

A RESOURCE FOR ASSEMBLIES OF GOD
STAFF PASTORS WHO EXPERIENCE
ABRUPT SENIOR PASTOR TRANSITION

A PROJECT REPORT
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
BY
JASON R. ARANT

WINEBRENNER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FINDLAY, OHIO

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JASON R. ARANT

APPROVED BY:

Project Mentor

Date

External Reader

Date

Writing Stylist

Date

Doctor of Ministry Director

Date

WINEBRENNER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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ABSTRACT

Assemblies of God churches frequently experience pastoral transition. Some transition is anticipated and planned for accordingly while other transitions occur suddenly for a variety of reasons. This project is designed to identify and constructively address many of the most common problems that abrupt senior pastor transition creates for staff members who remain behind to minister to a local congregation. How do such transitions impact staff pastors and their families? What common issues do they grapple with during these types of situations? What wisdom can be gained by studying the experiences of pastors who have successfully navigated abrupt transitions? The desired goal in this body of work is to ascertain the answers to such question and to create a resource for staff pastors who may face the abrupt departure of their senior pastors in the future.

This study demonstrates the need for Assemblies of God leadership at all levels to recognize and respond to the needs of staff pastors who carry forward in their calling while enduring such seasons of unplanned senior pastor transition. This project demonstrates that at the present time the failure to deliver a proactive and deliberate approach for aiding staff pastors who endure the abrupt transition of a senior pastor is due primarily to long held cultural paradigms within the fellowship itself.

Presently staff pastors are navigating personal, congregational, role change, and protocol issues with relatively little pastoral experience and even less direction from those in places of spiritual authority. If these issues are not addressed it can be expected

that this problem will continue to persist and grow in significance as more and more Assemblies of God churches move toward a team leadership pastoral model.

The personal experiences that have been communicated by the research survey participants in this study provide a realistic look into the challenges confronting staff pastors who navigate such circumstances. The shared wisdom of the research participants also provides clarity and practical admonitions that can be useful with regard to negotiating the way forward in times of congregational tumult and disorientation.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Pastor Annie Bettes serves as the Associate/Music Pastor in a church located on the east coast of the United States. She is an honors graduate of Central Bible College where she received a degree in music and has since obtained a specialized license with the Assemblies of God. Pastor Bettes committed to her first pastoral assignment as an unmarried twenty-three year old with no family or pastoral network of relationships. Three months after taking this position, the senior pastor resigned, leaving her and two non-credentialed staff pastors to minister to the local congregation.

The senior pastor had served a total of five years at the church during which time his personal and family problems multiplied and took their toll on his ministry. Eventually these problems became so overwhelming that he chose to depart. The senior pastor's abrupt resignation set the stage for power struggles, staff dysfunction, and a host of complex interpersonal issues. Pastor Bettes found herself in a tug-of-war between certain families who believed they had earned the right to power. Pastor Parks, one of the other staff pastors, decided to begin preaching every Sunday. The District contacted him and advised him to put an interim pastor from the District in place for the purpose of forming a pulpit committee and to guide the people through transition. He chose to reject the advice about an interim and to personally choose members of the pulpit committee that he believed would chose to install him as senior pastor. Pastor Parks did not

help with the everyday office decisions or the pastoral care of the people. His main supporters were a wealthy couple who had their hand in almost every ministry at the church. During this period the church lost members and giving decreased. When people came to Pastor Parks with ideas or suggestions, he offered little support and routinely hurt them deeply. When Pastor Bettes privately questioned certain things that he did, he would become angry and threaten her job, claiming that he had the power to fire her. She later learned that he did not have that power at all.

During this time, Pastor Bettes made contact with her former youth pastor for counsel and direction. Her former pastor advised her to not stir the pot but to remain faithful to the people, to love them, and to take care of herself. Six months after the senior pastor resigned, Parks put in his resume for the senior pastor position. The District told him to step down from all his ministries so that the pulpit committee could come to a decision and choose to either present him to the congregation or not. This process was then drawn out another six months because he refused to step down. After the pulpit committee fasted and prayed, they decided not to present him to the congregation. Suddenly, a handful of Parks' supporters began writing letters to the District arguing that the pulpit committee had violated the church constitution.

At this point the District was able to step back in. They held a special business meeting for the purpose of voting on Pastor Parks for the position or not. After a bitter meeting Pastor Parks was not chosen as senior pastor and his supporters, angry and vowing to continue the fight, made a scene after the vote. These same people are now gone from the church. They took with them all the sound equipment that they had donated as well as other tools and supplies. Only Pastor Bettes and another staff pastor

remained. Pastor Bettes contacted her District and the church once again has an official board and an interim pastor who preaches on Sunday mornings. Amazingly, in only three months time, the Royal Rangers grew from two boys to just under forty boys; the Missionettes had five girls and grew to thirty girls; the youth group consisting of two to five students more than tripled and is still growing. Attendance on Sunday mornings has doubled and giving has increased. Pastor Bettes has been running staff meetings as well as board meetings. People are smiling again, the church is back on track and thriving while the search for a senior pastor continues.

Context of the Problem

The preceding case study is the true-life story of young woman who was raised in an Assemblies of God church, pursued an education in an Assemblies of God Bible College, applied for and received Assemblies of God credentials and left her parents home to minister in an Assemblies of God church. Her background is not uncommon in her fellowship and neither is the situation she encountered.¹

The Assemblies of God is a century-old worldwide Pentecostal fellowship with roots in late nineteenth and early twentieth century revivalism. According to historian Edith Blume the revivalist roots of the Apostolic movements and the emphasis on being led by the Holy Spirit both set an anti-denominational tone for the fellowship at its

¹ This case study was provided by its central character in response to a direct request from the author for the purposes of this research paper. She has asked that her name be changed and to remain anonymous due to her continuing relationship with the church described. Her story has been only lightly edited to preserve as much of her original personal reflections as possible while maintaining anonymity.

inception.² This posture resulted in the organization of the movement into what is called a “cooperative fellowship”. The organization of the Assemblies of God into a “cooperative fellowship” essentially means it is held together by a common set of fundamental beliefs by which self-governing congregations function independently of a rigid centralized hierarchy while working together toward promoting a core set of doctrines and goals. As churches were planted and the fellowship grew, district offices were created for the leadership and support of the rapidly spreading independent congregations. In most cases the districts were drawn and designated on a state-by-state basis.

The context in which the researcher is ministering is a mid-western Assemblies of God congregation averaging around one hundred and fifty members and attendees in The Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God. The Lighthouse Church was founded over seventy years ago as First Assembly of God and has been blessed with faithful and relatively long-serving leaders. In addition to its standard offering of family oriented Christian ministries the church has also operated a Christian Childcare center for the past thirty years. Throughout the week the church, which is a multipurpose facility, is used by the Childcare Center for ministry to children. The Childcare operation is presently running between seventy to ninety students per week and employs a director and eleven staff members. The pastoral team has at most times consisted of the senior pastor and two or three staff pastors serving in roles most often focused on Children, Youth, and Fine Arts ministries. For the past few years the Senior and Youth pastors served on a full-time basis while the Children’s and Fine Arts pastors served on a part-time basis. The pastoral

² Edith Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Popular History* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1985). The above comments are the author’s summarization of ideas set forth by Ms. Blumhofer in her 1985 publication.

staff is presently composed of ministers ranging in age from their early twenties to early thirties. None of us had experience staffing a church during the planned or unplanned transition of a senior pastor.

