"So, you're moving..."

GUIDANCE FOR PASTORS IN TRANSITION

DR. BOB KAYLOR

A SEEDBED SHORT

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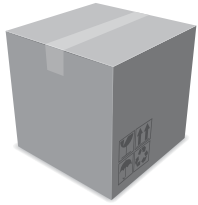

The 19th century English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson spoke eloquently about life's heartaches and joys, noting spring as the time when "a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love." Tennyson was a preacher's kid. While he spent his teenage years writing poems about girls, his father, George Clayton Tennyson, wondered if each new spring would bring a move to a new Anglican parish. Ironically, George stayed in the same two-point charge for twenty-five years until his death in 1831—a long series of springs that his Methodist colleagues would have found incredible.

While Tennyson wrote of life and love, pastors and church leaders across the land know spring is the time when district superintendents, ministers and churches turn their fancies (not so lightly) to thoughts of moving or welcoming a new pastor. Pastors and congregations who are undergoing changes may look to this new person or opportunity as the answer to all their hopes and dreams.

That optimism is a good thing, but the reality of pastoral transition is that it's also fraught with the potential for misunderstanding, disappointment, unclear expectations, and disaster (then again, what relationship isn't?). Some research on business leadership suggests that 40 percent of new leaders fail within the first 18 months of entering a new leadership role. The cost of failure is high—up to twenty-four times the leader's base compensation, which includes revenue lost when people depart, the cost of selecting a new leader, and lost momentum (Levin 57). In terms of leadership transition in the church, the cost may be even higher. Typically, a church can expect to see a 15 percent drop in worship attendance and financial giving when an effective pastor departs (Weese and Crabtree 30). If the transition of the new pastor is handled poorly, that percentage can become even higher and have long-term impact on the church's ability to thrive. Tennyson didn't say it, but breaking up is, indeed, hard to do.

Most failures in pastoral transitions are the result of very early mistakes in the relationship. Acting too quickly with limited information, failing to build key relationships and credibility with stakeholders, and not securing a few early wins that lay the foundation for early success are just of few of the missteps that pastors make within the first three to four months of a new appointment. Congregations, on the other hand, can also make the mistake of constantly comparing the new pastor to his or her predecessor, or by failing to provide an atmosphere of hospitality to the new pastor and his or her family. A pastoral transition may be like an arranged marriage between pastor and congregation, but falling in love is possible if both parties invest themselves fully in the relationship from the beginning.

A healthy pastoral transition, like any healthy relationship, begins with building credibility and trust and clarifying expectations. To do that, both the church and the pastor need to invest in an intentional period of learning about one another. The creation and execution of a written transition plan accelerates that process and brings both the leader and the organization to a "breakeven point." At this point a new leader begins to contribute as much value to the new organization as he or she has consumed from it (Watkins 2). When a newly appointed pastor and congregation have each learned enough about one another and clarified the expectations in their relationship, they can begin to engage in the process of planning for the future, organizing change, and transforming together. The more quickly and efficiently both the leader and the organization can reach the breakeven point, the more quickly they can begin to solve problems and exploit opportunities together.

The issue of transition became important to me when I got a call in February of 2010 to move to a new appointment. I had been at my previous church for seven fruitful years. While I wasn't looking forward to moving, I was excited about the opportunity. This move marked my fourth pastoral appointment, I thought about the fact that I had made a lot of mistakes in the early months of serving those previous churches—nothing disastrous, but some misunderstandings and unclear expectations took some significant recovery time. When I was appointed to a ski resort town, for example, I failed to understand that "powder days" were holy days on the church calendar and that attendance would be lighter on those days. At that time I worked out of an old downtown church mentality where the same people sat in the same pews week after week. This congregation defined church

in much broader terms. I got frustrated at the lack of attendance on powder Sundays, and they got frustrated at my narrow interpretation of worship. It took me three years to learn that church in that context didn't happen so much on Sunday morning as it did in being with the people out and about during the week. When I started to hang out in coffee shops, on mountain bike trails, and on ski slopes, they started attending church—even on powder days. If I had taken a little time to learn the culture early, I would have avoided a lot of misunderstanding.

