

YOUR BEST MOVE



Effective Leadership Transition for the Local Church

ROBERT KAYLOR

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Introduction

Early on the morning of February 25, 2010, I had just completed an epic workout at the local gym under the barking tutelage of my personal trainer. As I sat on the locker room bench trying to assess if all my body parts were still intact, I heard my cell phone vibrating from the top shelf of the locker—unusual for just a little after 7:00 a.m. I was pretty sure it was my wife, Jennifer, calling to let me know that I had forgotten something (a frequent occurrence), but when I answered, I heard the voice of my district superintendent.

Now in my own denomination's appointive system, district superintendents rarely call, especially that early, unless there's something big going on. That something big is usually the news that the bishop has appointed you a new

church. There in the locker room, still breathless from the workout, I learned that I would be moving after seven great years at the church I had been serving. I had not asked for a move so it came as a surprise. So much for bringing the heart rate back down!

Whether you are a pastor or a church member, the announcement of a pastoral change is an anxiety-producing moment. Even if the move was expected, a sense of disequilibrium sets in when the theoretical becomes the actual. Whether they have accepted a call to a new church or been appointed to one, pastors know that a move brings with it a lot of logistical challenges, from getting to know a new congregation to getting a family settled into a new community. Churches wonder what life will be like with a new pastoral leader. Can she preach well? Will he care for me like the other pastor did? Who will officiate at my daughter's wedding or my funeral? The announcement of a transition immediately begets a whole host of questions and speculation about the future.

Like most pastors, I have moved several times over the course of a life of ministry. Some of these transitions have been smooth and some have made me wonder if going back to my previous life as an Army infantry officer would have been a safer and less stressful choice. No matter how many times you make a move, every transition presents a new challenge fraught with equal parts excitement and peril. While a move may present a great opportunity for a pastor to take on more responsibility, or a chance for a congregation to receive a new leader, any leadership transition also presents the

potential for failure. Pastors and congregations both know the risk, which is why transitions produce a high degree of stress for everyone involved.

Michael Watkins, a professor at the Harvard Business School, says that transition represents a time of *acute vulnerability* for both the new leader and the organization.¹ The new leader lacks an understanding of the organizational culture, the working relationships of the people within that culture, and the organization's expectation of the new leader's role. Because of that lack of understanding, more than 40 percent of new leaders will fail within the first eighteen months of entering a new leadership role.² These failures typically happen when leaders commit errors within the first ninety to one hundred days of a transition, such as acting too quickly with limited information, failing to build key relationships and credibility with stakeholders, and not securing the few early successes that can lay the foundation for future success. The cost of that failure can be very high—up to twenty-four times the leader's base compensation according to one study.³ Churches can expect at least a 15 percent drop in attendance and financial giving when an effective pastor departs.⁴ If a church or pastor handles a transition poorly, particularly during those critical, first ninety days, the cost in terms of attendance, giving, morale, and momentum can prove devastating.

During my previous transition, I had not experienced that kind of failure. Things seemed to be flowing smoothly during the first few months, but as I reflected on it seven years later, I realized that it could have gone much better.

The church sits in the middle of a ski resort town and on winter Sunday mornings when there was fresh powder on the ski runs (which were clearly visible out of the church's windows behind where I stood to preach), the church would be fairly empty. Growing up as a kid from a blue-collar family in western Pennsylvania, this left me fuming for the first year or so of my tenure. After all, when I was kid I had a choice about whether I wanted to go to church—I could go happy or I could go sad, but I was going regardless. My congregants felt differently about church attendance, even when I preached on Jesus in Gethsemane and hammered his quote as I pointed out the window toward the lifts, “Can you not wait with me for one hour?” They waited all year for fresh snow because it was the reason they moved there in the first place. My griping about empty pews left us both frustrated.

It took me a while to catch on, but after some wise counsel from a few clergy colleagues in town, I began to see that my frustration was essentially a failure on my part to learn the culture of a ski town, where ministry happens as much outside as it does inside. When I started doing slope-side worship services at one of the resorts on Sunday afternoons, I began to see things differently. These people loved God, but on beautiful powder days they wanted to be outside on the mountain in a much grander cathedral. When I started to join them out there, they started coming to church in their ski bibs before heading out to the slopes.

I made a mistake in my early assumptions about ministry there, a mistake that could have proved disastrous had I not

adjusted my approach early on. I did not want to make the same kinds of mistakes in this upcoming move, so I began to scour the Internet for books on clergy transitions. I found several, but they mostly promoted a “wait and see” approach to transition; warning against making any changes for the first six months to a year. When the district superintendent sent me the profile of the new church, the document said that the church wanted someone who would be a change agent. Most churches will ask for this kind of pastor, though their definition of change varies. I was replacing a pastor who had just retired after serving the church for eleven of its twenty-year history, so I represented change just by showing up.