From an administrative and leadership viewpoint our church was small enough that the senior pastor served as the main business administrator and acted as the hub connecting all the different departments: Childcare, Children, Youth, Business, and Fine Arts. There was no hierarchy among staff members as everyone reported directly to him. As a result much of the planning, access to resources, and decision-making authority was consolidated within the senior pastor's office.

The context described above is the setting in which the researcher served as youth and associate pastor for seven years before the passing of the senior pastor who had faithfully led the congregation for the previous twenty-one years. During his tenure he had relocated the church to an expanded new property, suffered the loss of his first wife to cancer, survived a bitter church split, remarried, and led the church from nearly closing its doors to the threshold of another groundbreaking ceremony. Most of the congregation had never known another senior pastor and fewer still understood the process that would play out in the wake of his untimely passing.

Pastor's sudden death resulted in a rapid shift in the structure and dynamics of the church. It was the first of myriad uncertainties for the Lighthouse community. The congregation was buried beneath an avalanche of transition. A transfer of overall leadership responsibility, once heavily consolidated in the office of the senior pastor and to a lesser extent among the staff, was immediately transferred to the church board. The influence of Assemblies of God leaders from our District Council came into the mix.

Questions abounded over the future and transition in church leadership, finances, processes, as well as the day-to-day childcare operations. In addition to this, a massive change in the rhythms of ministerial activity took place. For instance, after years of not being allowed to attend a board meeting, the youth pastor was suddenly required to be present and active as a leader in a flurry of such meetings that sometimes lasted as late as one or two o'clock in the morning.

As illustrated in a small way above, the results of this shift were far reaching for the congregation but even more so for those of us serving as staff pastors in the days that followed. Those who remained in this situation learned quickly that we must continue to function effectively, make critical choices, and rise to meet new challenges in addition to the regular challenges of ministry the staff was already undertaking. This example of an abrupt transition in leadership that the church experienced is certainly not an isolated incident. Pastors resign and leave abruptly for all sorts of reasons. Conversations with others ministers during the initial research phase of this project revealed that the questions and dynamics that the staff faced are by no means anomalies and play out repeatedly across cultural, doctrinal, and denominational lines.

In conjunction with the loss of the senior leader there were grave new uncertainties unfolding in the personal and professional lives of the staff. Would one of them take the reigns of leadership as the pastor's successor? What would the installation of a new senior pastor mean? Who would remain and who would move on? How would either choice affect staff families and the greater church family? What would become of the building program they had raised funds for and were poised to begin? Would people and finances disappear while the question of leadership was being sorted out?

It all added up to powerful emotional and spiritual implications. The circumstances surrounding this sudden leadership transition and how they affected the life and ministry of the researcher provided strong personal motivations for engaging in this project.

Statement of the Problem

During the time the author's congregation struggled through these transitional stages several things were learned through first hand experience. One of these lessons was that the lion's share of the process and support structure in place for such situations is geared primarily to provide transitional direction and support to the church board in the search for a new senior pastor. The selection and installment of a new senior pastor is of primary importance because the goal in such situations is to maintain the momentum, stability, solvency, and confidence of the congregation. If this can be accomplished the chances are better that a church may be able to continue its mission to the community. If this key leadership question is not addressed and resolved in a timely and competent manner the congregation, community, and staff all stand to lose.

In a discussion on this subject with Pastor John Muskgrave, the Director of Church Development for the Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God in Columbus, Ohio shared his belief that pastoral staff issues in the wake of transition are of pivotal importance. "In the churches that have staff pastors, the issues staff are facing can certainly become a primary issue."³ When it comes to executing a healthy transition staff issues are much too important to be overlooked. Pastor Muskgrave was working with the

³ John Muskgrave, interview by author via telephone, Ohio District Council Offices, 8405 Pulsar Place, Columbus. March 2007.

transition of some thirty-five Assemblies of God Churches in Ohio at the time of this conversation. As such he understands first-hand the need for additional direction and guidance that is accessible to staff pastors caught in these types of situations. During an unexpected transitional season, with so many questions hanging in the air, it is apparent that the task of securing a fitting senior pastor is only one of many important priorities. In this type of reactionary damage control context it becomes easy to forget that staff pastors may be facing the toughest lessons and circumstances of their lives as the church races to replace the primary leader.

After speaking with fellow ministers and requesting resources from the Ohio District Offices it quickly became apparent that there is little available to staff pastors caught in the crucible of this situation. Those who remain on the scene find themselves dealing with a host of complex and demanding new dynamics. When a pastoral transition occurs the Ohio District Council supplies the affected church board with a guide for navigating the process of selecting a new leader. This resource is entitled: *“Transitions: A Roadmap For Pastoral Transitions”*⁴. A careful review of these transitional materials, distributed in the event of an unexpected pastoral vacancy, finds only three references directed toward staff pastors at all:

1. “In most churches this will be a combination of staff and leadership coming together as a team to guide the church through this interim. (6)
2. “Use staff and leadership to open and close the building, prepare bulletins, lead in worship and help with mid-week activities.” (8)

⁴ Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God. *Transitions: A Roadmap For Pastoral Transition* (Columbus: The Ohio District Council, 2005). The Transitions resource is a 62 page self-published document that is available as a Word document (or) in some cases mailed to churches as a hard copy to local church boards from the Ohio District Offices.

3. “If a staff is in place, meet with them and help facilitate team work and unity during transition... If the church has a ministry staff, the interim pastor provides leadership for that staff, helps measurably in derailing personal ambitions of an individual staff member.” (25)

What is noticeably absent from this document is any substantive identification or direction regarding the needs and concerns of the pastoral leadership who remains. As troublesome as the silence on this matter is, the third reference above presents a posture that might compound the matter. Dr. Shane Johnson, an Assemblies of God pastor and professor of theology at Malone State College, weighed in on the matter by stating: “This point of view suggests an Absalom or sinister agenda that is not necessarily so. If we adopt this mindset we assume that Joshua was politically ambitious for Moses job or that Timothy was waiting for Paul’s departure and that was not necessarily so. This does not have to be.”⁵

While there is certainly a measure of merit and necessity in each of these ideas they are narrowly focused. There is little presented in the way of a broader overarching solution to the transitional dilemma faced by staff pastors. This incomplete consideration of staff pastors’ needs leans heavily towards preventing or reacting to troublesome past situations rather than offering any positive or constructive new direction. Should such an important issue be guided primarily by reacting to past hurts and worst-case scenarios? Overall these suggestions read as a circling of the wagons that at best serve a very limited purpose with little regard for leaders who remain. The reality is that the unique situation into which pastoral staff is placed during an unexpected transition is beyond the scope of

⁵ Dr. Shane Johnson, interview by author via telephone conversation, Toledo, June 13, 2007.

our existing resources. A more holistic approach needs to be found to guide men and women through the precarious situations inherent in abrupt transitions. What remains to be seen is whether a more customized approach may hold the promise of healthier transitions for churches and staff members when this type of situation occurs.

It is the lack of attention to issues such as these that caused a pastoral friend, who has served faithfully at the same church through three consecutive unhealthy transitions, to quip: “In the Assemblies you eventually learn that if you are not the senior pastor you don’t count.” Whether this perception is a genuine observation of fact or born primarily out of his past frustration with multiple brusque transitions it tends to validate the idea that there is some inherent lack of consideration with regard to this matter within the fellowship. This sense of neglect may be quietly creating and perpetuating the idea that those who do not serve in the “top spots” of local churches are more or less discounted by the fellowship as they face what are often overwhelmingly challenging ministerial crisis.

