁶

Developing a Transition Plan

Nygren wrote that after a long pastorate there ought to be a planned and orderly exit,²⁷ but as noted in Chapter Three, regardless of the length of the pastorate, when pastors take the time to plan out their remaining time there is a benefit for both themselves and their congregations.²⁸ Considering the role well prepared lay leaders play in assisting a smooth transition,²⁹ as well as the numerous other variables, pastors would be wise to begin creating and implementing a transition plan even before they resign. There should be room in any plan to ministry to each of the areas of final tasks, including relationships. Antal believes that pastors intentionally over-schedule their final weeks and feign being too busy in an effort to avoid their own grief as well as the painful emotions they suspect others are feeling. He suggests, "The most common excuse for making a bad exit is that there simply was not enough time to do it right. . . . Thus, we must prioritize

²⁵ Oswald, Heath and Heath, 105.

²⁶ Friedman, 252.

²⁷ Nygren, "Ending a Long Pastorate," 20.

²⁸ See "Taking Control of What Remains," pages 101-109.

²⁹ See Chapter Five.

what really matters.”³⁰ Among those priorities are maintaining one’s prayer life, and the four termination tasks of Chapter Three.³¹

Kübler-Ross advises the dying to take care of the important matters early when there is less time pressures and emotional upheaval.³² The same advice can be applied to departing pastors and to church leaders. Phillips notes, for example, that the energy and motivation of a pastor wanes as the departure draws closer.³³ One pastor in particular who had thoroughly planned out his final months found that with two weeks left until he finished he had lost all sense of urgency and motivation to complete everything he had hoped to accomplish.

Weese and Crabtree urge pastors to help their churches develop standing transition plans long before they even consider resigning. They readily acknowledge this goes against some common fears. For example, there can be a fear that just talking about pastoral transition will implant the idea and cause it to happen.³⁴ Anticipating pastoral transitions is not a part of church culture. Congregations tend to wait until it is upon them and then try to muddle through, but the emotional, personal and financial costs to poorly executed transitions should urge churches and pastors to do better.³⁵

In anticipation of a church’s hesitancy to talk about the loss of a pastor before it occurs, Weese and Crabtree suggest transition plans be established in three steps. The

³⁰ Antal, 81.

³¹ Antal, 81. Discussion on the Termination Tasks can be found on pages 102-117.

³² Kübler-Ross, 169.

³³ Phillips, 37.

³⁴ Weese and Crabtree, 14.

³⁵ Weese and Crabtree, 29-39.

first step is a Crisis Transition Plan which details how a congregation will deal with a sudden pastoral loss through things such as death, severe illness, accident, or a sudden dismissal. Such a plan does not assume a pastor's desire to leave, nor a congregation's wish to be rid of their pastor. Instead it acknowledges there are always unforeseen circumstances or situations which may be unanticipated but for which one can prepare contingency plans.³⁶ Elements of a crisis plan include designation of decision making responsibilities, provision for continuity of worship and ministries, an interim ministry plan, and a designated person responsible for communication with the congregation and other members of the staff and provision of emotional and spiritual support for those grieving the loss as well as for those who have been dependant on the pastor's counsel. Of particular note, they suggest the pastor, with the Board's approval, approach a gifted pastoral leader and request a covenantal commitment to at least a few weeks of worship leadership in the event that a sudden calamity removes the pastor from the pulpit. They note that the sudden loss of a pastor requires a gifted preacher and worship leader at the very moment the congregation's primary preacher is lost.³⁷

While people may be less apprehensive about developing a Crisis Transition Plan it has the benefit of broaching the subject of transition and getting church leaders to begin reflecting on what a healthy transition might entail before the emotion filled experience is upon them.³⁸ A Crisis Transition Plan can open the door to discussion about the second step which is a Generic Transition Plan. This plan details a vision of how the church

³⁶ Weese and Crabtree, 142.

³⁷ Weese and Crabtree, 188-193.

