

ASSESSING YOUR APTITUDE FOR TRANSITIONAL MINISTRY

Rev. Donald Wiggins

The Need for Transitional Ministry:

When is a local church most vulnerable? No doubt it is in the wake of the lead pastor's departure, even if he leaves on good terms.

Pastors leave for a variety of reasons—acceptance of a call to another church, retirement, forced resignation, family crises, health issues, even unexpected death. Other than pre-announced retirements, pastoral departures are usually shocking and abrupt in nature.

One experienced interim pastor described the almost universal reaction:

“Whatever the specific circumstances were surrounding this event, it likely left you and other members of your church in a state of uncertainty, and maybe even confusion about what to do next.”¹

A young church is especially vulnerable. People develop deep ties with the pastor who planted the church and those relationships also grow along with the church. If the founder leaves within the first few years, it is deeply traumatic. With immediate assistance the body can be stabilized and move with hope into the next chapter of ministry. Without on-site help, closure is more likely.

While an established church that has weathered previous pastoral transitions may fare better, it faces a different challenge. In a typical scenario, the leaders worry about the negative effects of a long gap between pastors. Fears of falling finances, people leaving, and lost momentum mount as the search for pastoral leadership grows longer. Church leaders are often tempted to rush their search for the next pastor.

While a quick replacement of the congregation's pastor may relieve temporary discomfort, it is usually short-sighted. If there are underlying conflicts or sins that have never been resolved and confessed, they will inevitably resurface at some point. Not long after the new pastor arrives, he gets burned as the past boils over onto his unsuspecting hands.

In too many churches, avoidance of deep issues has become a pattern. The predictable effect is a string of relatively short pastorates and a downward spiral. Even resilient, established churches must break this pattern if they hope to do more than survive. Outside assistance is

¹ [“Why Does the Church Need Interim Pastor Ministries?”, [Vital Church Ministry](#) website, October 10, 2018]

almost always necessary to calm fears and to address issues that hinder spiritual health and new growth.

A healthy church can approach the time between pastors as an opportunity to assess itself, seek what God is saying, and make strategic changes in line with His will. These things take time and should not be rushed. The assistance of a transitional pastor is often critical to make certain the church is prepared for its new pastoral leader.

A Christ-Centered Alternative:

Churches in transition—young or established, in crisis or healthy—need to pause, take a deep breath, and ponder this very basic question: Whose church are we anyway? Who’s in charge here?

The answer to that question about ownership is binary: either we are in charge, or Christ is in charge. If the church is ours and we are in charge, then it’s fully on us to run it. And if it’s on us, we’ll “hire” a pastor and expect him to perform wonders. But, is that the right answer?

The church *really* belongs to Christ. And if He’s the head, then we are not in charge. Our role is to yield control to Him and to determine what the Lord wants to do in the local church. We are to submit ourselves to His divine will in love, humility, repentance, and trust.

When church leaders embrace this second answer, dysfunctional cycles can be broken, and sins can be dealt with and forgiven. Spiritual life can return, and fruit reappear. Rather than depending on our efforts, the future rests on the Lord Jesus. Since He writes the next chapter, a new pastor can lead a yielded church where the Master says to go.

This alternative picture of the church is more than wishful thinking. It is a real possibility. And the ideal time for it is the transition time between pastors. An interim period “can be one of the most effective times in the life of a church.”²

Stepping Up:

More churches today recognize the value of outside assistance to help them navigate times of transition. And C&MA district leaders are more ready to help in this critical time period ~~more~~ than ever before.

To turn pastoral transition into a positive opportunity, The Alliance has launched a strategic initiative: Alliance Transitional Ministries Network. The purpose is to identify, equip, and deploy a team of qualified transition pastors who can wisely steer churches through pastoral transitions.

² “Seven Ways an Interim Pastor Can Help Your Church Become Healthier,” Interim Pastor Ministries website, accessed 1/19/20.

The transition pastor's goal is described in the scenario above. Under the transition pastor's guidance, a church honestly evaluates its past, humbly repents where that is needed, yields control to Christ, makes Spirit-led corrections, and establishes healthy new patterns for future ministry. All of this prepares the church for a trajectory of sustained fruitfulness under the leadership of a new pastor. The pastoral transition becomes a positive opportunity.

Experts in church transition suggest that an intentional interim pastor is advisable "especially...if the church meets any of these criteria³:

1. The pastor is leaving after a lengthy tenure (experts differ over "lengthy tenure", with figures from 7 to 15 years).
2. The church churns its pastors (a new one is called) every few years.
3. The pastor leaves under duress (forced out) or due to moral failure.
4. The church's leaders can't identify or agree on the church's mission.
5. It has been three years since the last ministry audit (everything is reviewed for "mission fit" and amended as needed).
6. It is a "commuter church" (members are very different from those who live near the church).
7. Attendance has plateaued (people coming in offset those who leave).
8. The church faces significant financial challenges

Since most Alliance churches in transition will meet one or more of those criteria, district leaders are encouraged to consider an ATMN-certified pastor for every interim need. Even an apparently healthy congregation benefits greatly from the opportunity to assess ministry, clarify vision, and make healthy changes prior to the calling of a new pastor.

