

Leading Through Transition
In the Church



An Open Letter to Churches in Transition

Sooner or later every church experiences a change in pastoral leadership. It is not always a simple matter to negotiate these seasons of change in church life. During these times of transition churches have a golden opportunity to take a step back and reflect to see how they can prepare for effective ministry in the future.

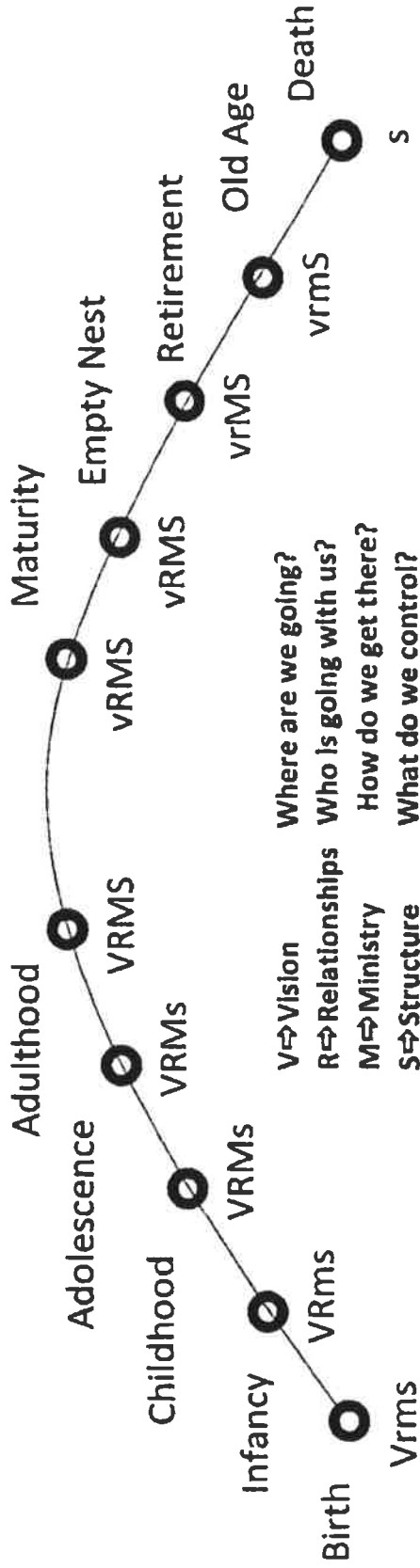
There are some important things to keep in mind about transition:

- The reasons for a Lead Pastor's departure and the way the time of transition is managed will have significant impact on the present and future life and vitality of the church.
- The temptation is to move immediately into a pastoral search process. There is great value in taking the time to find closure to the former pastor's ministry and doing a re-evaluation of the church's mission, vision and health before engaging in pastoral search.
- With good leadership, transition can be a time of opportunity for your church to experience renewal of vision, purpose and spiritual vitality.
- Most transitions include eight major phases — Closure, Regaining Stability, Assessment of Church Health, Developing a Transitional Plan, Preparing for the Pastoral Search Process, Conducting the Search, Hiring the Pastor, and evaluation.
- The length of the transition varies from church to church - it is not uncommon for a season of transition to last anywhere from 6 months all the way up to 24 months.

Transition Defined

We use the word "Transition" to describe an intentional process between the departure of a Lead Pastor and the arrival of a new one. Transition begins the moment it becomes public that your current pastor will be departing. The process of preparing to say farewell and making plans to function as a church without a Lead Pastor are the early stages of the transition. From that point forward there are a number of phases a church moves through in a transitional season.

Life Cycle Of A Church



A Word to the Church Board

Providing strong leadership during a time of pastoral transition can be one of the more challenging aspects of serving your church as an Elder. Transition places new demands, expectations and variables on your leadership as individual Elders and as a group. Some guiding principles to remember:

- Be sure to include your District Coach in the process
- Work together - avoid making any commitments to the departing pastor or potential new pastor without including the Board in the discussion
- Be sure that any decisions and agreements are made in writing
- If the situation is conflicted - seek out third party assistance; the District Office can provide specialists to assist churches address conflict constructively
- Seek ways to honour your departing pastor, even if there are struggles
- Recognize the temptation to engage in the search too quickly
- Start by developing a plan for how the church will function through transition
- Communicate regularly with the congregation
- Remember you are not alone in this challenging season; there is a support system to help you through this process