³⁸ Weese and Crabtree, 199.

intends a normal (i.e. not a crisis) transition to occur. It should begin with an explanation of the Biblical principles that informed the creation of the plan and then specify the general transitional strategy (i.e. a delayed arrival and interim period or an overlapping period), who the key players in a transition might be (i.e. the Board, the Search Committee, an Interim Minister), what resources will be available (e.g. financial, denominational), and how various issues will be discussed and/or negotiated with the departing pastor. Weese and Crabtree suggest the third step is a Tactical Transition Plan. In essence it is a more detailed and specific version of the Generic Plan. Beyond step two, the Tactical Transition Plan should include a “timetable with objectives and milestones, . . . a communication plan, a budget, and a staff management plan.”³⁹ It would also identify unique mission components of the church and how they will be maintained through the transition. Finally the Tactical Plan would also specify a preferred strategy for an exchange of information between the former pastor and new pastor (e.g. through a bridging resource, direct debriefing, or a Successor File).⁴⁰

A complete transition plan covers more than just the departure period of the pastor. As noted in Chapter Six – Future Considerations, the congregation’s goal is to call and integrate a new pastoral leader. A Transition Plan should map a route to this goal.

Weese and Crabtree intend their strategies to apply to churches operating at Level One or higher.⁴¹ Transitions in low performing churches (i.e. Level Zero) need to be very

³⁹ Weese and Crabtree, 143.

⁴⁰ Weese and Crabtree, 142-143. For a more detailed description of the elements of a transition plan including an explanation of their view of interim tasks related to vision, identity and context see 135-143.

⁴¹ See discussion of Weese and Crabtree’s church functioning levels pages 179-190.

different. These transitions are at the same time both simpler and more difficult. They are simpler because fewer bridging strategies are needed to carry important ministries through a transition. There are usually very few ministries which can or need to be maintained. They are more difficult because the choice of a new pastor will be crucial if the congregation is to advance from a Level Zero status. The congregational leaders need to be willing to invest time and energy into the important interim tasks and then to critically interview and evaluate pastoral candidates in order to wisely choose a leader who can bring the needed change. There then needs to be a critical mass of the congregation (i.e. at least twenty-percent) who are willing to provide the finances and support the pastor as he/she leads change if the church is to embrace a different future.⁴²

While none of those interviewed made reference to any pre-planning for periods of transition, two pastors did make reference to changes which were made in the way the Search Committee was formed prior to their resignation. In one church there had been a standing Pulpit Committee which was composed of the deacons and their spouses. About a year before the pastor's resignation that committee was dissolved and new regulations were brought in to create a committee which was more representative of the congregation as a whole. It was also stipulated that there could not be two members from the same household on the committee. In the other church one of the pastor's achievements had been the development of a Church Constitution which contained specific instructions for the formation of a Search Committee. The pastor reported that the week after his

⁴² Weese and Crabtree, 181-186.

resignation the church consulted the Constitution and held a meeting to form the Search Committee. Both churches were among those who experienced a smooth transition.

Brouwer concludes that the lack of attention and prudent planning for pastoral departures creates unhealthy closures and patterns which will negatively impact the future pastoral relationship.⁴³ A congregation should enter the transition period better equipped to face the multitude of tasks, including dealing with normal grief responses, when the pastor has helped them engage in a period of forethought and development of a transition strategy apart from the emotional upheaval which comes when the church is plunged into the process.

A Healthy Departure as a Final Gift

Eventually every ministry comes to a close. Eventually every pastor will have to “pass the torch” to a successor.⁴⁴ The question is not if the pastor will leave, but whether the manner of the pastor’s departure will set the stage for a moment of growth or set back.⁴⁵ Numerous writers suggest that how a pastor exits a congregation is the ultimate measure of one’s ministry. Friedman, for example, states it can either extend or curtail the influence of one’s message,⁴⁶ and Nygren tells pastors their departure will reveal whether they have fostered “personal loyalties or loyalty to the church.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Brouwer, 52.