In addition to the aforementioned complexities there may also be underlying generational issues involved in these transitions as well. Staff pastors are generally younger and less experienced than the senior pastors and the members of the church boards whom they serve. When a pastor leaves abruptly due to a moral failure or passes away suddenly and a church board composed of an older group of people inadequately considers the staff pastor’s situation, a host of negative emotions might rapidly be fostered. This set of circumstances brings to mind what Dr. Earl Creps, former chair of the Doctor of Ministry program at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary has encountered and written about in his interviews with young leaders in our fellowship. “Many of the young leaders I met know the sting of orphan status, deprived by their

elders of both fatherly affection and professional example”.⁶ Such latent feelings and experiences of being discounted, ignored, or poorly led can do little to restore traction and positive direction when navigating an unforeseen transitional period. Feelings of betrayal or abandonment to a difficult set of circumstance by a leader or group of leaders holds the potential to cut deep and leave lasting impressions. A subtle undercurrent of “orphan status” might serve as an invisible barb that works against even the most carefully crafted and enacted transitional process inadvertently contributing to a transitional process like that of Pastor Bettes in the opening case study.

In earlier times, when pastoral leadership tended to be more centrally focused on the person and ministry of the senior pastor, issues related to the staff enduring transition may have seemed a less important topic. The emphasis of the last several years, however, has been one that highlights and encourages team leadership among the lead pastor, staff, and laity alike. This new emphasis has the power to change the dynamics we have been accustomed to in a considerable way.

More is accomplished when people work as a team. Synergism captures this idea and means everyone combining his/her unique giftedness to produce significant achievement for Christ. Visionary leaders must build individuals together into teams and empower them for their ministry -laity want to be in the action.⁷

From articles such as this in the magazines published by our fellowship to ministerial conferences and the curriculum offered in Assemblies of God Bible Schools the emphasis on team leadership continues to grow and play an increasingly important part of

⁶ Earl Creps, *Off-Road Disciplines: Spiritual Adventures of Missional Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 178-179.

⁷ Dale Galloway, “Six Habits of A Visionary Leader,” *Enrichment Journal*. http://enrichmentjournal.org/200001/043_6_habits.cfm [accessed February 12, 2008].

congregational life. The following excerpt is from a textbook used until recently in the Assemblies of God Berean University course on team leadership:

The Old Testament contains many stories of such individual leaders, but the New Testament changes the pattern dramatically. From the example of Jesus and the disciples through the last missionary journey, we see team leadership emerging as the consistent New Testament form. Yet hundreds of pastors and leaders of Christian organizations do not know how to build leadership teams or how to help others around them develop such teams in a church or organization.⁸

As the above quotation illustrates, the Assemblies of God as a fellowship has been intentionally moving in the direction of team led ministry over the past decade. As the team leadership model emerges more prevalent in the church of today it is increasingly difficult to ignore the needs and dynamics of the players who remain on board once the senior pastor suddenly exits. When leadership, once consolidated, begins to be distributed more evenly and abundantly among a leadership team the value of those serving beyond the chief and central role increases in importance and relevance to the organization. The team leadership affect will be felt the least in a setting where the lead pastor delegates little and retains most of the influence for him or herself. The affect will be felt more keenly in a situation where the lead pastor delegates heavily and relies on the diligence and influence of his or her pastoral staff.

If finding a new leader for a congregation suffering the loss of a senior pastor due to death, disgrace, or division is of primary importance; guiding, equipping, and supporting those who are working through the pivot point of these exceptional circumstances must merit at least a secondary level of importance in this new age of team emphasis. If so the issue must be recognized, addressed, and taken on with sober

⁸ Kenneth Gangel, *Team Leadership in Christian Ministry* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1997), 111.

determination. *The Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God does not have a resource that addresses the needs of staff pastors caught in the tension of abrupt senior pastoral transition.*

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project is to produce a resource for the Assemblies of God that identifies the key needs of staff pastors caught in the wake of sudden transitions.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this project will be mainly qualitative research. This research will draw primarily on case studies, interviews, reflections, and experiences of Assemblies of God ministers currently serving in Ohio and other Assemblies of God districts. Research will focus specifically on pastors who have experienced abrupt transitions as staff pastors and have remained on scene to help lead through the interim period that resulted. Research will also focus on publications and documents that provide insight and quantitative data regarding these types of transitions, as well as other materials that may provide illumination upon the subject. Quantitative research, such as Assemblies of God demographic information, will be used to ascertain how many churches and ministers this concern is relevant to in the District of Ohio as well as at the national level.

Research Questions

There are several questions that, when asked of staff pastors who have been faced with abrupt transitional experiences, might provide illumination and guidance for

ministers who are facing similar challenges. All of the following questions should be understood to be within the context of an abrupt and unprepared for lead pastor transition:

1. What common questions does a staff pastor grapple with during this type of transition?
2. What common congregational expectations do staff pastors encounter during this type of transition?
3. What common pitfalls lie in wait for staff pastors in transition?
4. What guiding principles are necessary for enacting a successful transition?

An abrupt leadership transition leaves a church somewhat confused and disoriented. Researching answers for the questions above should provide helpful insights for those facing a similar situation while serving in a local church setting. Identifying and communicating many of the most common changes these congregations face can help make the unfamiliar terrain of transition seem a little more manageable and navigable to those who must traverse it. Knowing what questions others are asking in the same situation holds the potential to dilute inherent feelings of isolation or abandonment.

Learning about the struggles of others may not only help a pastor uncover and deal with his or her own struggles but may also release a sense of hopefulness knowing others have faced similar challenges and have overcome them. Identifying the most commonly expressed expectations of congregations will help a staff pastor meet healthy and reasonable expectations as well as addressing and redirecting any unrealistic or unreasonable demands of the people he or she is serving. Learning from the shared wisdom of others and identifying potential pitfalls early on can help a minister steer clear of situations that may make an already unstable situation that much worse. In addition to

this having an available toolbox of guiding principals and observations distilled from the experiences of others holds the potential to save a pastor from making unnecessary mistakes in word, thought, or deed throughout a critical period and unstable season of ministry.

