

Chapter 4: After the Pastor Leaves...The Transition/Interim Period

Increased Leadership by Lay and Remaining Staff -- Response to the Emotional Dynamics Caused by the Pastoral Vacancy -- Planning for Continued Pastoral Support -- Multiple Pastor Situations

Following the resignation or loss of a pastor the congregation will be required to move through a successful transition from one pastor to a new pastor. The pastoral vacancy occurs with little advance notice, sometimes catching the congregation off guard. Emotions and anxieties may quickly surface that will need prompt attention. The uncertainties, emotions, and questions about the future of the congregation present significant challenges to the congregation. Yet, the transition period can be an opportunity for the congregation to reaffirm its ministry and to grow in spite of the challenges created by the pastoral vacancy. The transition/interim period can be a time of revitalization for the congregation.

The transition/interim period will include the following:

- Increased leadership by lay and remaining staff
- Response to the emotional dynamics caused by the pastoral vacancy
- Planning for continued pastoral support
- Mission Exploration Process and Development of the Congregational Mission Profile (ref. Chapter 5)
- Selection of the Call Committee (ref. Chapter 6)
- The Call Process, and calling of the new pastor (ref. Chapters 7,8,9)

Increased Leadership by Lay and Remaining Staff

The announcement of a pastoral vacancy will trigger the need for increased leadership among the lay members of the congregation, and the remaining staff members. There will be an immediate need for an ordered process to keep a sense of stability in the congregation's life and to help people stay focused on the mission they share as God's people. The congregation will normally look to its Congregation Council members, other Pastor(s), and remaining staff members (Program directors, administrative assistants, etc.) for this leadership. This leadership "team" has the task of overseeing and guiding the ministry of the congregation during this time. At the outset the leadership "team" may simply attempt to maintain the status quo, which is no small task given the challenges presented by the pastoral vacancy. The leadership "team" should communicate closely with the Synod staff for assistance during this period.

The following leadership tasks need to be assigned and individuals authorized to handle them:

- Provide to the membership of the congregation reassurance that pastoral ministry will be fulfilled;
- Assist the membership of the congregation in the processing of their feelings related to the departure of the pastor;
- Assure the continuation of services of worship and to assist those who lead worship (supply pastors, interim pastor(s), assisting ministers, musicians, and others);
- Give support and guidance to staff persons (office personnel, music personnel, custodial personnel, etc.) who normally function under pastoral oversight (continuation of staff meetings or conferences which help clarify needs, directions and expectations);
- Assure continuation of pastoral ministries (hospital visits, other visitations, emergency pastoral response, funerals, weddings, confirmation, baptisms);
- Support congregational leaders (council members, financial people, etc.) in the service of their various responsibilities;
- Assure confidentiality in regards to sensitive issues that arise during the period of transition.
- Be a resource to the next called pastor and assist her/him in the continuation of immediate and special pastoral ministry needs;

The leadership tools for addressing these needs may include: Newsletter or bulletin items, small group discussions, review of current policies and other current congregational resources.

Response to the Emotional Dynamics Caused by the Pastoral Vacancy

Following the resignation or loss of a pastor there is often a period of time when the experience of loss finds expression in various ways among members of the congregation. Often there appears to be a pattern, depending on the circumstances, surrounding the resignation and the quality of the member's relationship with the pastor. The congregation's response may take the form of the pattern described below even though the stages may or may not follow in the order they appear. These are some of the typical emotional responses members may have to the departure of their pastor. These emotions should be dealt with intentionally and with compassion during the transition period in order to bring about final resolution and closure to the ministry of the separating pastor.

Stage One - “Shock and Denial”

Members of a congregation may respond to the resignation of their pastor with surprise and disbelief. “I can’t believe he/she is leaving. There must be some mistake.” Shock and disbelief is usually a temporary state and will likely be followed by one or more of the following stages.