Profile of a Transition Pastor:

In the past, it was enough for a church to acquire "pulpit supply" for the 6-12 months it usually takes to secure new pastoral leadership. Given the vulnerability of churches in transition today, and the opportunity for deep spiritual transformation, the ministry of Transition Pastor has become a distinct calling for some pastors.

Christ has equipped certain individuals in His body for just this ministry. Experience by itself, is not enough. However, there are certain personal qualities and ministry strengths that stand out as essential for an effective transitional ministry. The pastor's track record should reveal those

³8 *Signs Your Church Needs an Intentional Interim Pastor*, Lavern Brown, LCMC (Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ) website, 1/15/16

qualities. The Alliance Transitional Ministries Network is designed to confirm one's equipping for the transition pastor's role.

Key Qualities:

If you are considering Transition Pastor ministries, start by evaluating yourself in light of the following considerations.

Personal Strengths:

- Without question, the single most important quality is spiritual maturity. That is evidenced by:
 - knowledge of the Word and doctrine
 - godly character as a leader of God's people
 - patterns of prayer and personal application of the Word
 - lifetime growth in wisdom and leadership
 - fruit in ministry

Personal references are required to confirm these indicators of ministry qualifications and your track record.

- Closely related to these traits is evidence that godly character has been *tested* under pressure: when holding to the faith and maintaining integrity cost you something.
- You ~~must~~ demonstrate "realistic optimism" toward the local church as an institution and toward real people in the church; as opposed to outspoken negativity toward the church and expectations of the worst in people.
- You show a pattern of engagement with and leadership of a staff team or a volunteer team with little regard for who gets the credit for ministry fruit. You balance supporting the team with holding them accountable.
- You persevere in tackling problems, addressing sin, and implementing change. This is in contrast to being stopped by difficulties and obstacles, giving up when things get tough.
- You hold a realistic appraisal of yourself that is neither too high nor too low. That is, avoiding the sin of pride and boastfulness on the one hand, and timidity and extreme self-criticism on the other.

Relevant Aptitudes:

- You have a track record of *initiating* and *sustaining* healthy relationships with other leaders, staff, and volunteers. This aptitude is not to be confused with vaguely termed personality traits like “a people person.” It is identified in relational patterns evident in prior ministry roles and confirmed by references.
- You have an “upfront” communication ability expressed in preaching, teaching, and publicly leading the congregation. This is not limited to any single style of preaching, nor is it connected to a single personality type or trait. It will also be confirmed by references.
- You have a knack for sizing up situations and people, identifying below-the-surface issues, and coming up with solutions that bring healthy change. This is not to be confused with day-to-day administrative ability. It is seen in accurate insights into flaws and weaknesses in church functions and ministries that lead to corrections and changes for improvement. It will be confirmed by references.
- You have an aptitude that fits the size and complexity of the church:
 - For a multi-staff situation, a proven track record of successfully leading pastoral teams in the past is important. This involves directing and overseeing ministry *through* staff members rather than personal involvement in all ministries. Will be confirmed by references from past staff associates.
 - For a solo-pastor situation, the previous supervisory aptitude is not critical. The track record will show a willingness to engage personally and directly (without paid staff) in a variety of ministries. References will confirm strength in serving, encouraging, helping out, and responding to needs.

An Important Word About Talents and Spiritual Gifts:

The Bible reveals that God made human beings in His image. One reflection of God’s image is the wide diversity of innate capacities, aptitudes, or talents that He distributes. These are present at physical birth and manifest themselves early on in one’s formative years.

These talents appear evenly distributed across ethnic and racial lines, as well as gender. They account for the innate potential for achievement in each person. However, since human beings are sinners by nature, the very aptitudes bestowed by God with potential for good, are easily turned into instruments for selfish ends and the oppression of others.

When a sinner is redeemed and re-born, the indwelling Holy Spirit bestows one or more spiritual gifts. These differ in category and effect from natural talents. Gifts are supernatural endowments for ministry, and they produce supernatural effects.

This does not mean, however, that birth-talents are lost or replaced. Rather they may be yielded to Christ's lordship and transformed by the power of God. The Sanctifier will (if allowed) redeem one's talents and turn them into instruments for God's glory.

Both birth-talents and rebirth-gifts come from God. Therefore, we should see them not in opposition to one another, but as complements to one another. Both are designed and bestowed to glorify God.

For more information about Alliance Transitional Ministries Network contact the Office of Church Advance. Send an email to transitionalministry@cmalliance.org.