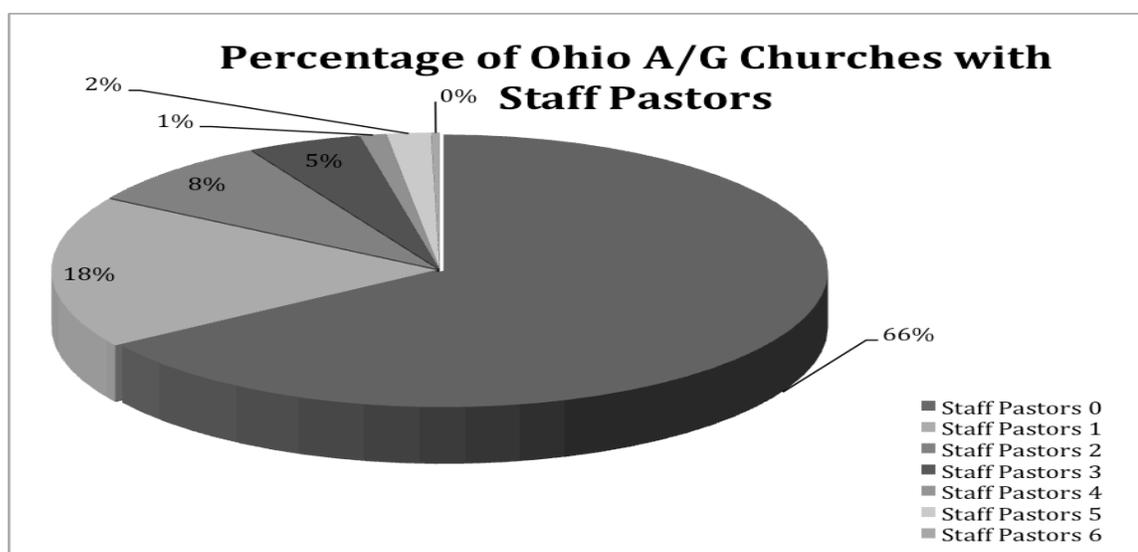
Significance of Study

The answers to the questions above must be carefully listened to, digested, and interpreted. While every context of ministry is unique and congregations that suddenly find themselves confronted with pastoral transition each present their own challenges, there remains much common ground across the spectrum. That common ground has the potential to become a source from which various Christian individuals and organizations may draw insight of significant value. The significance of this type of study may be felt at many levels for many different reasons. Ministers of varying tenure, educational level, vocational specialty, ministerial calling, and gifting all have the potential to find himself or herself serving in the context of a congregation faced with a sudden senior pastor vacancy.

The most important question concerning this study at the outset might be: “How germane is this issue to the experience of Assemblies of God ministers and churches in Ohio?” This question is one in which quantitative data proves helpful. The Ohio District presently has two hundred and seventy one Assemblies of God churches on its rolls. What percent of Assembly of God churches in Ohio even employ staff pastors? How many of these churches have multiple staff members in service? What kind of potential impact might abrupt vacancies in senior pastor positions have on staff ministers in terms of real numbers? The answers to these questions were researched by examining the

individual profiles of each of the two hundred and seventy one Assemblies of God congregations on file via the Ohio District Council on-line directory. The numbers cited in this research reflect staff pastors who hold credentials with the Assemblies of God and do not reflect ministers who may be serving in A/G churches but do not carry credentials with the fellowship. The number of Ohio churches that function with one or more staff pastors is represented on the chart represented as *Figure 1* below.

Figure 1 Percentage of Ohio A/G Churches with Staff Pastors



Of the two hundred and seventy one churches in the Ohio District one hundred and seventy eight are lone pastorates.⁹ The remaining ninety-three congregations all have additional pastors on staff. In addition to this the National Assemblies of God Demographics Office¹⁰ reports that forty-nine percent of Ohio District churches report having selected staff members presently serving. This number includes all who serve as

⁹ This Research was compiled by the author through an examination of pasoral leadership listed for each Ohio fellowship in the *Ohio District Church Directory*, www.ohioag.org [accessed Dec 15, 2006].

¹⁰ Sherri Doty, Demographics Office, Assemblies of God National Headquarters, e-mail message to author, December 12, 2006.

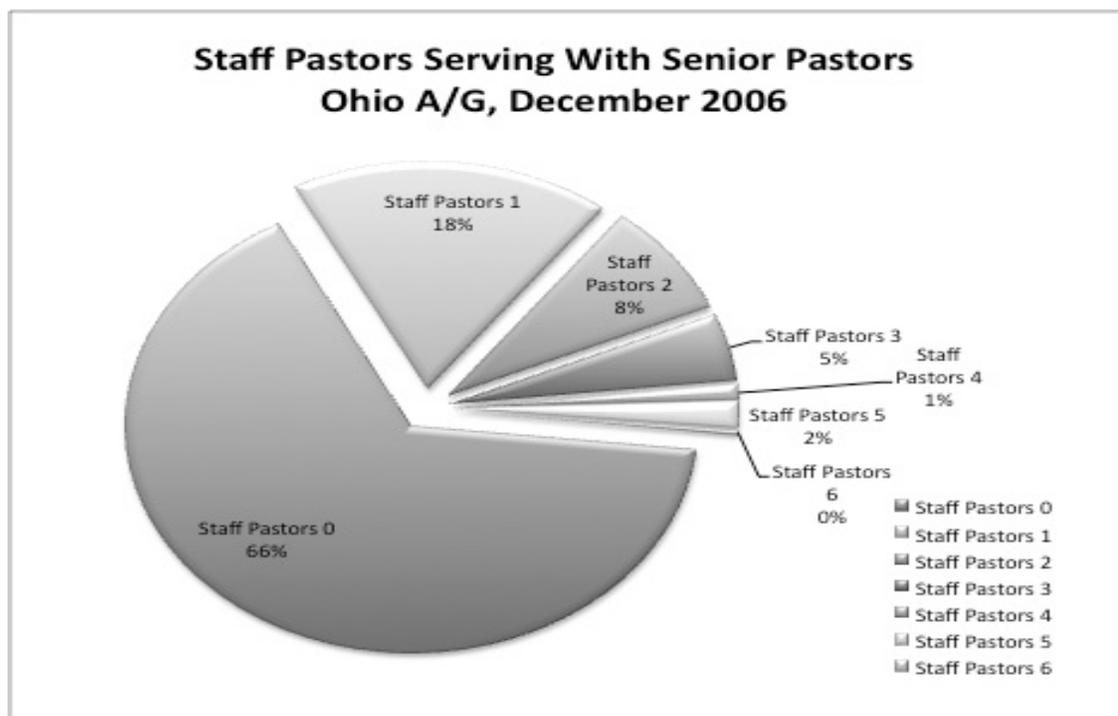
staff pastors whether they hold Assemblies of God credentials or not. This means that in cases of unplanned lead pastor transitions there is somewhere between a thirty-five and fifty-one percent chance that Ohio pastoral staffers might be closely involved and affected by an abrupt transition process.

In terms of percentages the illustration in *Figure 2* shows a lone senior pastor leads a majority of A/G churches in Ohio. This leaves thirty-four percent of Ohio churches with at least one or more credential holding ministers who might remain on staff once the senior pastor has left. *Figure 2* on the following page illustrates that pastoral leadership teams in Ohio may be composed of anywhere from one to as many as six staff pastors serving in roles under the leadership of a senior pastor. This data shows that many multi-staff churches in Ohio have associate pastors who may potentially experience a sudden senior pastor leadership transition.

While the immediate intention is to provide a resource that might benefit staff pastors and church boards in Ohio, there is also a natural and much wider applicability of this study to other Assemblies of God districts who are looking for a way to address this same subject matter. Additional data obtained from the National Assemblies of God Demographics Office for May 2006 specified that at the national level in the United States “38% of churches reported selected staff in addition to the senior pastor: specifically assistant, Christian Education, Youth, Music, and/or Children’s pastors.”¹¹ This issue may also hold a much wider scope of significance within the Assemblies of God if research were conducted on congregations being run by nationals in foreign nations. Unfortunately such research is beyond the scope of this project.

¹¹ Sherri Doty, Demographics Office, Assemblies of God National Headquarters, e-mail message to author, December 12, 2006.

Figure 2: Credentialed Staff Pastors Serving With Senior Pastors, Ohio A/G



Non-Assemblies of God Organizations

The Assemblies of God see themselves as a cooperative fellowship rather than as a denomination. This means that individual churches, while signing on and adhering to a centralized statement of fundamental beliefs, adopt their own constitution, maintain sovereignty over pastoral leadership, ministry, and business functions. Fellowships, organizations, and independent church bodies with constitutions, government, and leadership structures similar to those found within this fellowship may also find this topic significant as they encounter similar transitional dilemmas. When pastors and their staffs are not appointed centrally and choices are made at the congregational level there is increased potential for staff ministers to find themselves caught in the sort of “ministerial limbo” Assemblies of God pastors face while waiting for congregational leadership mechanisms to run their course.