Stage Two - “Abandonment - Panic”

Feelings of being abandoned may set off a temporary state of disorganization with fear and panic about the future of the congregation. There may be a fear of the loss of the congregation’s “future story”, its mission and its plans for future programming. “He/she can’t possibly leave us. There’s too much at stake right now.” Feelings of betrayal may be expressed.

Stage Three - “Anger and Resentment”

Anger and tears may accompany feelings of unfairness and regret. Anger may become displaced on church leaders, church council members, other staff members or it may be directed at the departing pastor or the synod. Anger may precipitate members transferring their membership to other congregations, withholding funds or staying away from worship.

Stage Four - “Guilt - Bargaining”

As the reality of the pastor’s departure settles in, anger and regret may become displaced on self or others in the congregation, taking the form of guilt which might be accompanied by pleading, frantic prayerfulness, and bargaining with the pastor, church council or the synod. “Is there something we’ve done to make you decide to leave? Is there anything we can do to persuade you to stay?”

Stage Five - “Acceptance - Resolution”

Through mutual support members can be helped to accept the loss, make peace with their pain and bring about a sense of reconciliation without revisiting earlier stages. They can finally talk about their sense of loss without tears or resentment and begin to approach a sense of appreciation and even celebration of the life they and the pastor have shared together.

Stage Six - “Closure”

Closure has occurred when members and the departing pastor have reconciled any differences that may have occurred and have released one another from previous commitments. Members and the departing pastor can bid one another farewell and Godspeed.

Planning for Continued Pastoral Support

Although lay and staff leadership can attend to many of the issues presented to a congregation in transition, substitute pastoral support is still needed. The congregation must continue to worship and pray together during the transition period. A transition congregation that relaxes or ignores the worship needs of its members will find it even more difficult to deal with the pastoral

vacancy. It is recommended that close contact be maintained with the Synod as a source for pastoral support resources.

Interim Pastors

When a pastoral vacancy occurs, the congregational leadership, with guidance from the Synod, will need to determine how best to arrange for continuing pastoral leadership during the transition period. The intentional interim pastor is used in the Greater Milwaukee Synod. This approach gives full pastoral presence and support during the transition period. Interim pastors are particularly effective when a congregation experiences significant emotions due to the pastor's departure (anger, grief, sadness, hard feelings, etc.). Interim pastors are trained to work through the emotions so that the congregation is able to engage in a meaningful Call Process and, ultimately, to warmly receive a new pastor.

Model One – Intentional Interim Pastors

(See Guidelines for Interim Pastoral Ministry in Chapter 12/Appendix)

Those who serve as Intentional Interim Pastors work under an agreement called an Interim Covenant (in Chapter 12/Appendix). They are not under Call to the congregation and they will not be available as a candidate for a regular Call to the congregation. They may serve on a part time or full time covenant. Salary is based on the salary package of the former pastor.

1. Interim Part time: Depending on local circumstances and their personal availability these pastors would serve congregations in a limited way in the role of interim pastor.
2. Interim - Full time: These pastors would serve congregations full time during the transitional period with all of the usual pastoral duties of a full time pastor.

Model Two - Pastors Under Term Call

Under some circumstances, particularly after a long pastorate or in a conflicted congregation or other unusual circumstances, a Call may be extended for a specific term. These are pastors who are called by the congregation for a specific term. Their availability as a candidate for regular Call following the ending of the term Call must be negotiated prior to the issuance of the Term Call. A congregational meeting is required with a 2/3 vote in favor of extending a Letter of Call. In most cases, a term call is suggested by the synod because of the particular needs of congregations and the availability of a particularly well suited pastor. When a term call is issued, the process as identified in this manual may be modified; it is usually put in place more quickly.

Availability of pastors is a significant matter at any given time. The Synod Staff will assist in the search for Intentional Interim pastors and those available for Term Call.

Supply pastors - Supply pastors may preside at worship, preach, teach on Sunday morning and/or may provide a minimum of pastoral care for the seriously ill or those in crisis. (*A list of pastors*

who have indicated their willingness to serve congregations for this type of ministry during pastoral vacancies is available from the Synod.)