Common mistakes churches make while in transition

- Launching into the search process too quickly
- Not recognizing the realities of loss (even grief) after a pastor departs
- Absence of consistent congregational prayer gatherings
- Thinking they will save money because of reduced salary costs
- Failing to know and follow the Constitution and Bylaws of the church
- Failing to consult with Denominational Leadership
- Inconsistent and/or inaccurate communication with the congregation
- Avoidance of dealing with conflict
- Failure to strengthen and encourage the governing board during transition
- A lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of leadership and staff
- Reluctance to consider outside help

Eight Major Phases of Transition

Our experience in working with churches in transition has helped us to identify eight major phases to a healthy transition process. Some phases require more attention than others depending on the circumstances. These phases are not necessarily a step by step sequential process; often there is overlap between some of the phases.

Transitional Phase	Description
Closure	Assisting the senior pastor (and their family) and the church family to finish well, conclude the mode of relationship, mark the occasion with respect/memory/celebration and dignity.
Regaining Stability	Addressing the urgent and emergent needs of the church and its ministry in light of the departure of the Lead Pastor. Space to grieve the loss & let go of the past without being rushed on to a new beginnings.
Assessment of Church health	Listening to God and His people about how we are, who we are, where we are...and where we are headed. Exploring questions of church health, mission, vision, identity and context in preparation for future search.
Developing a Transitional Plan	Creating ways to address the health and vision needs of the church to effectively maintain the current ministry while in transition without a senior pastor.
Preparing for the Pastoral Search	Creating a search team, understanding the process and resources available to conduct an effective pastoral search.
Conducting the Pastoral Search	Doing the research, interviews, reference checks, pre-candidating, candidating and prayerful discernment needed to reach a decision.
Hiring a Lead Pastor	The steps needed to complete the hiring process and welcome a new Lead Pastor effectively.
Evaluation	Reflection together about what we have learned and experienced through this process.

Closure

Assisting the senior pastor (and their family) and the church family to finish well, conclude the mode of relationship, mark the occasion with respect/memory/celebration and dignity.

Regaining Stability

It is important that a local Elders Board are prepared to and willing to address the urgent and emergent needs of the church and its ministry in light of the departure of the Lead Pastor. Space must be provided to grieve the loss & let go of the past without being rushed on to a new beginnings.

These urgent and emergent needs would include (but not be limited to) ...

- Developing a plan for pastoral leadership during the transition
- Ensuring that effective Sunday ministries are in place during the transition
- Ensuring effective administration of staff, volunteers and ministries
- Nurturing the spiritual, relational, and organizational health of the Board
- Providing helpful ongoing communication to the congregation
- Helping to create a sense of calm and stability during the early days of the transition

Questions to Consider:

1. How can we ensure effective Sunday ministries during transition?
2. How can we ensure effective ongoing communication with the congregation at this important time in the life of the church?
3. Are we able to sustain and manage this transition with the personnel and leadership we have?
4. How can we ensure that we work well together as a Board and church staff through this time?
5. How might a Transitional Pastor or Coach help us?
6. How can we provide stability for our church staff and congregation at this time?
7. Who will provide leadership for the church staff and day to day operations?

Assessment of Church Health

Listening to God and His people about how we are, who we are, where we are...and where we are headed. Exploring questions of church health, mission, vision, identity and context in preparation for the search for a new Senior Pastor.

- Assessing the spiritual and relational health of the congregation
- Assessing the health and effectiveness of the ministries of the church
- Assessing administrative strengths and weaknesses; capacity for change
- Identifying the key result areas that need to be addressed and resolved prior to engaging in an active search
- Studying the history of the church, its leadership patterns, issues and styles
- Identifying the unique character of the church in its community context
- Re-visiting the church's sense of mission and vision

Questions to Consider

1. Under what conditions should we begin to conduct a pastoral search?
2. What issues do we need to address before we hire a new Lead Pastor?
3. What patterns are present in life of our church that we want to change?
4. What factors have precipitated the departure of previous pastors?
5. Are we on the same page about our sense of mission and vision?
6. Are we at a place where we need to explore a new vision and direction?
7. What role has our previous pastor(s) played in shaping vision?
8. Are we committed to hiring a new pastor from a position of health?

Developing a Transitional Plan

Creating a way to address the health and vision needs of the church while continuing on in ministry during transition.