First Pastoral Assignments

Having served in this context for nearly seven years before the transition had given the researcher a much greater opportunity to establish connections, resources, and relationships from which to draw encouragement and access to wisdom while walking the transitional tightrope. This is not the uniform experience of all who serve in ministry. The reality is that many people who serve in staff pastor roles are relatively transient and have short tenures. Others are recent graduates from Bible schools and seminaries who may be less experienced and serving far from the support structures and contexts they have previously known. Still others may have served in a context in which the senior pastor who left did not take measures to mentor them or transitioned before any meaningful mentoring could take place. Still others may serve under the type of pastor whose lack of integrity and character taints their image and ministry even after he has made his exit. These situations are all examples to which this research might provide a significant voice and benefit for those who are able to access it.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

The assumptions that the researcher brings to this study are based upon three foundational beliefs:

- 1) The team leadership model diversifies the leadership structure in such a way that raises the level of importance of each pastoral team member.
- 2) A successful transition of a congregation after an unexpected senior pastor departure is rooted in finding a replacement while recognizing and addressing the needs of remaining pastoral leadership.
- 3) The majority of staff pastors will remain loyally and selflessly dedicated to God's plan

unfolding in their context and are not using the confusion of a sudden pastoral vacancy for the furtherance of personal ambitions.

There are certainly many limitations to a study like this. Qualitative information from surveys will never be as objective as it should be. Many times sudden transitions will be full of emotionally charged memories and perceptions that will color feedback to some degree. There are always several sides to a story so the data collected here is skewed by factors such as these. In addition to this each context of ministry has its own unique factors and therefore creating a one-size fits all resource will never be able to completely address any and every situation that involves abrupt transition.

Lastly, this study might also be limited by the fact that the Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God may not decide to incorporate, endorse, or make available the end product of this project to staff ministers who are involved in an abrupt transition.

Definition of Terms

1. Abrupt transition: The unanticipated and unprepared for transition of leadership at the senior pastor level within the context of a local congregation resulting in disorientation among the leadership and laity alike.
2. Lead pastor: The senior most pastor of a congregation. The lead pastor is responsible for overseeing all ministries and ministers serving a congregation.
3. Cooperative fellowship: A fellowship composed of self-governing local congregations voluntarily subscribing to a common set of fundamental beliefs.
4. Church Board: A group of individuals elected by a congregation to oversee and transact the business of the congregation in cooperation with a senior pastor.

5. Restorationist: An individual or movement dedicated to restoring and returning to various elements of the first century church.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One: Introduction to the Project

Chapter Two: Biblical and Theological Foundations

Chapter Three: Literature and Other Sources

Chapter Four: Research Methodology and Procedures

Chapter Five: Analysis of Data

Chapter Six: Summary, Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Chapter One begins with a short case study illustrating some not too uncommon dynamics staff pastors face when a sudden senior pastor transition takes place. The chapter also provides a broad overview that begins with a brief account of Assemblies of God history and polity in an effort to assist the reader in understanding the context in which abrupt transitions take place.

The author's own ministerial experience with pastoral transition provides another window into the dynamics, which provide motivation to engage in this study, and to further enhance the reader's understanding of the main problem presented by this paper.

Chapter Two provides the foundational theological framework that colors the approach to the problems facing staff pastors in the midst of sudden senior pastor wisdom of the great cloud of witnesses informs the problem.

Chapter Three acknowledges that “All Truth is God’s Truth”¹² and reviews additional data from literature and other sources in an effort to shed additional light upon the project.

Chapter Four details the methodology and procedures utilized in this study. This chapter will disclose the details regarding the “who, what, when, and where” of data collection.

Chapter Five describes the results of the data that has been collected, analyzed, and recorded for the project while Chapter Six provides the summary and interpretation of the conclusions reached as a result of the project.

Gaining insight into the theological issues surrounding an abrupt pastoral transition is of paramount importance. The primary goal of pastoral leadership is to move a community of believers to be individually and corporately conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of world evangelization. When an abrupt change of leadership occurs the threat looms large that this mission may be temporarily if not permanently derailed. The doctrinal understanding of the Assemblies of God is that the church is the “Body of Christ, the habitation of God through the Spirit, with divine appointments for the fulfilling of her Great Commission”.¹³ This understanding of the church and its mission beg deep theological reflection for the purpose of limiting the potential of damages that unexpected leadership changes can bring with them. As such some key theological issues for reflection require a basic understanding of ecclesiology, a theology of the role of the

¹² Arthur Holmes, *All Truth is God’s Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1977) The quotation notated above is the title of Holmes’ famous book.

¹³ William Menzies and Stanley Horton, *Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1993), 156.

pastor, a theological exploration of Kingdom ethics as well as reflection on the work of the Holy Spirit in each of these areas.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

From the earliest days of the church Christian communities have faced abrupt pastoral transition. This type of alteration in the life and rhythm of a community engaged in the Great Commission of Christ is a serious matter. In the context of our culture and times, multiple pastors often serve together on staff in the same church. As such there are several important theological issues that converge when sudden senior pastor transition occurs. Chapter 2 examines several key theological issues related to this type of situation:

1. The issue of Scripture –Does the Bible reference sudden pastoral transition?
2. The issue of Ecclesiology –What is the church really all about? How might this type of transition affect its mission?
3. The issue of Pastoral theology –What is the role of a pastor in the church?
4. The issue of Christian Ethics –What behavioral standards does Christ require of the body of Christ when facing sudden shifts in leadership and organization?

Each of these topics must be reflected upon and studied carefully in light of truths revealed in Scripture. It is critical to consider the writings of the New Testament, as the first century church is the fundamental model upon which Restorationist movements and fellowships such as the Assemblies of God draws.

Biblical Examples of Abrupt Pastoral Transition

When considering the issue of abrupt senior pastor transition as Christians it is important to consider the weight of biblical witness on the matter. Are there examples of abrupt pastoral transition in the context of a local church in the pages of the New

Testament? Beyond such examples are there explicit or implicit instances of unplanned leadership transition in the pages of the Old Testament? Any such examples might be helpful to provide a model or insight that may benefit the church today. As a fellowship of people who regard the scriptures as the authoritative revelation of God for Christian life and conduct these examples need to be carefully explored and considered in order to form a meaningful and useful theological framework for helping staff pastors navigate sudden change.

New Testament

In the New Testament there are few places that directly address unexpected leadership transition confronting a local church. One instance may be Paul's response to the situation facing the fledgling church in Crete that is alluded to in his letter of instruction to Titus. "*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you*"¹ This greeting to Titus could easily be Paul's response to the abrupt departure of some unnamed pastor or evangelist who had to evacuate the region. While the details behind the events that transpired in Crete are unclear, what is clear from this passage is that the first century church did experience dysfunctional moments of leadership transition. It was in one such moment such that Titus was called to serve Crete. The text reveals that a work was begun and left unfinished and that someone would need to step in to bring order out of the chaos that naturally resulted. This first century example of a transitional problem is essentially the type of problem that the sudden loss of a senior pastor brings about in the 21st century church of today.

¹ Titus 1:5 [NIV].

