

FIRST THOUGHTS WHEN FACING A PASTORAL TRANSITION

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Updated November 25, 2014

When churches are confronted by an unanticipated pastoral transition, its leaders are often struck by a sense of shock accompanied by an urge to do something and to do it quickly. In this paper, I suggest that church leaders instead take a deep breath, relax, and carefully consider their next steps.

Here are some suggested first steps for church leaders facing unanticipated pastoral transitions. With the exception of the first item, they are not listed in any particular order.

1. Pray. A church planter shared at a conference this sage advice: “Pray like it depends upon God. Work like it depends upon you.” So often, it seems that we don’t go about our business this way. We are tempted to jump in and do something and, perhaps as an aside, to ask God to bless our work. The opposite should be true. The time surrounding a pastoral transition should first be a time of prayer, seeking from God wisdom, guidance, blessing, courage, and, especially, alignment with His purposes. Share with God our hopes, dreams, and fears, and listen to God for His direction and purposes. Then, take action accordingly.
2. EFCA West encourages churches to make the following two actions their default responses to a pastoral transition if possible: (1) Get an intentional interim pastor to shepherd the congregation through this season, and (2) clarify the church’s values, mission, and vision. Pastoral searches are very time consuming and can be emotionally draining for church leaders. The congregation and its leaders still need to be spiritually fed, cared for, and led. A good interim pastor can do this. And, no congregation can find a pastoral candidate well-suited for the church unless they first know where the church is going and whether the pastoral candidate is equipped and interested in going there. Before picking a pastor, know where the church family is trying to go and what they are trying to accomplish together.
3. Enlist the support of the EFCA West team to accompany you on this journey. This should be done as soon as possible and should continue throughout the search process and even beyond. Don’t walk this path alone. Chances are, you and the church have not done this in recent years, so you are not likely very good at it. Avoid costly errors and setbacks. Embrace this, and get help from people who are committed to the church’s ministry and long-term wellbeing.
4. Ask tough questions and be open to new answers. The church is not looking for a pastor to keep them in the present, but rather to lead them into the future. What is the future that is being imagined for the church? Is it Biblical? Is it attainable? What obstacles are in the way? Is the entire leadership team on board?

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5. Manage expectations. Unmet expectations are a major, if not the number one, source of conflict in churches. Leaders must ensure that they and the church family have realistic expectations about what is ahead of them. Don't minimize the complexity or difficulty of the task ahead. Be clear about what lies ahead and the various steps being taken along the way. Communicate regularly with the church family. Leaders should practice transparency and openness as much as possible (generally little more than the names of potential candidates and reasons for selection/deselection need to be confidential).
6. Watch your compass, not your clock. In general, pastoral transitions take 12-18 months. But, some are longer, and some are shorter. This variation is entirely normal. However, a church that expects a 12-month transition and finds themselves in month 20 may begin to panic enough to just pick someone in order to appease the clock that is ticking within. By doing so, we may well find that we have veered off course, having led with our eye on the clock rather than on our compass. Be steadfast in your direction – be flexible and patient in your timing.
7. Be systematic and create adequate infrastructure to support the search process. Most church leaders have not done many, if any, pastoral searches, so we create ad hoc systems as we go along. This can lead to disaster. Instead, figure out a system to follow and follow it throughout the process. It is fine to deviate or customize a standardized search process to meet a church's specific circumstances and needs, but the general outline should be followed. Some resources available to help churches create systems and processes include the following books:
 - a. *Ask...Seek...Knock, A Step-By-Step Guide for Pastoral Transitions* by Ken Moberg. Also get the companion CD containing various forms and documents.
 - b. *The Elephant in the Boardroom, Speaking the Unspoken About Pastoral Transitions*, by Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree.
 - c. *Next, Pastoral Succession that Works*, by William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird.
8. Consider using a search firm. The key word in this suggestion is “consider.” Oftentimes, a search firm can be invaluable to a church that has little if any internal or denominational support in finding suitable candidates. The work of sifting through hundreds of résumés is mind-numbing and generally unproductive for the church search team. It can lead to mental and emotional fatigue and poor decisions. A qualified search firm can “thin the herd” of applicants far more efficiently and effectively than a local church search team, and they generally already have a pool of potential candidates that are available for placement. Yes, this costs money, but if there is good communication and partnership between a search firm and search committee, it can be a great investment in the future of the church. EFCA West can help with these searches.
9. Be mindful of doctrinal compatibility. When a church or pastoral candidate is desperate for a match, doctrinal compatibility can be overlooked or short-changed and can lead to

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major problems down the road. EFCA's Statement of Faith is based upon the concept of: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ." While it is important that any pastoral candidate be in unity on the essentials, there can be great conflict in a local church if there is disunity between a pastor and the congregation in "non-essential" doctrinal areas unless there are clear expectations about how these differences will be addressed. EFCA West will assist churches in their examination of a pastoral candidate's doctrinal beliefs upon request.

10. Create and maintain a healthy pace. The pastoral search process can be a long, exhausting journey. Be sure that those who lead this journey do so at a sustainable pace. Schedule breaks. Take a week off. Don't meet long into the night. Work wisely. Few decisions made after 10:00 pm are great.
11. Follow the rules. Know your church's governance documents and follow to the letter the rules related to search processes and calling a pastor. This is a moral and legal requirement for the church. If the church's governance documents require unworkable or untenable processes, change the governance documents before starting the pastoral search process.

While these suggestions don't guarantee a trouble-free, successful search process, they will certainly help you get started off on the right foot. Pray, think, act.

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