

YOUR BEST MOVE

Effective Leadership Transition for the Local Church

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CHAPTER 1

A Theology of Transition

A pastoral transition is not just about changing leaders; it is also about furthering the mission of God through a particular congregation. Before we dive into the tasks that support an effective pastoral transition, we turn to the Scriptures for a look at how pastoral transitions can help the church gain traction toward the future. A solid biblical foundation gives us helpful tools to make good leadership transitions, which are important to furthering the church's mission of making disciples of Jesus for the work of God's kingdom.

The transition from one leader to another is a recurring theme throughout the entire Bible. Moses, for example, groomed Joshua to be his successor over a period of years, culminating in Moses' charge to "be strong and bold, for you

are the one who will go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their ancestors to give them" (Deut. 31:7). The prophet Elijah anointed Elisha as his successor, leaving the prophet's mantle behind for Elisha to carry forward (2 Kings 2:4–8). The kings of Israel and Judah struggled with succession issues, with one generation often overthrowing the previous one either by violent coup or, as in the case of Hezekiah and Josiah, by overturning their fathers' apostasy through wide-ranging religious reform (2 Kings 18:1–20:21; 22:1–23:30). These few examples from the Old Testament indicate that transitions in leadership most often occurred as the result of a kind of apprentice-master relationship where the apprentice was groomed—either intentionally or unintentionally—as the master's replacement. Jesus would groom his disciples in a similar manner, telling them that they would do even greater things than he had done (John 14:12–14). Throughout the Bible, God sends people to particular times and places in order to further the mission of God's kingdom.

Pastors entering a new church setting might frame their thinking and transition planning around the idea that they have come to a particular church according to God's timing, even if the initial circumstances of the change might lead them to believe otherwise. If God has already worked in the life of this church throughout its history—even if the evidence appears on the surface to be scant—then a new pastor must believe that there is divine reason why he or she and this church have been thrust together for a season. The first ninety days provide an opportunity for the new pastor to learn where God has been at work and how his or her gifts

and skills can align with God's vision for both the church and its surrounding community.

In addition to knowing the times and seasons of the church's life and knowing how the new pastor's gifts and graces align with this particular time in the church's history, another theological consideration in pastoral transition concerns the missional lens through which the new pastor views the congregation's indigenous culture, norms, symbols, and relational style. While each pastor arrives at a new church with a particular personality type, leadership style preference, and theological worldview, the pastor must also begin to understand how the congregation will view his or her leadership through their own cultural lenses. The pastor must think like a missionary going into a foreign culture in order to understand the unique context of the church and its surrounding community.

Translating the message of the kingdom for people in a specific social context first requires an understanding of the culture of both the church and the community. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian church that he had adapted his leadership approach and evangelistic styles to the indigenous cultures of the churches he planted and encouraged in various locations around the first century Roman world. Acting essentially like a new pastor, Paul saw himself as a "slave to all," approaching each city and religious culture as a servant leader with an agenda to win as many people to Christ as possible (1 Cor. 9:19). Paul's own unique standing as both a Jew and a Roman citizen enabled him to connect with both Jews and Gentiles. He wrote, "I have become all things to all

people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Paul had learned to listen, adapt, and adjust to the cultural language of those he was trying to reach. Clergy entering new churches enter into new social contexts as well, and the early days of transition offer an especially rich opportunity to begin to learn how one's own unique giftedness, experiences, and cultural background might win people to Christ along with a congregation's buy-in for their leadership.

Whether the pastor is sent by the denomination or called by a local church, pastors are all itinerant messengers. We come to a church for a season, but there will always be a time to move on. As one senior citizen reminded me on the first day of my first pastorate, "I was here before you came and I will be here after you are gone." She was right! Pastors should see themselves as itinerant missionaries who bring the gospel to wherever and whomever God sends them. Two biblical stories stand out as examples of the kinds of appointments to which God sends itinerant messengers: Jonah and his difficult appointment to ministry in Nineveh (Jonah 1-3) and the seventy disciples whom Jesus sent on an itinerant mission to bring the good news of the kingdom "to every town and place where he himself intended to go" (Luke 10:1).

