

## How to Leave a Congregation Well

### Jim Osterhaus & John Holm

There comes a time for pastors when they must say goodbye to a congregation. In certain situations, this is due to the pastor's retirement. In other instances, it is caused by the pastor accepting another call.<sup>1</sup>

Each leaving involves a transition, which causes distress within the congregation. How these leavings are handled by pastors will greatly enhance or diminish the congregation's ability to move forward successfully.

### Preparing for Successful Departure

Let's begin with the end in view. What does a successful departure of a pastor look like? Successful leavings involve:

- *Honoring the church.* When you honor something, you show it respect and esteem. This can be an easy task when the church has proved honorable during your tenure. It is much more difficult when you as the minister have had to battle through certain issues, receive unwarranted criticism, and been generally second-guessed along the way. What is important is to recognize what specifically is honorable, and honor those aspects. Honoring something that isn't honorable is a pointless exercise. You might want to take some time and list those aspects of your tenure that have been honorable. This could form the basis of your farewell message to the congregation.
- *Honoring the staff and key leaders.* Again, this respect shown for those who have walked the journey along with you is much easier when those staff and leaders have been truly helpful. As with the church collectively, think of each staff member and key leader as to particular attributes, behaviors, and contributions they have made that you now wish to honor. Share that with each of them individually. It is not recommended that this be done publicly, in that the name of specific contributions may lead to jealousies and suspicions with the others.
- *Not doing any damage on the way out or after you leave.* 'Do damage?' you might be thinking. 'I would never dream of it.' Perhaps not, but ministers can do damage inadvertently, even with the motivation of helping. Let's look at an example. Mary leaves her church after a successful fifteen year head

---

<sup>1</sup> In certain situations, pastors are asked to step down because of particular failings. This later situation is beyond the scope of this paper.

pastorate. Things haven't always been perfect in the church, but overall she has seen growth in the members and intentional outreach to the community. Now retired, she moves to a new community far from her old congregation. But she begins to receive emails and other communication from former congregants. Some ask her advice, some criticize the new minister, some ask her to perform weddings and funerals. Not wanting to disappoint (she was always a people-pleaser), she says yes to almost all requests, gives advice on church matters, and entertains criticisms of the new pastor.

- *Preparing the church for their next phase (interim).* There are usually two parts to the next phase in the church's life: the interim period when an interim pastor is called to fill in until a new pastor is called, and the coming of the new pastor.
  - *Interim.* When a church is between installed pastors, many members become highly anxious. One reason for the anxiety is at least a perceived loss of stability and continuity. The community has lost a key leader. Another reason for the anxiety is a fear factor. Members are afraid that attendance will drop, contributions will decrease, and no one will join the community while this position is vacant. A vital key to a church's healthy movement through this anxious time is the engagement of a person specifically trained to lead congregations in transition. Often due diligence is not undertaken by the congregation (they're solely focused on the next pastor) to select a competently trained individual to fill the interim role. A transitional interim ministry specialist significantly increases the possibilities for a congregation to establish and maintain their positive, forward motion. The departing pastor needs to be aware of this and offer advice to those authorized with the transition.
  - *Coming of new pastor.* Though it is wise to stay out of any direct involvement in the selection of the next minister, there are several areas where the departing minister's expertise may be helpful.
    - ✓ Pastor search resources (beginning with the denomination) that are available to the Pulpit/Search Committee. TAG has prepared a Pastor Search manual that can be found on the website: [www.transformingchurch.net](http://www.transformingchurch.net).
    - ✓ Denominational requirements for searches. Each denomination, depending on polity, has slightly different requirements regarding searches, beginning with how much the denomination expects to be involved in the search. Preparations for the coming of the new minister. Work with Board and staff to make any needed adjustments for staff responsibilities during the interim.

## **Transformational Issues**

It would be helpful to review the material found in *Leadership Triangle* by Kevin Ford and Ken Tucker. This will give you a handle on the three categories of issues

that bubble up in congregations that must be dealt with in different ways.