These pastors work either for specific, one-time duties, or for very limited work defined in a carefully designed contract that outlines the scope of their work and range of authority. Sunday supply and part time pastors may be pastors who are retired, On leave From Call, or lay persons with special training who have been authorized by the Synod to engage in this ministry.

Multiple Pastor Situations

The call process takes on a different dimension when there is a pastoral staff of more than one pastor. When a pastor resigns a call the other pastor's relationship and responsibilities in the congregation may change dramatically. While most material in this manual will not specifically change when a new Senior pastor or Associate pastor is being called, there are a few dimensions of this process that should be highlighted.

There are always exceptions, but generally in a staff situation it is best for an Associate or co-pastor to begin to seek another call when the Senior Pastor leaves. This is not always possible. It is also important to note that it is rarely advisable for an associate pastor to seek the Senior position.

WHEN AN ASSOCIATE PASTOR IS BEING CALLED

- The Senior pastor may, with the support of the Congregation's Council or Call Committee, screen potential candidates before a call committee interview is initiated.
- A Senior Pastor does not necessarily serve on the Call Committee, but in either case there must be a plan for the Senior's input on potential associates.
- A determination should be made regarding two stipulations recommended for inclusion in the Letter of Call to an Associate pastor (see Chapter 9, p.____)
- After a Call Committee has selected a candidate, the Call Committee chair will work with the synod staff person to set up a one day meeting with the Senior pastor, the candidate and an outside facilitator.
 - The Synod works with Christos Ministry as an Employee Assistance Program which can provide facilitation for this time.
 - The congregation is responsible for any costs associated with this process.
 - The vote for issuing the call will take place after this session.
 - The process is terminated if the pastors recognize that they will be unable or unwilling to work together.
 - The facilitator may make recommendations to the pastors, or the congregation regarding ongoing work for this pastoral team.

WHEN A SENIOR PASTOR IS BEING CALLED

- The Council will have an initial meeting with the associate(s) and determine the participation level of the associate in the Call Process, and review the pastoral status of the assistant/associate. The Council shall note:
 - What, if any, limitations of call are placed on the associate in regards to a Senior pastor leaving. (May not be called as a Senior, Call terminates 6 months after the Senior departs, etc.)
 - What are this pastor's intentions. (The associate may not know, or have a clear idea, and may not be able to share much. But the issue should at least be opened. Confidentiality at this point is essential)
- If an Associate or Assistant pastor intends to stay under call to the congregation, or is at least open to that possibility, he/she:
 - will need to be kept informed regarding the Call Process;
 - may be asked to advise in the MET process (see chapter 5);
 - may be asked to be a part of some of the call activities;
 - should not be in on the structured interviews or decision process.
- All candidates should be provided an opportunity in their visitation time to have a private conversation with all program staff including the Associate.
- After a name is selected by the Call Committee, and before a congregation votes, a day should be arranged for a meeting between the candidate and the rest of the staff. This day should be led by a facilitator from outside the congregation. (See details under Calling an Associate, above.)
- While the vote for Senior pastor will take place after the staff meeting, it may be the recommendation of the facilitator, synod staff, and/or the Senior pastor candidate that the Associate should begin to seek another call.

WHEN A CO-PASTOR IS BEING CALLED

- In the case of a **clergy couple**, several suggestions:
 - A separate call is issued to each, even if one position is being shared.
 - Structure the interview so that the Call Committee has some time with each pastor individually, and some time with them together. Feel free to ask the same question of each person - don't make assumptions about similarities! Ask about strengths and weaknesses of each, complementarity, etc.
 - Note in the Compensation Guidelines the information on benefits.
- In the case of **a co-pastor being called to join an incumbent co-pastor**
 - The same advice given above for the calling of a senior pastor applies here as well. Especially important are the conversations between the incumbent and the candidate(s), and the outside facilitator described above.