In the pages of the New Testament there appear few explicit examples of a local church negotiating through a sudden and jarring revolution in pastoral leadership. Perhaps the situation most comparable to an abrupt present day scenario might be the hours and days immediately following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although the birth of the church is often considered to have taken place on the day of Pentecost Jesus' twelve disciples underwent a radically abrupt pastoral transition only weeks before. Jesus sudden arrest in the garden and his subsequent trial and execution might be considered the first unplanned pastoral transition in the history of Christianity. This series of events unfolded with rapidity, shook Jesus' inner circle to the core, left a group of devout people in a state of utter bewilderment and despair, and left the leaders of the band befuddled and wondering what would happen next. Some headed for Emmaus, others focused on tending to the body of the Lord, while still others remained in Jerusalem no doubt contemplating what their next move would be.

The actions of those disciples who remained in the aftermath of Jesus' death are not far removed from what happens in the context of a local church today when a senior pastor suddenly resigns, passes away, or is removed from his office in division or disgrace. Some head down the road to another community of worship, others focus on preserving the body, still others remain for a time to see what will unfold next.

The second clearly identifiable instance of abrupt pastoral transition in the New Testament occurred immediately after the resurrected Lord ascended to heaven at the beginning of the book of Acts. The scripture records the immediate actions of the disciples in the moments that followed:

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the

*room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*²

In the after-effects of Jesus' second abrupt departure from the disciples' company there is no hint of the confusion, despair, and anxiety that was present following his first departure. This time the disciples were resolved to a spirit of unity, mission, and focus. The focused attitude, actions, and spirit of the group paint a very different picture than before. It is in fact a complete reversal of what transpired when Jesus was removed from the scene the first time when he was crucified.

In the Scriptures that follow Peter stands up among the believers and puts forth the notion of replacing the vacancy among the disciples left by Judas. It is interesting to note that it is Judas who is replaced and not Jesus. Peter's focus is on the gap among the ranks of the team that remains. Jesus is still alive in the presence of the heavenly Father and he is still the one by which the disciples feel led and the one to whom they are dedicated. *"Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection"*.³ Peter's words communicate the idea that the one who joins their ranks plays a crucial part of bearing witness with the community of believers to Jesus' resurrection and the good news this event brings. The mission and the leadership for the mission are depicted as corporate in nature. The group does not act to elect a supreme leader among them but instead refers to the Scripture's injunction to ensure that one more

² Acts 1:12-14 [NIV].

³ Acts 1:21-22 [NIV].

disciple steps forward to witness and continue the Kingdom work already in progress among the eleven. The actions of the disciples in this matter reflect a theology that is Christ-centered rather than centered upon any single human functioning in the capacity of a pastoral role. The actions of the eleven or the “new twelve” convey that Jesus remains the ultimate leader and pastor of the church and that the disciples work as a team under his continuing leadership, sustaining power, and authority.

There is a marked contrast between the scattering, despair, and confusion that followed the crucifixion and the unified and functional group that returned to Jerusalem after Jesus was taken up from their midst. In the first instance the disciples were under the impression that the Lord Jesus had been torn from the center of their lives. In the second instance they found reassurance that he remained forever at the center as their Lord and leader. These faithful followers no doubt drew confidence from Jesus’ admonition, “...*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*”.⁴ This same assurance should give fortitude and confidence to those who serve in roles of pastoral leadership today as we look to our most senior pastor, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Old Testament

In the Old Testament there are many Scriptures that describe the transfer of authority between one spiritual leader to another and from one king and kingdom to the next abruptly. The books of First and Second Chronicles give extensive records of the rise and fall of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel. There are a few key Old Testament leaders however who seemed to pastor the entire nation of Israel. One such leader was Eli the priest. Eli served before the Lord as priest and continued to do so until

⁴ Mt 28:20 [NIV].

reaching a very old age. The Scriptures do not accuse Eli of any direct personal actions against God but the Scriptures do detail the actions of Eli's sons as reprehensible enough for God to abruptly remove Eli from his priestly position. In the narrative a man sent from God excoriates Eli for not taking measures to correct his wicked sons behavior.⁵ This same prophecy is then delivered through Samuel to Eli effectively bringing about a quick and decisive ending to Eli's spiritual leadership.⁶ While Eli is one example from the Old Testament that serves to illustrate an abrupt pastoral transition his story lacks the element of time passing without a named leader who assumes the mantle he leaves behind. Samuel supersedes Eli almost instantly, which appears to be the pattern of Old Testament leadership transition.

The Old Testament narratives consistently demonstrate a pattern of designated succession in pastoral leadership. Leadership transitions such as Moses to Joshua, Saul to David, David to Solomon, Elijah to Elisha, and other great examples are many and extend beyond the scope of this paper. Old Testament examples seem to communicate that whether men and women anticipate the transition of a leader or whether that transition occurs almost randomly and unexpectedly, God himself is not caught off guard and already has his choice in mind. The Old Testament narratives do not generate questions about whether a new pastoral or national leader for God's people will arise. Instead the Scriptures challenge those of us in the present age to await the revelation of who the new leader that God has ordained will be. This understanding regarding the way God has been at work in the history of the Old and New Testaments should bolster our

⁵ 1 Sm 2:29-36 [NIV].

⁶ 1 Sm 3:1-19, 4:1 [NIV].

confidence that the providence of God is at work all along in the transition process long before we might even consider that such a transition is even in process.

Ecclesiology

To adequately consider the dynamics of abrupt leadership transition in the local church setting necessitates theological clarity about what the nature of the church is and how the church comes into being. As the corporate temple of the Holy Spirit the person of the Holy Spirit himself indwells the church. This is as true in the individual sense as it is in the corporate sense. As vessels of the Holy Spirit God's presence and power is active and mobile as the people of God live out daily life with people inside and outside of the Christian community. If the church is truly indwelt by the Spirit of God, the implication is that God makes himself available to men and women on earth through the presence of his people, the church. The church exists and functions as a group of people called out of the world and into a community centered on the person of Christ. As McGrath wrote: "The church comes into being when people aware of the call to salvation in Jesus Christ, come together in community, profess the same faith, celebrate the same eschatological liberation, and seek to live in the discipleship of Jesus Christ."⁷ For the purposes of this study on abrupt senior pastor transition it is important to note that while the church is led and blessed by the gift of pastoral leadership the church is neither founded nor dependent upon the leadership of any one person holding any one specific office. The church catholic, national, and local is built as a body of believers.

⁷ Alistair McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 506.

Theologian Stanley Grenz writes that the church is fundamentally more than an edifice, a leader, or a cause. Grenz asserts that the church is all at once a nation and holy priesthood belonging to God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Spirit.⁸

The Scriptural reference to the church as a nation occurs in First Peter and declares: “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*”.⁹ As a nation our membership transcends the boundaries of earthly states and includes instead a diverse swath of people from differing geographic settings, racial backgrounds, and historic times. As a nation of priests, “all the people of God belong to the priestly order and the ministry of the priesthood is shared by all.”¹⁰ The nature of the church beyond that of a holy nation and royal priesthood is the body of Christ. This is revealed in Paul’s words: “*Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it*”¹¹ and affirmed again later in the book of Ephesians: “*And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way*”.¹²

As the body of Christ the church exists to serve the head who is Christ. Grenz makes the point that the body of Christ comprises his presence in the world and that the members of that body, in its diverse functions, “use their gifts in service to the whole”.¹³ This means that every local body of believers that comprises the church is designed in

⁸ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 466-467.