⁴⁴ Finzel, 177.

⁴⁵ Mead, *Critical Moment*, 20.

⁴⁶ Friedman, 252.

⁴⁷ Nygren, “Ending a Long Pastorate,” 19.

As a servant of Christ the pastor is continually called to seek the welfare of Christ's church even as he/she leaves that congregation. Seeking to initiate a healthy pastoral leadership transition begins with the pastor taking the initiative to determine when it is time to leave. Waiting until one is forced to exit is difficult both for the church and for the pastor (Chapter 1 – Deciding to Leave). Congregations enter into the pastoral transition period as they learn of their pastor's impending departure. Pastors should give prayerful consideration to when and how they privately and publicly communicate this information, paying particular attention to being open and honest while at the same time being gracious and caring (Chapter Two – Communicating Departure). Following the announcement the pastor's own ability to function in a healthy manner will greatly influence the health or dysfunction of the congregation's transition process. His/her ability to model a healthy response to grief and complete his/her own final tasks will set the tone for the congregation's emotional responses to losing their pastor (Chapter Three – The Pastor's Transition). A minister who facilitates the start of the church's grief process, and allows them to withdraw emotional energy after his/her departure, will help prepare the congregation to be ready to engage in a new pastoral leader relationship (Chapter Four – Final Tasks – Relationships).

Pastors who have given time to developing capable lay leaders allow the congregation to enter transition with little concern for the ability of church programs to be maintained, if not grow, during the interim period. Pastors should also prepare leaders to accept the greater responsibilities which come during the interim period (Chapter Five – Final Tasks – Ministries). As the church prepares for a new pastoral leader, the

departing pastor can assist by encouraging the choice of an interim ministry plan which allows the church leadership to make wise use of the interim period. Pastors who affirm the known or unknown new pastor to their congregation and are open to assisting the new pastor become familiar with his/her new congregation will bless their former church's journey towards the Kingdom of God (Chapter 6 – Final Tasks Future Considerations).

The pastor's biblical calling is to serve Christ as His gift to the church. The Epistle to the Ephesians lists pastors among those who are given as gifts to the Church for the purpose of preparing the people for ministry and so that, "the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God." (Ephesians 4:11-13 NIV) Commenting on this passage, Klyne Snodgrass wrote, "We would do well to have less concern about identifying gifts and more concern about being a gift, that is, about how the Spirit functions through us to strengthen the body."⁴⁸ Perhaps, the final measure of one's ministry and the final gift a pastor can leave his/her congregation is the legacy of a smooth and healthy transition to a new pastoral leader.⁴⁹

William McNutt wrote in 1935,

The minister will plan always to conclude his work with a grace and dignity worthy of his high calling under Christ. Departing he will close the door gently behind himself in order to leave a united church.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 213.

⁴⁹ Ted Engstrom quoted in Umidi, 22.

⁵⁰ William R. McNutt, *Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1935), 91, quoted in Gillaspie, *Restless Pastor*, 32.

Postscript

Personal reflection and feedback from those who have read through this thesis material leads the author to believe that there are some topics and issues briefly touched upon in this work which are worthy of further research and exploration. For example, the correlation between the reasons why pastors leave their congregations and the manner in which they leave suggests it would be helpful to seek means and methods of assisting pastors to overcome discouragement and/or resolve conflict which often lead to premature resignations. Somers' observation that a key factor to longevity is the presence of mentoring relationships could play an important part in addressing these issues.¹

Other areas worthy of further exploration include: helping pastors discern the call of God to and/or from a particular ministry situation; helping pastors deal with the emotional, family, and vocational issues which result from involuntary terminations; and guidelines and protocols for multi-staff churches when the senior pastor resigns. There are likely more topics of interest which could be expanded upon.

