

## Congregational Leadership and Pastoral Transitions

### Loren Mead

All church bodies try to be sure that congregations have a variety of resources and resource people for when the change-of-pastor time comes. For several months or even a year or two, you will need these resources on a regular basis; then, when you no longer need them, they'll be put in storage (as it were) until the next time you need help. In the meantime these resources will be assisting other congregations and being continuously updated to provide the best help possible.

Five of the actors from the church system that you may use, or at least meet, in the next few months are:

1. Your bishop or executive
2. Interim (or Search) consultants
3. Interim pastors
4. Board members (or vestry, council, or session members, depending on the denomination)
5. Search committee members

The first three of these are outside your congregation, but the last two are in it. I deal with those two here because in a real way their operation during the time between pastors is a new part of their life for which they may need new training or orientation. Keeping clear about the different functions these persons have will make everyone a better participant in the process.

### Board Member

Board members in every denomination have books of order or board handbooks or sets of canons, often written in ecclesiastical gobbledygook, outlining the responsibilities and tasks of the office. In each place those rules are adapted to local conditions and are usually brought out of the closet only when something goes wrong. In this brief section I want simply to point to areas in which I think the tensions and dynamics of going through a pastoral change may modify or shift those tasks.

When a pastor resigns, the first thing for the board to do is to get its executive or bishop (or the assigned staff person) in. They will know the relevant sections of the rules and they will have considerable experience in working with other boards and answering the kinds of questions board members have. They can give you a quick orientation to what you will need to do. Get clear early on what authority the board has: Does it make the decision about the next pastor? Does someone have a veto power? Does the congregation put the matter to a congregational vote?

Ask the bishop, executive, or staff person how they can help you: Can they give you lists of supply clergy for Sunday services? Do they have policies about the use and payment for such persons? Do they have access to lists of interim pastors? Access to interim consultants? Suggestions for self-study or mission study for the congregation? What do they recommend for the make-up of a search (or pastor-seeking) committee? What about the budget for such a committee? Ask them about anything that confuses you, and also ask how you can continue to use them.

Here are some of the things board members will need to be thinking about and acting on.

**The use of an interim pastor and interim consultant.** If you decide to use an interim pastor, you will need a process for interviewing that person. If you want to use an interim consultant, you need to coordinate with the search committee; they should choose the consultant.

**A job description for the search committee.** This should include information such as how many people, what general time frame, what kind of staff or budget they may count on, the extent of the search (national or regional), whether you want them to bring in one name or several, who on the board will be the liaison for information, and so forth.

**Who is to be on the search committee.** Here are some suggestions: between 6 and 12 persons, and certainly no more than 15 or 16, who will commit the time and energy for 18 months to two years; people who are respected members of the congregation; people who represent different points of view, but not people who are so rigid they cannot compromise; people who can work with others; people who are not all devotees or opponents of the previous pastor; and people with particular ideas and skills.

**Communications.** Clarify who is in charge of releasing information to the congregation and to the public. Clarify how and when the search committee will report to the board and to the congregation.

**Negotiating power.** As the search proceeds, be sure to have in place an understanding between the board and the search committee about who negotiates what with the candidates and what parameters the search committee has in describing the work, its pay, benefits, and housing even before "negotiations" begin.

**Shared concerns.** Arrange a way for the concerns of the board or the search committee to be shared with each other and negotiated if need be.

**Congregational support.** Maintain strong support of the work of the congregation. Be at church every week. Step in to help wherever needed.

### **Search Committee Member**

The role of search committee member is one of the toughest and most rewarding positions one can have in a local congregation. It is tough for many reasons, but especially because it often comes at awkward times in light of one's other commitments, and it is very demanding of time. It is rewarding in that search committee members often tell us the experience was a highlight of their lives: building strong new relationships within the congregation, meeting church leaders in many parts of the country, being challenged to rediscover what "church" means to one personally, and having a real hand in shaping the future of one part of the church.

There probably is no lay role in the church with such a long-range potential for ensuring the future of the congregation. The search committee is involved in no less than trying to discern what God is calling the congregation to be and who God is calling to be its professional leader.

Over the course of the search, committee members will experience the breadth of the church, the variety of its leaders, and the way churches in other places are responding to the changing place of the church in society.

If you are a committee member, you will also be involved in trying to discover both the congregation's strengths and its areas of weakness. You will discover challenges to which you will be called to respond. You will meet a number of splendid clergy, and you will probably find some you'd just as soon not have met. You'll see the whole ball of wax.

You will have to learn some hard give-and-take with the other members of the committee—how to honestly, even violently, disagree yet still work together and find ways to compromise. You will discover confidential information that you have to take to your grave with you and never let on that you've heard at all.

In the course of the search you will have to deal with a list of potential candidates, sometimes a list longer than your arm. You'll have to learn to differentiate among them, learning more and more about them. You'll very likely discover some "favorites" on the list and get partially committed to one or more of them. Then you'll have the hard job of working with the other committee members to choose the one you think God wants more than the one any of you is pushing.

It isn't easy, and nobody can tell you from the front end exactly what you'll discover. But this work is for real, for keeps—and what you and the committee come up with will make a long-term difference in your parish. Not only that, but the way you do the job will help the congregation move beyond its past and start toward new visions.

What could be more satisfying?

But. Accepting a role on the search committee commits you for a very significant amount of time. For a year, a year and a half, or sometimes even more you will be involved in intense meetings (many times weekly meetings of two to three hours each). As the search comes toward its end, you may well have to commit five to seven weekends for visiting congregations to meet pastors on their home ground.

It's a big task, but it's an important one. Of course it's not easy. But the Lord never promised us it would be easy.

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