- Developing a sustainable term ministry plan for the transition period
- Exploring the results of the congregational assessment of church health
- Outlining the process that leads towards greater church health and a successful pastoral search
- Deciding what the role of the congregation will be through transition
- Implementing an ongoing communication process with the congregation

Questions to Consider:

1. How can we develop a plan to continue on in ministry while we are in transition?
2. How will we maintain strong communication between the Board and the congregation in the absence of a Lead Pastor?
3. Who will give oversight and leadership to the church staff?
4. How can we encourage morale and volunteerism within the congregation?
5. How will we measure our progress through transition?

Preparing for the Pastoral Search Process

Creating a search team, understanding the process, gathering resources available to conduct an effective pastoral search.

- Understanding the roles of the Board, the Search Team, and the District Superintendent in the search process
- Creating a Search Team and developing their mandate
- Developing a comprehensive Lead Pastor profile and Job Description
- Ongoing communication of the process with the congregation
- Addressing the possibility of current staff members becoming candidates

Questions to Consider:

1. How will we select a search team that will represent our congregation?
2. How will prayer and discernment be part of this process?
3. How can we gain a clear sense of the following aspects of our church:
 - who were we?
 - what is our community context?
 - who are we now?
 - who we hope to become?
 - what kind of leader will we need?
4. How will we develop an effective Pastoral Profile?
5. What will the role of the search team, the Board, the church staff and the congregation be in the search process? The hiring process?
6. How will we keep the congregation informed?
7. What if current staff members wish to apply for the position?
8. What do we need to know about the requirements and resources provided by our denomination in this process?

Conducting the Search

Doing the research, interviews, reference checks, pre-candidating, candidating and prayerful discernment needed to reach a decision.

- Gathering and evaluating resumes and tabulating information
- Conducting reference checks and initial interviews
- Understanding the pre-candidating and candidating process
- Developing a short list of candidates
- Presenting the short list to the Board and deciding on a candidate
- Presenting the board's agreed upon short list to the District Superintendent for approval
- Conducting the candidating process
- Ensuring a sense of congregational ownership in the process

Questions to Consider:

1. What confidentiality, privacy law, and reference check issues do we need to know?
2. How do we get resumes?
3. What process do we use in co-operation with our District Office regarding candidates who are not accredited with our denomination?
4. What is the difference between pre-candidating and candidating?
5. What would an effective candidating process look like in our church setting?
6. What role will the congregation have in the search process?
7. What/When/How do we communicate to - the church staff?
- the congregation?
8. Who will be doing the communicating?

Hiring the Pastor

The steps needed to complete the hiring process and welcome a new Lead Pastor effectively.

- Finalizing the decision in cooperation with the District Superintendent
- Making an offer of employment and receiving an acceptance
- Refining the job description with the new pastor
- Communicating this information with the congregation
- Details related to start date, moving, and an installation service
- Welcoming the new pastor
- Transitional Pastor debriefing — with the new pastor, the Board, and the District

Questions to Consider:

1. When do we announce that a call has been given to a candidate?
2. When should we announce that the candidate has accepted?
3. Documenting an offer of employment? Acceptance of the same?
4. How will we welcome a new Lead Pastor and help him to start well?
5. What is the role of District Church Coach in the hiring process?
6. How can we celebrate the work of God in this process?
7. What should we do to orient our new pastor to our congregation and community?

The Eight Recommended Goals of a Transitional Leadership Process

During the Transitional Process there are 8 goals that are recommended so that the church experiences the full benefit of a pastoral change and doesn't just go on autopilot until the next pastor shows up.

Goal 1. There is the need for closure.

Local Congregations must be able to find the ways and means to deal with the past in such a way that it doesn't hinder or restrict what God is wanting to do in the future.

- A Transitional Leader counsels & helps people deal with their grief and loss — as well as celebrating the past and leaving to let go in a healthy way so they can move on.

Goal 2. There is the need for relevant preaching & clear communication.

A Transitional Leader carries the primary burden for ensuring that the congregation gets fed and that the preaching ministry of the church does not suffer during the transition time.

- Not just filling in while they wait for the next pastor, but sermons that are messages from God designed with this church in mind.

Goal 3. There's a need for short term administration.

A Transitional Leader can easily fulfill the traditional administrative role that is filled by the Senior Pastor.