While composed as part of the requirements for a degree program, much of the material has practical ministry applications and lends itself to further dissemination in a condensed and accessible format. Some sections could be rewritten as short topical pamphlets and made available for Regional Ministers to distribute in appropriate situations. Alternatively, these sections could become short article links in the resource section of the CABC website. Topics or titles could include the following:

Communicating a Pastoral Resignation
The Pastor's Personal Transition Process

¹ See page 29.

Ethical Relationships with Your Former Congregation
Developing a Successor File
An Order of Worship for Ending a Pastoral Covenant
Conducting an Exit Conversation

It was noted that Exit Conversations are best received when they come at the request of the church or Board, but often the laity are not familiar with the concept. Regional Ministers meeting with Search Committees are in a good position to make the suggestion to those Committees as well as to help educate both the laity and the clergy on the process.

During the research process it was noted that the limited amount of literature for pastoral leaders about the departure process is not comprehensive. Oswald's material, for example, tends to focus primarily on the grief process and bringing closure to relationships and pays little attention to sustaining ministries. Weese and Crabtree's volume, by contrast, focuses almost exclusively on sustaining ministries and only has a few minor references to the grief process which occurs with the loss of a pastoral leader. It also became apparent through the research that preparing a congregation for a healthy transition should begin long before a pastor's resignation. It would be beneficial, therefore, to help pastors become aware of the dynamics of pastoral transitions before they actually resign. Perhaps the material of Chapter 4 through Chapter 7 in particular could be condensed into a very practical pocket book (twenty to thirty pages) and made available to pastors through a Convention book give away. Workshops sponsored by Associations or ministerials could also be beneficial in helping pastors consider the positive elements of a more thoughtful and planned strategy of ministry during the final months of a particular pastorate.

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APPENDIX 1

Sample Letter Sent to Request Participation in Survey

Dear Pastor:

I am currently working on a thesis project for a Doctor of Ministry degree at Acadia Divinity College. The working title of my thesis is “Leading While Leaving: The Role of a Departing Pastor in Pastoral Transition.” The focus of the project is on pastoral leadership as a church begins the process of transition from one pastor to another. Part of my research includes interviews with pastors in the final months of a particular ministry as well as lay leaders in their churches. I hope that by reflecting with those in the midst of this transition I might glean some general principles which could help pastors lead well during such a period of flux.

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to talk with me about your experience during this time of transition. I want to assure you that any information I might use from our conversation would be dealt with confidentially. That is to say, names will be withheld or changed and circumstances or quotes would be related in general enough terms that specific people and places should not be identifiable by the reader.

If you would be willing to meet with me, I would call you to arrange a time that I could come to you. I would also like to meet with a deacon or another lay-leader either before or after our time together.

Having gone through a couple of these transitions myself, I realize they can be periods which are both busy and emotional. I am, therefore, all the more appreciative of your consideration of this request. You can contact me by email or phone to let me know if you are willing to meet with me. I pray you might be continually aware of God’s blessing both on you and your family as you serve Him.

In Christ,

Peter Lohnes

APPENDIX 2

Questions Asked of the Pastors in Initial Interviews

Church & Pastor History

How long have you been pastor of this church?

Tell me about the church. General history, size, make up, ministries, personality? How healthy is it?

What ministry gifts have you brought to this pastorate? What gifts for ministry do you think you lack?

How are you are similar and or different than your predecessor?

How has the church changed over your ministry?

Do you know anything of the church's history during previous pastoral transitions?

Resignation or Departure Details

Why are you leaving at this time? What are the circumstances?

What was the process of resignation? Who knew first, second etc.? When did they know?

How did they know? (Verbal, Written, etc.)

How long from your resignation to your departure?

Emotional/Relational Issues Related to Transition

How are you feeling about all this?

How do you think your congregation is feeling about your departure?

How is your immediate family feeling about what has happened? ? (If applicable.)

How involved has your spouse been with your decisions? (If applicable.)