I didn't want to make the same kind of mistake in this new appointment, so I started to look at some resources on clergy transition. While several books focused on the dynamics of change, few focused on the nuts and bolts of transition planning. A lot of the literature suggested making no changes for the first full year of transition. This idea seemed wrong to me given that clergy are often appointed to a congregation for the specific purpose of leading change and bringing new vitality and vision to the system. Making changes isn't the issue; however, these changes must emerge from a clear sense of the congregation's goals and include their participation in the process.

That's when I came across Michael Watkins' helpful book The First 90 Days. Watkins is a professor at the Harvard Business School and wrote this book for business leaders moving into new positions. However, his wisdom about intentional planning for the first ninety days of a new leadership setting seemed solid to me. Watkins outlined ten key tasks that leaders and organizations should execute in the first ninety days to facilitate learning and achieving early success in the transition. I took Watkins' list and modified it for a church setting, adding some things and

deleting others. I shared a transition plan outline with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee of the new church; we began to work together. The ten tasks were:

1. Leaving well.

Every transition starts with an ending, and the failure to identify what's ending and ignoring the resulting grief leads to more problems for leaders and organizations in transition than anything else. Pastors must prepare the congregation they are leaving by defining for them what has ended and turning them toward the possibilities represented by new leadership. Simultaneously, pastors must also deal with their own feelings of loss and grief. Congregations must effectively say goodbye to their outgoing pastors so that they can open themselves to receive a new leader and his or her family. Unresolved grief and failure to let go will make it much harder for a new pastor and congregation to bond with one another. You can't arrive until you've truly left.

I prepared a packet of information for my successor, had personal conversations with key leaders, and preached about transition during my last six weeks in the pulpit. I also reminded them in writing and from the pulpit that I would always be their friend, but I would no longer be their pastor. This is an important step in preparing the way for a successor. They don't need you hanging around and making yourself available for others to voice their opinions about the new pastor. Once you're done, you're done!

2. Create a Transition Team.

A Transition Team (TT) is a group of five to nine people selected from the congregation (preferably selected by the Staff-Parish Relations Committee or its equivalent) who may or may not be

formal leaders in the church, but are most definitely opinion leaders and have access to the church "grapevine." A TT is designed to gauge the pulse of the church during the new pastor's first ninety days or so. The team meets at least monthly and provides a focus group for the pastor to review plans, share ideas, and test changes before they are implemented.

My transition team was essential to helping me navigate those first three months in the new parish and ran interference with those who were having difficulty with the change. My predecessor had pastored there for eleven of the church's twenty years and was the only pastor many had known. The TT ran interference for me and helped to sell some of the early and, in my view, much-needed changes I made in the worship service. I was able to collaborate with them as I listened to people in the congregation. Their feedback was probably the most vital factor in us having a successful transition together.

3. Develop a learning plan.

In most situations, the first people who come to see the new pastor are people with an axe to grind. They want to make sure they get to you first. If you pay attention to their "advice," you're likely to get a very distorted view of what's going on in the church. In other words, beware of Greeks bearing casseroles!

An intentional learning plan, on the other hand, allows you to act as a researcher and anthropologist, approaching the church as a people group to be studied. Asking everyone the same questions and tracking the responses helps you mine significant data about the church and the peoples' hopes, dreams, and expectations.

After I began my new appointment, my Staff-Parish Committee set up eight home gatherings in my first two weeks; fifteen to twenty people attended each of them. We gathered for coffee and dessert, introduced ourselves to each other, told our stories, and then I asked them a series of questions about the strengths and challenges of the church, as well as where they would start if they were me. I took copious notes at each meeting, which gave me raw data to begin getting a picture of the church's current state. Another byproduct of those gatherings was that it got people acquainted in this mid-sized church with three services. These gatherings gave them an opportunity to provide hospitality—an important aspect of the transition process.

