

# Towards Healthy Transitions in Pastoral Ministry

## - Part 1 -

### Introduction

At least once, but most likely a few times in every pastor's career, he/she will be called to a new pastoral role at a different church. How one negotiates that transition can sometimes be a little tricky, because, even though it's a very personal transition in terms of the pastor and his/her family, it also involves many others from both the relinquishing church and the inviting church.

Here are some suggestions to help make the process as healthy and as positive as possible for all involved.

Ideally, the process begins quite some time before interviews take place with an interested pastoral search committee or the giving of notice to conclude, and begins with a period of discernment. What follows is an article which outlines a process of discernment to assist a pastor in considering the issues around whether to continue on or whether it is time to move on to a new pastoral assignment.

### A Five Step Process of Discernment

*(We wish to thank Tim Dyer, from John Mark Ministries, who has kindly provided this article.)*

This simple five step process is designed to allow for three sources of discernment to work in harmony together. These are; God-given human insight, the wisdom of reflecting in community, and an intentional time of listening to God.

This idea has been adapted from an original scheme shared on a retreat my wife Merran attended in the UK, facilitated by Gerard Hughes the author of *God of Surprises*.

1. Gather a small group of people who you trust, who know you well and are willing to walk a process of discernment with you. e.g. Husband and wife, home group, retreat group, peer group, soul friends.
2. Frame the question you are discerning in a closed form ("yes" or "no" response) e.g. Is my time here complete? Will I seek another term as pastor? Should I apply for this position? Would it be good for our family to move to this location? Should we become members of this church? Is it time for me to resign my job? Should I take up theological study?
3. Allocate a time period for the decision. e.g. 2 weeks, 1 month, 3 months. Then divide whatever period you have allocated into five equal periods i.e. a month will divide into 5 periods of 6 days. You can intentionally set aside 10 weeks, five periods of two weeks each.
4. Then follow the outline below:

#### **Step A: Compile the reasons for saying "Yes"**

During this period the group collectively seeks to produce the most thoughtful and considered list of 'reasons to say "Yes"' that it can. Apply as much wisdom and reflection as possible to this.

- a) The primary person asking for assistance with discernment puts together an initial list and circulates it.
- b) The group meets for discussion of these / or emails their ideas around and adds or suggests any others
- c) The primary person edits the final list and distributes the completed list to the group on the last day.

### Step B: Discern these reasons

During this period the group covenants to pray regularly through the list asking God for assistance in discerning how important each 'reason' is. There is no further discussion of these.

- a) Members of the group covenant to pray daily and to record their reflections during or after prayer.
- b) In particular they are asked to 'tune in' to questions that should be raised or a sense that 'reasons' listed are growing or decreasing in importance.

### Step C: Compile reasons 'against' or to say "No"

During this period the group collectively seeks to produce the most thoughtful and considered list of 'reasons to say "No"' it can. Care is taken not to simply mirror the 'first list' in negative form. Significant independent 'reasons' that stand on their own are sought.

- a) Again the primary person puts together an initial list and circulates it for reflection
- b) The group meets or emails their thoughts for discussion of these 'reasons' and suggests the addition of any others
- c) The primary person edits the final list and distributes this list again to the group on the last day.

### Step D: Discern these reasons

Similarly to time period 2 the group covenants not to discuss the 'reasons against' but simply to pray regularly through the list asking God for guidance in discerning how important each 'reason' is.

- a) Members of the group covenant to pray daily and to record their reflections during and after prayer
- b) In particular they are asked to be sensitive to questions that should be raised or the sense that these reasons are growing or decreasing in importance.

### Step E: Evaluate and Reflect on the changes which occurred over the discernment period

In the final period the group first reflects on the lists and their journaling in silent times and then meets to share, listen and reflect together on what happened for each list particularly during the time periods 2 (Step B) and 4 (Step D) as people prayed and reflected.

- a) The group members share one at a time their sense of what God confirmed or challenged over the four periods with specific attention paid to the times of silent prayer.
- b) The primary person should listen and then share last.
- c) Is there a clear sense of the a pattern arising from the discussion?

5. It may be that a clear direction can be affirmed as a result of this process. It also may be that as the group discusses the outcome of the process the critical questions to ask and answer become clear. This also may allow the decision to be made on a clearer basis.

Adapted by Tim Dyer  
John Mark Ministries 2005

*In addition to this article, other helpful articles on this subject have been written by Rev David Rock, called "Discerning Well", and by Rev John Simpson, called, "When is it Time to Move On?" These can be obtained from the BUV.*

# Towards Healthy Transitions in Pastoral Ministry

## - Part 2 -

### On the Way to Leaving Well

Saying goodbye and hello is nearly always an emotional process. Apart from the often traumatic geographical relocation of pastor and family, many relationships also need to be renegotiated from pastor/parishioner to friend, and even some relationships relinquished altogether simply because the pastoral relationship comes to an end.

So, how does one negotiate this process in as healthy and positive way as possible?