Have you noticed any difference in you relationship with the church or how congregational members are treating you since you announced your resignation? If yes, what seems different?

What will you remember with fondness from your time in this pastorate? Are there any regrets?

Practical Ministry Issues Related to Transition

What ministries of the church do you see continuing and not continuing?

What do you see for the church's future?

Intentional Planning for Transition

What input have you given to planning for the church's transition to a new pastor?

What ministry plans do you have for the remainder of your time here?

Are you doing anything to help the congregation come to terms with their feelings?

What do you think the church will need in a new pastor? Have you communicated this with anyone?

What are the church's plans for the interim period?

If someone asked, would you be willing to talk with a pastoral candidate for the church?

Is there any advice you have for someone going through this transition?

Questions Asked of Lay-Leaders in Initial Interviews

Church & Pastor History

How long have you been a part of this congregation?

How long has your pastor served this church?

Tell me about the church. General history, size, make up, ministries, personality? How healthy is it?

What have been the gifts, or strengths of your current pastor?

What are the weaknesses of your current pastor?

How are your current and previous pastors similar and different?

How has the church changed over your current pastor's ministry?

Do you know anything of the church's history during previous pastoral transitions?

Resignation or Departure Details

Why is your pastor leaving? What are the circumstances?

How did you find out the pastor was leaving? Do you know anymore about the process of resignation?

How long from your pastor's resignation to his/her departure?

Emotional/Relational Issues Related to Transition

How are you feeling about all this?

How do you think the congregation is feeling about it?

How do you think the pastor feels about this?

Did you notice any differences in the pastor's relationships with the congregation since you knew he/she was leaving? If yes, can you describe those differences?

What will you remember with fondness from his/her time in this pastorate?

Are there any regrets?

Practical Ministry Issues Related to Transition

What ministries of the church do you see continuing and not continuing?

What do you see for the church's future?

Intentional Planning for Transition

Has the pastor given any input to the planning for the church's transition to a new pastor?

What do you think will be the pastor's primary tasks for the remainder of his/her time here?

What will the search committee do while the departing pastor is still here?

What are the church's plans for the interim period?

What do you think the church will need in a new pastor?

Do you have any advice for pastors going through this transition process?

Appendix 5

A Service for Ending a Pastoral Relationship

Prelude

Opening Words

(Read by a Lay Leader)

Our church, like any community, changes. Babies are born. Children grow up. Loved ones and friends grow old. People move into our community and church and others leave us, moving to new places, new experiences, and new opportunities.

When a pastor comes into our church, we covenant with one another; we promise to walk together as God's people, deepening our commitment to Jesus Christ, and growing closer to God. God's covenant with us never changes, but our covenants with one another do change. We gather now to mark the ending of the covenant between *name of pastor* and *name of church*.

Call to Worship

Example: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Hymn

Prayer

Scriptures & Sermon

(If done by an invited guest speaker, then on a theme of transition, the continuity of God's work, and emphasis on the new type of relationship which will exist between the congregation and the pastor. If done by the pastor, similar themes may be used and appropriate memories and appreciation can be shared.)

Example Passages:

Philippians 1:3-6 where Paul expresses his thankfulness for the Philippians and confidence that God will continue a good work in and through them.

Joshua 24:1-17 Joshua reviews the people's history and presents them with a decision for the future.

John 14:18-27 Jesus' promise that the disciples will never be alone, but the Holy Spirit will come to them in the midst of their being overwhelmed with change.

Hymn

Communion Service

Sharing Memories of the Pastoral Relationship

(Designated members of the congregation may share memories of pastoral relationship. If not part of the message, the pastor may then express appreciation, and share memories of the joys and sorrows of his/her time with the congregation.)

Concluding the Pastor and Congregational Covenant

(A responsive reading led by the departing pastor.)