⁹ 1 Pt 2:9 [NIV].

¹⁰ Grenz, 466.

¹¹ 1 Cor 12:27 [NIV].

¹² Eph 1:22-23 [NIV].

¹³ Grenz, 466.

turn to serve other local bodies and ultimately the Lord Jesus Christ who is the head. It is the role of all pastors to lead, prepare, and equip the local church to carry out this mission in a focused and effective manner.

When the pastoral hierarchy is suddenly disturbed and rearranged adversely the Scriptures indicate that the local congregation might be directly affected and that in turn the entire body of Christ will feel the ripples that result. *“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it”*¹⁴

The pastoral duties of leading, preparing, and equipping become unclear or nonexistent when abrupt transition takes place. Naturally the effectiveness, momentum, and possibly even the existence of a local church can fall into a great degree of uncertainty.

Pastoral Theology

With a biblical idea of the nature and mission of the church established it is now possible to look at the theological realities of the pastoral role. The role of the pastor is essential in the drama of God’s unfolding Kingdom. As Grenz wrote,

Although the kingdom is here, this presence is partial and unconsummated. For this reason there remains a future eschatological aspect of the kingdom. One day all persons will acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus. Likewise one day the principals of God’s kingdom will be universally actualized in the new human society that God will inaugurate.¹⁵

It is for the unfolding of this kingdom that God has called and equipped pastors in the local church to play a central role in serving and equipping believers to advance the gospel on earth. The vocation of senior pastors and staff pastors alike

¹⁴ 1 Cor 12:26 [NIV].

¹⁵ Grenz, 476.

is revealed through scripture as equipping and preparing the people of God for service. Paul explained in Ephesians,

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.¹⁶

The nature of the pastoral role is set forth distinctively in this passage. Regardless of the demographic context a pastor is working with, the calling to prepare people for works of service for the advancement of God's kingdom remains. This process of serving and equipping should be carried on in the body regardless of transition among the ranks of leadership. Willimon wrote: "We search the New Testament in vain for much stress on continuity of structures of Christian leadership. Continuity of faithful witness is the main concern rather than continuity or uniformity in ecclesiastical structure".¹⁷ As such the pastoral role should serve the goal of continuing the witness that Christ has given and charged his followers to carry to all nations.¹⁸

The pastoral role in transition at any and every level should be maintaining a proper witness to those we are called to disciple whether that transition is planned and occurs with careful deliberation or unplanned and occurs without warning amid seemingly devastating circumstances. Willimon further explains: "For the sake of good order, when the church gathers, some from among the 'priests' are to serve as 'priests' or 'servants of the servants of God'. These are

¹⁶ Eph 4:11-13 [NIV].

¹⁷ William Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 29.

¹⁸ Matt 28:19-20 [NIV].

called ‘pastors’”.¹⁹ As Willimon points out, the role of the pastor is primarily the role of a servant to the people of God. Fidelity to the mission and to the calling of service among the people of God honors the office of pastor and lends power and momentum to the great commission of Christ to reach the world with the message of reconciliation that the gospel offers.

While the context of pastoral ministry may face change and uncertainty the fidelity of the pastor to that calling must remain unshakeable. London and Wiseman observe,

A call means being used to impact a part of God’s world -that noble and eternal part. At the same time it means I work where he sends me –in Fairbanks, Selma, or Manhattan; that’s the sweaty earthy part of a call. It is a summons to unknown territory, but it always promises the company of the absolutely trustworthy God. It is more important to know who is leading than were you are going.²⁰

In the midst of transition the landscape upon which the pastoral calling changes shape while the call and the one who gives it remains the same. The theological reality of a static vocation in a dynamic set of circumstances leaves the pastor with a foundation upon which to rebuild even when what was before ceases to be reality and a new reality begins to find its form.

Kingdom Ethics

The issue of Christian Ethics is a major one when navigating abrupt pastoral transition. This may be especially true in situations where a senior pastor has resigned or division in the church has resulted because of behavior that is immoral and unethical. It

¹⁹ Willimon, 44.

²⁰ H. B. London, and Neil Wiseman, *The Heart of a Great Pastor* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1994), 114.

is important that pastoral staff members who remain understand their ethical obligations and continue to model them. It is also important that a church board and congregation at large understand and embody the ethics of the kingdom as well. A lack of clarity on this matter may cause further injury not only to leaders and lay people but also to the reputation of a church in its community at large.

To the follower of Jesus Christian ethics are the “trump” that provides the ultimate perspective on reality and provides the foundation upon which all other ethical systems are judged. All Christians must recognize that their lives are on loan from God himself and that he has provided special revelation about how humankind should behave on planet earth. “We live out our days in the presence of God. And this God has preferences. God desires that we live in a certain way, while disapproving of others in which we might chose to live”.²¹ The reality of what God desires and expects from his people brings awareness and informs Christ followers that there are divine ethics set in place by the creator.

Christian ethics must always be centered on Jesus Christ as God’s manifest revelation of himself. These ethics and the guiding principles behind them can be found through the written word and are especially understood when both the written word of Scripture and the living word of Christ meet within the center of the Christian life. Christian ethics are birthed by God’s Spirit in dynamic and life-giving heart attitudes informed by the divine revelation of wisdom. As St. Paul confessed, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”.²² Believers can know that they are not alone in making ethical choices but do indeed have access to a guide, the

²¹ Grenz, 17.

²² Phil 2:13 [NIV].

Holy Spirit, who provides direction as well as the divine empowerment to live according to the ethical standards and ideals that are depicted in the scriptures.

Christian ethics is at times a messy business because it involves broken and finite creatures encountering and applying truths that are more powerful and complex than the natural mind can often aspire to understand. The ethical conduct of the Christian life plays a role that both shapes and displays the shape of inner spiritual formation. The decisions that Christians make every day are the products of an ongoing process of spiritual formation. At the same time personal decisions also play a role in shaping individual character. Many people see the spiritual component of their lives as something that is lived out corporately during a worship service. Others see the spiritual component of their lives as something lived out very privately and individually. What is important to remember is that these components are not mutually exclusive, but rather, complementary to one another. For the Christian worship, character, vocation, and ethical conduct are all interrelated. The true character of an individual or a group of individuals, such as a church, will be shaped and revealed in the fire of difficult circumstances. An unexpected transition in senior pastor leadership is one of many such possibilities.

The interplay of these factors is very crucial to the mission of God in the world today. Christians cannot effectively preach a Christ who the community of Christ does not reflect. The reality of this idea further underscores the necessity of a local church making its choices in the midst of transition in a way that honors the name of Jesus Christ.

Ethic of Christian Love

The Lord Jesus seeks to guide the church through the sudden transition of senior leadership as necessary. Christ himself has the greatest vested interest in the continued success of the local church as it advances his kingdom on the earth. Those men and women to whom the mantle of leadership falls in the interim can be guided by the ethic of love that he has set forth as the ultimate way of living life. The centrality of the ethic of Christian love is set forth plainly in many New Testament scriptures such as in Mark chapter twelve. When Jesus was teaching one day a man asked him a question about which commandment was the most important.

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.’”

“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.²³

The ethic of love that Jesus sets forth is communicated as love toward God himself and at the same time love for our neighbors as ourselves.

The love of God and neighbor is the ethic that must guide every Christian above all others. The supreme example of this love for God and humankind is displayed through Christ’s sacrificial death in obedience to God’s desires and in subjection to the needs of lost humanity. Paul wrote, “But God demonstrates his

²³ Mark 12:29-34 [NIV].

own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”.²⁴ The ethic Christ most displays and commands is one of a generous and sacrificial love. It is this very ethic we are challenged to reflect as his people.