The truly important problems are rarely technical. Nor are they mostly strategic. They are usually transformational. Transformational issues involve values, behaviors, and attitudes. An issue requiring transformational change is much more complex and is sometimes hidden within the systems and structures of the organization. We are seldom aware of transformational issues. They mostly revolve around competing values. This is why strategic direction often surfaces transformational issues. The new direction challenges the status quo.

Transformational issues always bring competing values to the fore. An example of a competing value: Our congregation is made up of highly educated people, but our surrounding community is in transition to a largely Hispanic presence. Value #1: We continue to provide resources and services for our current congregation (mainly Caucasian, upper middle class, highly educated, and aging who pay the lion's share of the bills). Value #2: We divert a large amount of resources and services to the Hispanic community that has no where near the same financial resources and demands a whole different approach to "doing church." These aren't easy decisions, because arguably both values are valid. Transformational issues require different skills than technical problems, especially the ability to manage and occasionally even orchestrate conflict. Very few pastors have developed these skills (instead of maintaining an expert stance, becoming a facilitator helping the congregation work through the issues and the anticipated losses associated with new directions taken).

As an example, First Church leadership, as the current minister's tenure came to an end, decided this was a good time to terminate the music director. He'd kicked up some opposition with music choices, and had alienated older members (who were over-represented in leadership) with his flip comments when challenged. The termination occurred just before choir practice on Thursday, three days before the departing pastor's last sermon. Bob, the music director sent the following note to the choir, which spread like wild fire to the congregation:

*This evening at 6:00 pm I was suddenly terminated. My termination came as a great shock to me and I want you to know that I feel like I have lost a family. I would have liked to have come to my last choir practice but I was ordered not to. I can't thank you enough for all your hard work in helping me make the choir sound good. The past seven years have been a joy. I know some times I chose music that was both challenging for the choir but also for you and I know it took hours of practice time on your part. I am sorry if didn't thank you enough for your dedication but I do want you to know how grateful I am to have worked with such a professional. Thank you again, Bob*

Needless to say the congregation was immediately up in arms. Pastor transitions always heighten anxiety within church families. And heightened anxiety tends to expose transformational issues, in this case the types of musical expression, the acquiescence to authority, and the overall direction of the church.

## **Technical Issues**

Technical problems are solved by experts. If the roof leaks, hire a roofer. If your worship band isn't performing well, hire a new worship leader. If your computer network is down, call the Geek Squad. Most leaders function in this mode most of the time. Pastors, for example, are experts in theology, church history, exegesis, and hermeneutics. More importantly, they tend to be experts in delivering sermons. Often they use the pulpit as a place to address issues. And when the issue is related to theology or biblical interpretation—for instance, the church's position on social justice or gifts of the Spirit—the pulpit is an appropriate venue.

Leadership teams bring their own expertise to the table: financial, technological, managerial, and so forth. If the church is considering a new building project or capital campaign, it is appropriate for others to bring their expertise to the table. To solve a technical problem, simply find a person who has the expertise and authorize that person to solve the problem.

What frequently occurs is the departing pastor thinks that an issue is purely technical, and goes about a step-by-step process of solving a problem or moving in a particular direction, only to be surprised by a disproportionate push-back from some faction within the congregation. Often the departing pastor reads these signals incorrectly, takes the push-back personally, and responds in ways that escalates the problem.

Realize that for many within your congregation, the experience of your departure is similar (especially those who are more emotionally needy) as abandonment of a parent. Those people who have been the most emotionally dependent on you will be the ones who are most affected, and the ones who will 'act out' (i.e. translate their emotions into action that is usually negative). These negative actions, though unconscious, are designed to draw you closer to the hurting congregant. "Oh pastor, I just can't bear to think you won't be around. I've just done something stupid. I've ingested a handful of my antidepressants." I know this example is extreme, and lesser examples abound. But be advised reactions will undoubtedly come your way.

## **Strategic Challenges**

Strategic challenges relate to external changes. They are future-oriented. They are about major transitions. Such challenges require more than a technical fix. Strategic challenges require strategic leadership, the art of leveraging strengths in order to minimize weaknesses and capitalize on opportunities. But strategic leadership often involves dealing with opposition, as internal stakeholders may resist the needed change.