4. Diagnose the situation.

I took all the data that I gleaned from the gatherings, as well as other data I collected from looking at the minutes of committee meetings, worship bulletins, newsletters, and statistical records, and put together a report for the Transition Team. I diagnosed the church as a stable congregation, who saw themselves as very welcoming to new people, but whose location on the far edge of the suburbs made them difficult to find. The church had grown steadily since its inception twenty years before, but had reached a plateau as my predecessor neared retirement. The church wanted a new vision for a future of continued growth. The TT confirmed my diagnosis, and I outlined for them some ideas that we could execute early on to start us in a new direction. Their buy-in was critical to the success of these early initiatives. Some churches say they want change, but only if you don't change what's important to them, and the new pastor often has to figure that out on his own. The research and the Transition Team's input helped me to

work from correct assumptions regarding the church's vision.

5. Clarify expectations.

Roy Oswald of the Alban Institute says that people in congregations have "psychological contracts" with the pastor—those unspoken and unwritten expectations they have with whoever is the clergy leader (123). Pastors have them, too, and they expect a congregation to behave a certain way or show up in church on a certain schedule, as I had in my previous appointment. The problem with these unspoken expectations, however, is that they lead to working out of assumptions rather than agreements. Misunderstanding is the inevitable result.

When I arrived at my new appointment, I reviewed the church's written profile with both the Staff-Parish Committee and the Transition Team and asked what they expected from me in the next three months. I also told them what I expected from them. I had the same conversation with the staff and the members of the church council. It's important to know where the land mines are right up front. We were able to clarify some significant expectations that weren't immediately apparent. They had not, for example, expected the pastor to preach on stewardship since my predecessor had been reticent to do so. I, on the other hand, expected and desired to preach on stewardship. We talked about the congregation's expectations, including the fact that some would not like the pastor talking about money because that was their psychological contract with my predecessor. Still, we negotiated the expectation that the series on stewardship would happen. It did, and we went from a significant deficit to a 25 percent increase in pledged giving, which enabled us to increase the budget for the

following year rather than making the expected cuts. Some of the congregation did indeed complain that I was talking about money, but the leadership was able to say to them very clearly that this was what we, together, had negotiated and expected to happen. Without that clarification of expectation, I would have preached that series anyway, causing significant turmoil.

Clarifying expectations takes those psychological contracts from the realm of the unspoken and unwritten to the agreed-upon and written down. It's one way of clearing the land mines that can kill momentum early in the transition.

6. Shoot for early wins.

An early win is anything that excites and energizes the congregation, builds the new pastor's personal credibility, and creates short-term improvement in the organization's performance. A successful stewardship campaign was most definitely an early win for me and for our leadership in those first three to four months, but there were others as well. Our sanctuary, for example, had serious issues with acoustics, making music and spoken words sound muddled. The sound issue made it virtually impossible for some of our older folks with hearing impairments to understand what was being said or sung. I talked with one of the significant donors in the church. They agreed to fund a project that put acoustic panels on the wall to cut down the echo and provide hearing assist units for people who needed them. On the Sunday we installed these improvements, one of our long-time elderly members came up to me in tears and said, "I heard a sermon here for the first time!" Now, I didn't fund the project or do the work, I just asked. Sometimes that's all it

takes—finding a need and filling it. It was a major early win.

John Kotter, another Harvard Business professor, offers four characteristics of an early win:

1. It's visible. Large numbers of people can see it for themselves.

2. It's unambiguous. There can be little argument over the call.

3. It's clearly related to the change effort in the organization.

4. It rewards the change agent, undermines critics, builds momentum, and turns neutral people into supporters. (122)

Look for those "low hanging fruit" opportunities to fix a problem or improve a process in your new congregation, bounce it off a Transition Team, and watch the process of transition accelerate!

7. Communicate, communicate, communicate.

When a relationship goes bad, most of the time people say it's because they couldn't communicate. You cannot over-communicate during a transition. Communication is key during different phases of the transition: when the appointment announcement is made, during the interim period, your first Sunday, and before you make your first major change.

You may be fortunate enough to have some significant time between the time the new appointment is announced and that first Sunday. This is an important time for both the incoming

pastor and the congregation. As soon as the new appointment is announced, people will want to know about the new pastor: What is he or she like? Can he preach? Will she visit me? Will I have anything in common with her? Will he care about me? Rather than waiting for that first Sunday, incoming pastors should consider sending a letter of introduction to the new congregation with pictures and introductions of both pastor and family. Even better, consider setting up a transition blog. There you can make weekly posts, such as "Frequently Asked Questions" about yourself and your family, moving status, links to audio sermons, and social media contact information. You don't want to intrude upon the current pastor's leaving process, but you can make information available so that people begin to know you before you even show up.

