



Heart Warming Ministries

For everything there is a Season Transitional Ministry

“Times, they are a changing” wrote the modern day songwriter Bob Dylan. Having been in the pastoral ministry for 40+ years, I have seen the truth of that song echoed in the anxious faces of far too many Christians when their Pastor leaves their church either through retirement, resignation, reassignment, the acceptance of another call, or their departure to pursue God’s “new” direction for their lives.

When a pastor departs there is a time before the new pastor is called to a church which is aptly called a time of “transition”. Years ago, it was called a vacancy...which carries with it the concept of a void...something is missing.

Regardless whether the pastor leaves on good terms or on not so good of terms, these “transitions” disrupt patterns. This change in one part of the Body, affects all the other parts of the body. The emotions that exist because of this transition can take on many different forms – fear, anger, confusion, discouragement and sometimes even relief.

When a pastoral leadership changes, the congregation will respond to the transition. It is unfortunate that many congregations respond by wanting to return to their former state as soon as possible. This is a universal instinct because the impulse is to return to the comfort of a steady state as soon as possible. Roger Nickelson in the book *Temporary Shepherds* advises that this transition time, this interim time can be a time for learning for the local congregation which supersedes the desire to return to the old balanced way of doing things. It is common belief today that the use of “temporary shepherds”, Transitional Ministers, or Interim Ministers gives the church time to evaluate and grow.

Isaiah 43:19 states, “For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.” What a wonderful promise to a church in transition. Nevertheless, old ways die hard, and many leaders and church members prefer to live in the golden era of their past. Friends, in so doing we do ourselves and our churches a great disservice in praying for, believing in, and preparing for a new future. After years of observation, I have come to believe in the stark reality that “the good old days” will not return.

Every church member can tell you what transition or change is. It does not require some deep analysis. Simply stated, something is different. Perhaps there are feelings of fear, helplessness, and heightened anxiety.

Transitional ministry refers to the ministry that takes place during the time of change or transition. It is the transitional minister’s responsibility to lead the congregation through various processes needed to work on issues arising out of that change. Congregations are not often prepared to deal with the transition.



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So, what are the options when a church is in “transition. According to Lifeway, the publishing branch of the Southern Baptist Convention, “ Whenever a church is without a Senior Pastor, it is a very vulnerable time. There are several options for filling the pulpit and the leadership role that has been vacated by the former Pastor. According to Lifeway, the average time that a church spends without a Pastor is between 9 and 18 months. So much can happen during that time that could affect the church either positively or negatively. A Transitional Pastor can help the church stay focused on its mission and keep from becoming complacent during the intervening time.”

There are 4 ways a church can handle this transition:

1. They can have local staff members fill the pulpit. There are multiple drawbacks here of which the primary two are:
 - a. There are not enough people in most churches to make a good rotation
 - b. The quality of pulpit ministry may not meet the needs of the congregation
2. The church can have multiple preachers fill the pulpit.
 - a. The positive of this approach is that the people may get to hear men they would have never got to hear.
 - b. The negatives include the fact that it becomes someone’s scheduling nightmare and there is inconsistency in the pulpit. Instead of bringing back the feeling of a steady state, the “void” still exists. Congregations want to build a relationship with the person who fills their pulpit.
3. The third option is to hire an “Interim Minister” Traditionally this person fills the pulpit for all Sunday services and assists the pulpit committee as necessary in their work.
4. A better option for most churches is a Transitional Pastor. A Transitional Pastor is similar to an Interim Pastor in many ways. They tend to be experienced Pastors. They tend to be capable in the pulpit and with relationship skills. They have the leadership skills to lead the church staff and lay leaders in the direction they should go in order to be ready for the arrival of the new Pastor. The Transitional ministry goals include:
 - a. Providing direction to the Church leadership boards and to work to remove obstacles to unity.
 - b. To work toward a culture of loving accountability within the church.
 - c. To challenge and improve church processes and to encourage the church to believe in God’s great future.
 - d. To work with established leadership to evaluate existing ministries and make recommendations.
 - e. To rebuild trust within the congregation.
 - f. To proclaim the Word of God in all Sunday Services
 - g. To prepare the church for the ministry of the new Pastor.

Yes, “the times they are a changing” but the God we service changes not! Even during transition and change, He Is There!