- There is the management function that the transitional leader needs to do or ensure is being done by someone

Goal 4. There's a need for pastoral care.

A Transitional Leader is able to continue to meet the needs for pastoral care in the congregation and/or ensure that people are cared for even if he or she does not fulfill that function.

- The need for pastoral care not only continues during the time between Senior Pastors, but in many ways the need actually increases during a transition time.

Goal 5. Focus needs to be given to relational renewal.

A Transitional Leader can both recognize and respond to the reality that during the change of a Senior Pastor there are always feelings of hurt and loss that, if not addressed and dealt with, will leave the congregation with unresolved hurts and hindered in its ability to move ahead with effective ministry and future relationships.

- "Relationship Renewal" refers to the connections both with God and with each other — during a transition, the opportunity is there to renew, restore and revive any weak or poorly functioning connections

Goal 6. There's opportunity for vision renewal.

A Transitional Leader can be sensitive to the need in a local congregation for a renewed or reinforced buy-in by the congregation for the church's vision.

- Since healthy churches have a vision and an action plan to bring it into reality. A time of transition can be a time for the whole congregation to listen and discern what God is saying to them. It can be an incredibly healthy thing for the church to see where God is leading them so that their next pastor can match who they are and where they are wanting to go.

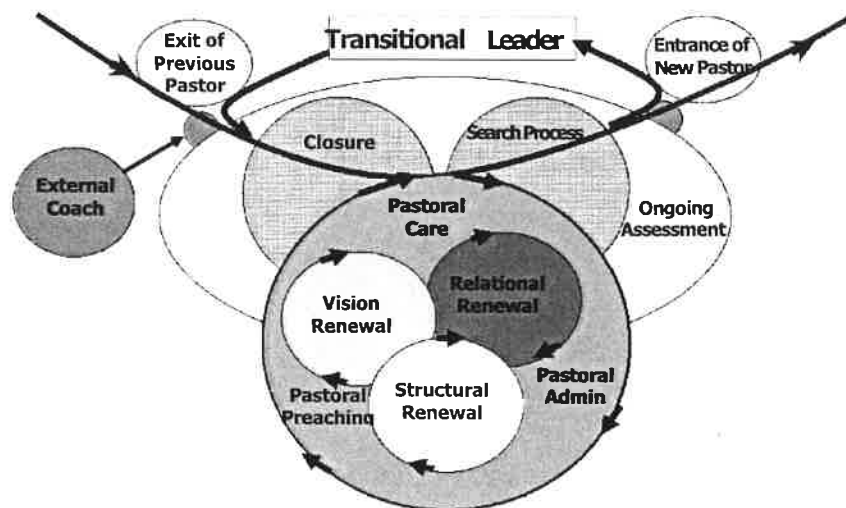
Goal 7. There's an opportunity for structural renewal.

A Transitional Leader is able to recognize that at times the structures within the local congregation are either contributing to the congregation's present situation or structured in such a way that they were not able to provide stability during the transition time.

- If the structures of a church are mismatched or in need of review, a time of transition is an excellent time to renew them — for the purpose of achieving their mission.

Goal 8. Then lastly, a transitional leader takes a congregation through a search process.

There's no denying that God has a specific leader(s) for every church that is listening and responding to Him. The greater prepared the church is to move forward in a healthy way, the more successful the search process.



Evaluation

Reflection together about what we have learned and experienced through this process.

- Sharing how God has developed our spiritual life together as a community
- Exploring what we have learned about one another through this process
- Documenting what we have learned for future reference
- Considering the importance of succession planning
- Evaluating how well we followed our transition plan and search process
- Conducting an exit interview with our Transitional leader
- Recommendations and suggestions for our District Superintendent
- Developing a mutually agreeable pastoral evaluation process for the Board and the new Lead Pastor

Questions to Consider:

1. What has God shown us about ourselves through this process?
2. What have we learned about trusting God and listening to God as a community?
3. What would we do differently next time? What would we do the same?
4. How can we be better prepared for a pastoral departure next time?
5. How well did our transitional plan work? How well did we work the plan?
6. How can we conduct a meaningful exit interview with our Transitional Leader?
7. Do we have a pastoral evaluation process that all parties are comfortable with?
8. How can we conduct effective pastoral evaluations in the future?
9. What suggestions or ideas might we want to share with our District Coach?
10. How will we document this information for future use?

