

LETTING GO OF THIS PASTOR AND PREPARING FOR THE NEXT

by Susan Beaumont

A pastoral transition is announced. One era of leadership winds down as the promise of a new one beckons. People are naturally drawn to the excitement of beginnings; however, a healthy beginning with a new pastor depends on a good ending with the exiting pastor. The problem is that people avoid and minimize the losses associated with endings.

When a congregation hears its pastor is leaving, there may be wailing and gnashing of teeth, followed quickly by reassurances that nothing will change. Planning for the future starts immediately. Or there may be a celebration that a difficult chapter is finally ending, followed by prompt plans for a more hope-filled future. Efforts to bring the present chapter to a healthy close are minimized or forgotten.

Managing transitions

William Bridges, a well-known business consultant and authority on managing change, argues that people don't resist change – they resist transition. Change is situational. It depends on the arrival of new outcomes: the new pastor, the new worship experience, the new policies. People negotiate such outcomes without much trauma. Transition, on the other hand, is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the loss of the old. Transition begins with ending, and this is where people struggle.

The following leadership practices, adapted from Bridges' book *Managing Transitions*, will help a congregation do their ending work well.

1. Define what is ending and what is not

When faced with a leadership loss, people often have one of two extreme responses: they pretend that nothing is changing, or they overly dramatize that everything is ending. Helpful leaders invite people to explore what is actually coming to an end and what is not. Talking openly about losses and gains allows everyone to approach the transition with sympathy for those who were feeling the loss more sharply.

2. Communicate, communicate, communicate

Overreaction is normal in a transition process. The present loss may trigger previously unresolved losses. Some may perceive this loss as the first of many larger losses to come. Loss often triggers feelings of powerlessness. Powerlessness is mitigated by giving people information. Leaders often assume that people are informed if information has been shared once. In times of anxiety and disorientation, people need to be told again and again. Find as many ways to communicate information as you can. Don't assume that since the leaders know, the rank and file know too.

Share what you know. You may be inclined to wait for everything to be perfectly clear before you begin communicating. Start the communication process as soon as you have something to share. Be straightforward about what is known and what is yet unclear, at every stage of the transition.

3. Mark the endings

Don't just talk about the endings; create actions to dramatize them. As Pastor Mark prepared for retirement, he selected books from his leadership library to share with congregants. People were able to take a piece of Mark with them as they treasured the gift of reading. The leaders of another church helped congregants to cope with the loss of their beloved executive pastor by distributing rubber bracelets imprinted with WWRD (what would Rebecca do?). Any member of the congregation could invoke Rebecca's leadership voice by flashing the bracelet and offering an observation. Other churches dramatize their loss through fundraising and naming rights: "Let's purchase our new hymnals in honor of our departing music minister, to recognize his leadership legacy."

4. Tell the story

A good ending narrative respects the past but does not get stuck there. It helps people see that a good ending helps ensure the continuity of what is most important to them. It creates the opportunity for an honest accounting of both triumphs and failures, and it wards off false idealization of the past. It avoids selective memory. It helps people realize that this chapter has to end in order for tomorrow's changes to materialize. By addressing loss forthrightly, congregations make emotional space for new beginnings and attachments.

When Moses stood at the edge of the promised land, knowing that he would not go further, he chose that moment to retell his people's story. By remembering their past experiences, he helped them recognize God's faithfulness at other times when they experienced transition and went on to create new meanings in the future. We can do the same by helping congregations learn that times of loss, experienced openly and fully, lead into times of promise.

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