Pastor: I was called to the ministry in this congregation and began serving on *date*. I exercised this trust with God's help and to the best of my abilities. After prayerful and careful consideration, it now seems to me that I am called to leave this charge, and I publicly state that my tenure as pastor of this church ends this day. *(The letter of resignation can be given to the appropriate lay leader.)*

Dear friends, you have allowed me to serve as pastor and leader among you. It is time for me to return to you what you have entrusted to me as a servant of Christ.

I was called to teach and proclaim the Word of God faithfully among you. May God's Word continue to challenge, nurture and inspire you. *(A Bible may be given to a deacon, or a suitable lay leader, or placed on the communion table in full view of the congregation.)*

Congregation: We will continue to place Scripture at the center of our life. The Word of God lives among us.

Pastor: I was called to help you be and make disciples. Baptism is the symbol which proclaims new birth and identification with people of Christ. The bread and the cup are the continuing reminders of Christ's sacrifice for our salvation. I remind you of Jesus' instruction that to be His disciples we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. *(A loaf and a cup may be given to deacon or a suitable lay leader or placed on the communion table in full view of the congregation.)*

Congregation: We will continue to celebrate new life in baptism and welcome newcomers into the fellowship of believers. We will continue to break bread and share the cup and celebrate the work of Christ. We will continue to seek daily to follow Jesus.

Pastor: I was called to offer care, encouragement and to help you serve one another. May you continue to love one another as God has loved you. *(A pictorial directory, membership roll, or another suitable symbol of the congregation may be given to the Clerk or a suitable lay leader or placed on the communion table in full view of the congregation.)*

Congregation: We will continue to offer care, challenge and encouragement to one another.

Pastor: As I entered this place I was given these keys. They are symbols of the daily duties, the work of administration; and of this building, a witness to Christ's presence in this community. May your light continue to shine from this place. *(The keys may be given to the Chair of Trustees, or a suitable lay leader or placed on the communion table in full view of the congregation.)*

Congregation: We will continue to build, to dream and to grow, discerning God's will for us in our time and place.

Pastor: Members and friends of *name of church*, I thank you for your love, kindness and support during these past *number* years. I am grateful for the struggles, surprises, and opportunities we have shared. Let us not forget our ministry together belongs to Jesus and is always on going. I ask for your forgiveness for the mistakes I have made. As I leave I carry with me all that I have learned here.

Congregation: We receive your thankfulness, offer our forgiveness and accept that you are now leaving us to *retire/minister* elsewhere. We are grateful for your time among us. We ask your forgiveness for our mistakes. Your inspiration on our faith and faithfulness will not leave us with your departure. We release you from your duties of ministry here in our midst, and no longer turn to you as we have when you were a pastor among us.

Pastor: I accept your thanksgiving and forgiveness of me. I forgive you. May our time together and our parting now be pleasing and acceptable to God. I now release you from turning to me as a pastor among you. I encourage your continuing ministry here and will pray for you and for your new pastor.

Prayer of Blessing for the Congregation and the New Pastor *(Pastor)*

Prayer of Commissioning by the Church *(Lay Leader)*

Hymn

Benediction/Blessing

(Pastor to the Congregation followed by Congregation to the Pastor)

Example: The Lord bless you and keep you;
 the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
 the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.

Postlude

Service Adapted from:

Celebrate God's Presence: A Book of Services for The United Church of Canada, (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2000), pp. 696-705.

Edward White, *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*. (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 74-76.

Roy Oswald, James M. Heath and Ann W. Heath. *Beginning Ministry Together: The Alban Handbook For Clergy Transitions*. (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 2003), 98-101.

Satterlee, Craig A. *When God Speaks Through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition*. (Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 2005) 118.

Appendix 6

Sample Planning Sheet for the Final Months of Ministry

Each pastoral transition will have its unique components, but every pastoral transition will benefit from time spent in early and intentional planning. The following is intended to offer a starting point for things a pastor might include as part of a plan for the final months of a pastoral relationship.