Just as a missionary tries to understand a new culture, strategic leaders are on a quest to understand their external environment. They must ask big-picture questions.

- ✓ How do people think?
- ✓ What motivates people?
- ✓ What do they value?
- ✓ How do they form relationships?
- ✓ How do they make decisions?

Because you are departing the congregation, these questions going forward will now be largely left to others to decide. And this might very well be painful for you, as you see your own pet projects, dreams and visions discarded, or greatly modified. Your temptation may be to jump back in to redirect discussions back in to the path you had designated. But this would be a mistake. In stepping away from this particular pulpit, you are handing over the mantle of leadership to others. And they now must set the course and accept the challenges that course demands.

### **Do Things in the Proper Order (Technical considerations)**

#### *The Process:*

Here is the order in which the leaving process must unfold (unless of course there is a particular polity in your denomination that dictates differently). Depending on what audience you are addressing, you need to have lined up your talking points as to why you have decided on this particular course of action at this time (e.g. the board chairperson will need a more thorough explanation than the average weekly attendee congregant). To try to think of how to respond in the moment is a bad idea, and will lead to faltering explanations that contain the wrong information to the wrong audience.

- ✓ Inform the Board Chairperson. The chairperson of your leadership board is the very first person who needs to know of your decision to terminate. S/he holds the place of authority within the congregation, and therefore must be the first to be informed. Be prepared (unless you've been working toward this termination moment for a long time with many discussions).
- ✓ Inform the Board. Next comes the board. You and the chairperson can determine the timing of this. Do not drop this announcement at the end of a board meeting. People will need to discuss this thoroughly with you.
- ✓ Immediately inform key staff. Understand that this information will spread like wild fire throughout the congregation and then to the surrounding community. It would be best that, following close on the heels of the announcement to the board, a meeting of the staff is held when the

announcement is made to them. You do not want them learning of this from a secondary source. They need to hear it from you.

- ✓ Inform congregation by letter. Next comes the congregation. Think carefully as to how you wish to word this letter. This letter should contain dates of your last Sunday in the pulpit and, if known, what the future is (next call, retirement, leaving the profession, etc.). Recount the process by which you have come to this decision
  - On Monday or Tuesday leading up to the Sunday announcement, send snail mail letter to the membership.
  - Friday of that same week, send an email of same letter.
  - Make a verbal announcement at the following Sunday services.

#### *The Timing:*

- ✓ Consider having at least 6 weeks between announcement and departure. This will give people time to say their good-byes, and have celebrations of your tenure. To shorten this timeframe does not allow enough time for the above to occur. To make the interval too much longer will turn you into a 'lamb duck' leader and could leave the congregation directionless.
- ✓ During those 6 weeks:
  - Preach a sermon series that will help people with your departure and the transition into an interim and eventual call of a new pastor.
  - This is to let them know that everything will be okay and that the congregation has everything it needs to do this well.
    - You are the church (thanks for being the church)
    - God has a plan for you
    - Seek forgiveness and reconciliation as needed and where appropriate.
    - You are leaving and cannot do pastoral acts (weddings, baptisms, funerals) and you cannot and will not comment on what the interim pastor is doing or what the new pastor is doing.
    - Trust the call committee and their work by trusting the new pastor.
    - Your last service:
      - "This church isn't mine or yours, it's Jesus'."
      - I know along the way I must have irritated, offended, and/or disappointed you." Have a period of silence. "It is important now for you to say, 'Rev \_\_, I forgive you for ...' This is for my sake, your sake, and the sake of the next pastor."
      - Tell them (and make sure it's true) that you went through the parish director and did the same with each one of them.

- Then tell them, “The best way for you to continue a relationship with me after I leave is to get along with the next pastor.

It would be best, if you do not already do this, to keep a journal of this whole process. This will give you a good place to put all of your thoughts and feelings as the process is unfolding. Hopefully you will not experience too many disorienting twists and turns. God bless you in your future ministry journey.