**Below are some pointers aimed at helping you finish well with your relinquishing church, and also leave well.**

- Once the reason for departure is clear and the decision made, for example, acceptance of an invitation to another church, let your leaders in on the news before you tell the church. (Sometimes, depending on your relationship with your leadership, you may have already taken them into your confidence when an approach was made to you. However, such an early alert can also become, in some cases, counter-productive to your ongoing working relationship with your leaders especially if the new opportunity doesn't eventuate.)
- It would be helpful to also advise the Regional Pastor if he/she does not already know.
- Having advised your leaders of your intention, they may work with you to determine a suitable departure date. Once the date is set, work to the date.
- Your announcement to the church should be clear but succinct, and delivered in an appropriate context where most of the church family will hear the news at the same time, for example, following the morning service.
- Don't get too upset if people are disappointed and express that disappointment to you forcefully. It's natural.
- Encourage the church leadership to contact the BUV to get assistance and tap into resources to assist with the pastoral transition as soon as it is known to be going to happen. Again, the Regional Pastor can assist in this.
- Encourage the appointment of a skilled Interim Pastor, maybe an Intentional Interim Minister to assist during the transition time.
- Work with the leadership, as appropriate, regarding a transition plan.
- Continue to invest into the lives of other leaders in the church.
- Make the final service a service of letting go – in some ways it might mirror your induction service where, if symbols of ministry were given to you at the commencement of your ministry, then ritually hand those symbols back with the clear understanding that you are no longer the pastor of these people. There are resources available for services like this.
- Encourage the use of an Exit Interview for both exiting pastor and the church leadership to assist with good closure and enable the leadership to deal with any issues before the new pastor arrives.
- After you have left be very careful about any phone calls you may receive from previous parishioners wanting to criticise your successor. Refrain from agreeing, encouraging those criticisms, or from making any suggestions that they might take back to their new pastor. Instead gently remind them that you are only a friend, and that you will not undermine your successor. If appropriate, encourage them to take up their problem/grievance with their new pastor.
- If you are leaving a manse provided by the church, ensure that you leave the manse as clean and tidy as you can.

## Here are some 'don'ts' that are important for a departing pastor to remember:

- If the pastoral search process commences prior to your departure do not attempt to control the process, manipulate the selection of members to the PSC, or influence the moderator's exercises with the church. It is advisable for you to refrain from attending those meetings where the new pastoral needs are being discussed. If you have had an opportunity to quietly express any relevant thoughts to the secretary, then leave it to the secretary to raise them in the broader arena than feeling the need to do so yourself.
- Do not make any plans or initiate any new ministries for the church beyond your finishing date. Instead, look to hand over ministry responsibilities, and key roles in a timely fashion to people who will assist with them in the transition period.
- Do not take the opportunity, now that you're going, to harangue the church on everything they didn't do for you or how they let you down. Your objective should be to hand the church over to the next pastor in as positive a way possible. Where appropriate, your messages should be uplifting and encouraging of the church.
- Do not undermine the moderator by giving your own commentary on possible candidates to succeed you.
- Do not initiate contact with folks from the congregation after leaving.

Many of these suggestions mentioned above may be self-explanatory or even obvious. However, they are offered in the hope that, when you are called by God to another task that requires you to move on from your current appointment, bringing to mind these pointers will assist you to make the process as healthy as you can, and bless both the church you're leaving as well as the church you're joining.

## Towards Healthy Transitions in Pastoral Ministry - Part 3 -

### Here's to Making a Great Start!

As part of the process of your interviews with the PSC, your acceptance of the call, and your discussions regarding commencement in your new pastoral role, ideally, the following will have been taken care of:

- An appropriate Induction is arranged with you having input as to when, what and who is involved;
- Starting dates and expectations in the first few weeks are clear;
- A good Position Description and Statement of Understanding are in place, agreed to and signed;
- Appropriate payroll and Exempt Benefit arrangements have been negotiated and are in place.

Once you are 'installed' and have commenced duties, ensuring that the following are in place will be helpful:

- Set a date for the 3 month "review/check-up," ensuring it's put in the diary of those who need to be involved;
- Arrange an introduction to the local Baptist Pastoral Cluster, and to other appropriate local groups (local Ministers' Fellowship etc.)
- Obtain details of local community and professional services – hospitals, doctors, dentists, etc.

- If not handed to you as part of the induction process, obtain a copy of the church directory and begin familiarising yourself with the names;
- Talk to the Church secretary (or office secretary if applicable) and ascertain basic information, such as:
  - the operating processes for the church office,
  - security procedures for opening and closing the church building if there are any,
  - expectations of the pastor for the weekly news bulletin;
  - how the church functions, as in the normal procedures for weekly events, normal methods and patterns of communication etc.,
  - the policy of the church regarding those who come requesting financial assistance, and what's expected of the pastor in those situations.

Even though you have just arrived, expectations will already have been made of the new pastor, that you'll change things "for the better" depending on who may hold those expectations (!). However, you will be wise to resist making any changes to things/processes/appointments/services for the first six months or so unless you absolutely have no other choice, that is, because of death, incapacity or security.

Our hope is that, in the leaving and arriving, as you work your way from a positive completion of one pastorate through to confident engagement in a new pastoral role, you will be blessed, as will your people.