Communicating Departure

- Are there church protocols for a pastoral departure?**
- Date of Departure:**
- Date, Place and Manner of Public Announcement:**
- People to Inform Prior to Announcement based on Position.** (e.g. Deacons)
- People to Inform Prior to Announcement based on Relationship.** (e.g. Close Friends)
- Draft Resignation Letter. Include:**
 - Specific dates of completion.
 - Expressions of appropriate grief.
 - Expressions of appreciation.
 - Specific details about future plans.
 - Blessing.

Pastor's Transition

- Up Date Records.** (e.g. Wedding Registry, Baptismal Records, Financial Receipts, Travel Vouchers.)
- Clean Out Unnecessary Files.**
- Write Final Reports.**
- Inform Denominational Personnel.**
- Change of Address notes.**
- Inform/Resign Positions in Local Ministerial, Community Groups, Agencies.**
- Delayed Issues and Unfinished Tasks to Complete** (e.g. Policy Statement)
- Non-Pastoral Tasks to be Delegated.** (e.g. Turning on the heat.)
- Clean-up Study.**

- Plan Retreat or Time for Reflection Following Completion of Ministry.**

Relationships

- Develop Visitation Plan**

- Those Needing Encouragement (i.e. Not dealing with resignation well).
- Those with Illness, Bereaved, Personal Needs.
- Those with whom have unresolved issues.
- Final visits with Shut-ins.
- Those worked closely with.
- Friends.

- Develop Appreciation Plan**

- People to Thank in Person.
- Thank you notes.
- Thank you calls, emails.

- Final Meetings/Groups to Attend**

- Plan Farewell Worship Service**

- Attend Farewell Event**

Ministries

- Assess Capability and Maturity Level of Ministries**

- Ministries With Capable Leaders
- Ministries Still Needing Leadership
- Unique Mission Components
- Ministries Which Need to Cease

- Items for Presentation to the Board**

- Appreciation.
- Specifics Departure Dates and Details.
- Personal Transition Plans.
- Interim and Search Protocols Specific to the Church.
- Principles of Transition Periods.
- Interim Period Tasks (i.e. Opportunity to Evaluate and Discover)
- Encouragement to Seek Interim Pastor.
- Personal Working Job Description. (i.e. What one typically does in pastoral role.)
- List of Shut-ins, Serious Illnesses, Bereaved.
- Regional Minister Contact Information.
- Terms of Future Relationship.

- Worship and Prayer.

Future Considerations

Develop Preaching Plan for Final Months - Specific passages for specific dates.

Include themes on:

- Leadership Transitions/Changes.
- Areas of Congregational Strength.
- Permission to Grieve.
- Confidence in God's Faithfulness for the Future.

Ensure Church Develops Interim Ministry Plan.

Ensure Church Forms Search Committee.

Exit Interview (If Requested.) – Suggested Facilitator.

Successor File

- Constitution and By-Laws.
- Policy Statements.
- Vision and Goal Statements.
- Church Covenant.
- Annual Reports.
- Membership List (Street and Mailing Address, Phone Numbers).
- Adherents Lists (Street and Mailing Address, Phone Numbers).
- Pictorial Directory.
- Boards and Committee Lists.
- List of Church Ministries and Leaders.
- One Year of Bulletins.
- Calendar of Normal Church Events for Next Year.
- List of Practices and Traditions Peculiar to Congregation. (e.g. Method of Communion, Where Keys are Kept, Annual Fundraisers).
- Local Wedding, Funeral, Baptism Traditions.
- Map of Community.
- Community Events Calendar.
- Contact Information for Local Churches, Clergy, Ministerial.
- Information for Hospitals, Schools, Police, Community Agencies.
- List of Shut-ins, Recent Serious Illness, Bereavements.
- List of People with Untapped Potential.
- Recent Changes in the Church.
- List of Good Restaurants.
- Personal History with the Church.
- Former Pastor's New Contact Information.

- Offer to Meet if Desired.
- Other Appropriate Information.