I found some contrasting advice, however. Kennon Callahan, best known for his book *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, suggests that the best chance for new pastors to make some advancements and improvements happens in the early days of the transition, especially within the first ninety days.⁵ If the first ninety days of transition represent the most dangerous possibility for failure, they also represent the best opportunity to begin achieving success. If a new pastor and congregation approach those first ninety days of ministry together with an intentional plan and a vision for success, they can establish momentum for change much earlier and begin developing effective habits that will lead them toward a successful future.

One of the books that I found most helpful in preparing for my own transition was Michael Watkins’ *The First 90 Days*, where he defines the goal of a leadership transition as reaching the “breakeven point,” or the point at which the

new leader contributes as much to the organization as he or she consumes from it.⁶ In terms of clergy transitions, a newly appointed pastor and a congregation reach the breakeven point when they have learned enough about one another, the church's organizational culture, and the cultural context of the community that they can then begin the process of casting vision and transforming the organization. The sooner the pastor and congregation reach the breakeven point, the sooner they will move out of transition and into the mission and future God has for them.

Armed with a goal for my transition, I began developing a plan that would include tasks for me and for the congregation I was leaving, as well as tasks that would help me enter the new congregation. Leaving a congregation that I had grown to love deeply over seven years would not be easy and we needed to deal with that grief together. I realized that the first task of transitioning to a new church involved leaving well from the old one. I also knew that the interim time between the announcement of my move and my actual first day at the new church could prove fruitful if I used it well. Using some of the material I had gleaned from Watkins and others, I crafted a transition plan that I presented to the new church. The plan involved several key tasks:

1. Leaving well: saying goodbye to my current church with grace and integrity and investing in the success of my successor.
2. Creating a Transition Team: bringing together a group of opinion leaders in the new church to aid in

- the transition, provide me with feedback, and help me navigate both potential problems and early wins.
3. Achieving early wins: discovering the immediate opportunities to make effective and visible changes that would establish my credibility and begin generating momentum.
 4. Researching the congregation: learning about the congregation's culture and its symbols, norms, and assumptions, as well as its emotional system.
 5. Building the leadership team: developing relationships with key stakeholders among the lay leadership and team-building with the church staff, as well as clarifying and negotiating what the congregation, staff, and lay leadership expected of me as their pastor and what I expected of them.
 6. Communicating during the transition: crafting a communication plan, which included letters, newsletter articles, and a blog to share information during the interim period before I started work, and a strategy for communicating during my first day, first Sunday, and first major change during the transition.
 7. Maintaining balance: managing time well so that I could give attention to my young family as they transitioned into a new community, and paying attention to my physical and spiritual health during the transition.

The new church and I began executing the plan right after my introduction as the new pastor and I am convinced

that the planning we did together as pastor and congregation enabled us to develop a strong relationship, navigate some potential land mines, discover some opportunities for early wins, and reach the breakeven point more quickly.

During my transition, I was working on my Doctor of Ministry degree through Asbury Theological Seminary. The transition plan proved so successful in my own move that one of my faculty mentors, Dr. Russell West, encouraged me to see if the plan could be taught and replicated with other churches with the same degree of effectiveness. I interviewed pastors and church leaders from ten different churches in my denomination about their transition experiences. The churches that executed the transition plan reported that they had effectively reached the end of their transition within three to four months of the beginning of the pastor's appointment. The churches without a transition plan still identified themselves as being in transition more than a year after the new pastoral appointment. The study revealed that a well-designed and executed transition plan is the key to a pastor and congregation starting well together. I continue to teach workshops on pastoral transitions and each year I hear from pastors and church leaders who have used the process outlined in this handbook to launch an effective new beginning in their churches.

This handbook emerged out of my study of various churches and my own transitional experiences. I designed it so that pastors and congregational leaders can use it as an easy reference guide for planning the transition together. The more the new pastor and congregation can share their

thoughts, hopes, fears, expectations, and vision together, the healthier the transition will be. This book deals primarily with a situation in which a senior or solo pastor comes to a new church, but the principles can also apply to associate pastors and church staff who may adapt them for their particular area of ministry in the church. As you read through the book, you will likely come to the realization that there is a lot of work to be done in planning an effective transition, and you may be tempted to skip some of the steps. You will, of course, want to adapt the learning to your context, but I urge you to dig in and invest significant time in this process. The hard work you do over the first few months of your transition will make all the difference for both a good start and momentum toward the future.

If that phone call has already come to you, whether you are a pastor or a member of the church's personnel committee or lay leadership, I pray that this book helps you begin to work on your next move!

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.