The Jonah story expresses the tension of arriving at a ministry setting where no prophet or pastor would have wanted to go. God calls Jonah to the hostile appointment at Nineveh, Israel's bitter enemy, while Jonah pines for the peaceful paradise of Tarshish, which lies completely in the other direction (Jonah 1:1-3). Eugene H. Peterson uses the Jonah story to point out that pastors can often see their

ministry as a career where churches are used as stepping-stones on the pathway to success—but not success as defined by obedience to God:

We respond to the divine initiative, but we humbly request to choose the destination. We are going to be pastors, but not in Nineveh for heaven's sake. Let's try Tarshish. In Tarshish we can have a religious career without having to deal with God.¹

In reality, many congregations feel more like Nineveh than Tarshish: "a site for hard work without a great deal of hope for success, at least as success is measured on the charts."² Pastors sometimes find themselves in Nineveh, and must learn to rely on God's power and provision for the task of transforming the community while God transforms the pastor as well.

Luke 10:1-12, which describes Jesus' sending forth of the seventy or seventy-two, would seem to most mirror the kind of sending to a specific place, time, and type of ministry that pastors experience in coming to a new church. Jesus appointed seventy others and sent them to the towns of Judea as laborers for the plentiful harvest of people for God's kingdom (Luke 10:1-2). Churches may appear as emotionally dysfunctional wolves that can attack clergy who fail to prepare for the difficult tasks of leadership and change, while pastors may also be seen as interfering wolves who threaten the congregation's sense of security (Luke 10:3). The work of ministry has traditionally expected clergy to be ready to travel light, leaving behind the stores of good will and experience

with one church in order to move quickly to a new setting. Such a call leaves little time for dallying or reflecting along the way (Luke 10:4). Clergy enter a new house of worship and church community announcing the peace of Christ. Some will greet this announcement with excitement, while others will greet the new pastor's arrival with reactive anxiety about the change of leadership (Luke 10:6). Clergy are called to remain with their congregations until released, receiving what the congregation provides even if that requires a lower salary than he or she received previously (Luke 10:7). Clergy are charged to be fully present to their congregations and not merely see them as stepping-stones to a different or more lucrative church "house" (Luke 10:7). The ministry of the itinerant pastor has not changed much since Jesus sent out the seventy—engaging in fellowship (Luke 10:7), offering healing to the sick in body and soul (Luke 10:9), and announcing the kingdom of God (Luke 10:9). Sometimes, too, Jesus calls pastors to announce God's judgment in places where evil and injustice seem to be the norm (Luke 10:10–12).

From the congregational side, the story of the sending of the seventy reminds Christians that welcoming the stranger often equates to welcoming God. Jesus sent the seventy ahead of him "to every town and place where he himself intended to go" (Luke 10:1), where they were to represent Jesus and his message that "the kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9). Those who listened to the disciples' message effectively listened to Jesus and, by extension, listened to God (Luke 10:16). In the same way, in Luke 9:48, Jesus made clear that the one who welcomes him welcomes God.

The Scriptures reveal that God often comes as a stranger. God appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre in the guise of three strangers who, after Abraham had provided them with hospitality, brought him the miraculous news that he and Sarah would have a son in their old age (Gen. 18:1–15). God appeared as a nighttime visitor to Jacob, and the patriarch wrestled with God until dawn, when God granted him a blessing (Gen. 32:22–32). The risen Jesus would appear to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, coming to them as a stranger falling into step with them along the way. When Cleopas and his companion offered hospitality to Jesus, the stranger, they recognized him "in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). The writer of Hebrews offers advice to the early Christian community based on the divine tendency of God to come as a stranger: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb. 13:2). If a new pastor obeys the call of God to move to a new church, the receiving congregation should treat this new stranger and his or her family with the kind of hospitality that is worthy of the one who sent them. How a congregation welcomes a new pastor (and bids farewell to the previous one) reveals the congregation's understanding of hospitality.

No matter the denomination, pastors and congregations both know that leadership transitions will happen throughout their history of ministry. Managing transitions well, particularly in the early months of a new pastorate, can enable the clergy and the congregation to begin working for a larger harvest of people for the kingdom.