That first Sunday sermon is also critical in setting the tone for the new pastor's leadership tenure. Many people will judge you by that first offering, for good or ill. It makes sense to use that first Sunday to preach a sermon about new beginnings. I've made it a tradition in my last two appointments to preach the same sermon my first Sunday and my last Sunday. The sermon is based on God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12 and titled, "God Calls, We Haul." That text expresses the excitement of a journey. Like Abraham, we don't know exactly where we're going, but we know that God will be with us and that he will bless us to be a blessing.

Your first major change, too, is a critical moment for communication. Some key questions must be answered before the congregation will buy into major change: Why is this important? What does it look like? What's the plan of how we're going to get there? What part am I going to play in the future? If you can

communicate the answers to those questions, you'll provide even your skeptics with a clear vision of what is taking place, even if they still disagree.

8. Build your leadership team.

The church staff and lay leadership will want to know right away how they can best work with the new pastor and will require some extra attention in the midst of transition. The new pastor must learn the congregation's stories, hopes, and dreams. The church's leaders must also hear the new pastor's vision and learn his style of leadership. Those first council meetings and staff meetings are wonderful opportunities for team building and mutual sharing of expectations. For example, I like to have the staff read a book together on a topic that will guide our work together. In my current appointment, I introduced the staff to Edwin Friedman's work on family systems because the book deals with how to handle conflict and anxiety. Those early lessons and discussions enabled us to develop a new vocabulary and way of working together that not only helped us get to know one another, but also helped us to create a united front when confronted with anxious people.

With the lay leadership, the new pastor needs to again act as an anthropologist and observer of the various groups and committees. Let the lay leaders lead and resist the impulse to take over the group or, even worse, imply that everything they did prior to your coming was wrong. Part of the transition process is earning the right to be heard. It's important to spend time with each leader individually to learn their heart and vision for their ministry area and to let them hear your vision of the future.

9. Understand the emotional system.

The emotionally intelligent leader understands that every system, be it a family or a church, is characterized by anxiety. How you deal with that anxiety will determine whether you spend most of your time handling conflict or leading the church. Transition sparks a lot of anxiety in a church, as some people will react to the presence of a new leader much like the human body reacts to a virus. The new leader has to be self-differentiated enough not to be reactive, but instead to be a non-anxious presence, while maintaining appropriate boundaries and taking appropriate, principled stands.

I highly recommend that both pastors and congregations in transition increase their emotional intelligence by diving into some resources like Edwin Friedman's *Generation to Generation and A Failure of Nerve, or Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* by Peter Steinke. These books, and others like them, will help you understand the roots of conflict and anxiety and begin to deal with them in a way that is both life-giving and transformational.

10. Maintain your balance.

While transition is a stressor for both pastor and congregation, it's also a stressor for the pastor's family. It's important for a new pastor to carve out significant time to spend with family as they get to know a new community, new schools, new friends, new home, and a whole new way of life. If the pastor is single, he or she will also need time to build new relationships outside the church (and, congregation, that doesn't mean he or she needs to be "fixed up!"). Every pastor needs a support team that is equal part "blankets" (people who will nurture and care for you) and

"sandpaper" (those who will challenge you and work on your rough edges). Congregational leaders can help this process by not overloading the new pastor with obligations in those early weeks and months, except for those that are absolutely essential (like the home gatherings).

A congregation that provides hospitality to both the pastor and family gives them all a blessing. On my first Sunday at my new appointment, people had placed a myriad of gift cards to local stores and restaurants on a tree in the narthex. That made us all feel very welcome and helped us tremendously as we were setting up our home.

Most importantly, however, the new pastor must be careful to guard time with God. It's not an overstatement to say that the pastor's own spiritual life is a number one priority. Maintaining balance in ministry is only possible if you're being continually fed by the Spirit.

May you look at transition as an opportunity to fall in love with a new congregation or new pastor, but, even more so, an opportunity to fall in love with God, who brings us together for the purpose of His kingdom!

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