In times of uncertainty, profound change, and loss, an ethic of love calls leadership to not only a compassionate kindness and prayerful understanding but also to moments of risk and potential self-sacrifice on behalf of the congregation. This ethic of love is not one-sided however. The lay leadership, members, and attendees of a church are called to demonstrate this same ethic not only on behalf of a senior pastor but also for all who are called to pastoral leadership positions in the local church.

The Scriptures even commend these people as worthy of double honor among those they serve. “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages’.”²⁵ This admonition contains no qualifications excluding those who serve beneath the office of senior pastor and must be evenly applied to all who legitimately participate in congregational ministry. Paul’s words in this passage appear especially applicable in the context of staff pastors forced to navigate abrupt leadership transition under the additional strain of instability and uncertainty that casts its shadow upon their families and careers. The ethic of Christian love must demonstrate a generous, Christ-centered, and sacrificial love between all who remain when the most senior leader departs.

²⁴ Rom 5:8 [NIV].

²⁵ 1 Tim 5:17-18 [NIV].

Theological Conclusion

The New Testament picture of abrupt pastoral transition is one that emphasizes the centrality of Christ. To maintain a Christ-centered focus rather than a merely anthropomorphic emphasis is clearly demonstrated as the model that Jesus' followers demonstrated for all to follow. The church is founded upon Jesus himself and advances when a community of believers joins together under his leadership to accomplish his purposes. From the Old Testament it is evident that God clearly chooses individuals for leadership to serve in leadership roles for appointed seasons. It is through such leaders, and sometimes in spite of such leaders, that the Lord leads his people towards his divine purposes.

Great theological significance can be drawn from the contrasting ways in which Jesus' followers reacted to his sudden departures on the two occasions that his personal presence was withdrawn. Jesus himself acted as the pastor to his disciples caring for, teaching, and leading those who followed him. Jesus did not serve in this capacity alone but was always mentoring and investing in the lives of the twelve who were his chosen pastoral leadership team. When Jesus' presence was removed in the time between the crucifixion and resurrection things quickly began to fall apart. For those Jesus led up to that point the crucifixion seemed a devastating defeat and the destruction of their hopes and dreams. Jesus could no longer be the center of life and mission. Without Christ at the center of the community it was certain that the church could not hold together. The resurrection however brought Jesus back to the core as the resurrected Son of God and as the omnipotent founder of the church. With Jesus as the supreme authority in heaven and

on earth the church would advance through the faithful love, example, and obedience of those who would serve under the leadership and authority of Christ.

This is the same theological situation in which churches that experience abrupt transition today must understand they are facing, not as sheep without a shepherd but as sheep led by the one who ultimately reigns over heaven and earth: the Lord Jesus Christ. To maintain a central focus on the headship of Christ as the one who leads and reigns over the local church is a proper theological perspective to appropriate when a senior pastor is suddenly removed from service.

For a local congregation to maintain a Christ-centered focus enables a church to respond to such transition in the pattern of the early church after Christ's ascension. Such a unified, focused, and devoted sense of mission will pave the way for successfully advancing the work of God's kingdom. For a local congregation to lose a Christ-centered focus is to enter into the same dark perspective that hovered over the church in the days between the crucifixion and resurrection. There is a real theological danger that lies in an anthropomorphically centered focus following the sudden loss of the senior pastor. Such a focus rests too heavily on the under-shepherd rather than maintaining a healthy focus on Christ as the true founder and sustainer of the local congregation.

Leadership is important in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and in the church of today. Leaders such as Peter, who stood up among the others, can be used by God to facilitate the advance of the kingdom, yet the ultimate reality is that Christ alone will build his church. Senior pastors, staff pastors, board members, and the congregation must always understand that Christ is the head of the body and all leadership roles are secondary to and dependent upon his preeminence.

The ecclesiology of the church demonstrates that it is set up to function as a body of believers under the lordship of Jesus Christ. This understanding of the church should not serve to erode and diminish the role of the senior pastor neither should it exalt that role beyond reasonable limitations. The local church requires pastoral leadership to move forward from merely “being” the body to “doing” the work that the body is called to do. In the absence of a senior pastor a local church is still called to advance the work of the kingdom and to remain in place as an oasis of life in the community it serves. The pastors who remain when the senior pastor leaves must understand this and be ready and willing to facilitate the continued work of the ministry in his or her context.

Pastoral theology based upon the writings of the New Testament draws no lines of distinction between senior pastors and staff pastors with regard to vocation. The vocation that all pastors are called to is monolithic in its purpose and application of equipping and preparing the saints to carry out the work of the ministry. The church today does employ hierarchy and job descriptions that help facilitate the corporate organization of a pastoral staff in a local context. Organizational designations, however, such as youth pastor, children’s pastor, worship pastor, and the like are not ultimately theological terms and offices in and of themselves. Instead they should be understood to describe areas of focus within the overall vocation of pastoral calling. These designations do not absolve staff pastors from providing the spiritual leadership an entire church may require. Neither should these designations disqualify such individuals from leading the church when a sudden transition occurs.

In the midst of all of these converging theological understandings there is also the ethic that demands the demonstration of Christian love. A staff pastor must demonstrate

love for the pastor who has departed whether in good terms or in bad. Love for the one who has departed must also be held alongside of love for all who remain. A deep love for God, his people and the work God is doing at the church affected by such a transition is a theological necessity. This love may require some measure of sacrifice as spiritual leaders focus on bringing healing and restoration rather than focusing on the possibility of being replaced or transferred to another context of ministry.

While the pastoral staff who remain after a sudden transition are theologically called to exhibit an ethic of Christian love they are not alone in this calling. The church itself is called as well to honor those who lead in the place of the one who has departed. A healthy exhibition of Christian love for God and for one another demonstrates that the presence of the Holy Spirit remains at work in the local community of believers. This attitude of mutual love should also serve to create a healthy environment that will lend itself to healthy overall leadership transition in the senior pastorate.

Overall the sudden loss of a senior pastor necessitates that those who remain take their theological cues from the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us. The preeminence and centrality of focus on Christ is of utmost importance. The proper understanding of the church as a body that functions through all of its members will serve to dissipate the feeling of immense impact that losing a key spiritual leader produces. The remaining pastors, leaders, and congregation should be free to focus on the bigger picture of the purpose, mission, and ministry that still remains to be executed in their community to advance the kingdom of God. The staff pastors themselves must be committed to and focused upon the static nature of their calling rather than the dynamic and possibly changing nature of their specific ministry context. Finally, the Christian ethic of love for

God and one another should guide the community of believers to a generous, mutually submissive and at times even self-sacrificial posture on behalf of the entire body of Christ.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE AND OTHER SOURCES

Beyond the theological ideas in the preceding chapter a wider review will provide insight from resources beyond the scriptures and Christian literature. Such resources will lend themselves to pastoral leaders navigating abrupt transition in a church setting. This research section will concentrate on: (1) leadership characteristics necessary for leading through transition, (2) managing organizational transition, and (3) personally responding to transition. This chapter will combine and utilize the information gathered from reviewing literature on these topics for the purpose of distilling it into a useful end product.

Leadership Essentials Necessary for Transition

As noted in the theological reflection on leadership transition in the scriptures certain leaders are chosen to lead for certain moments in the flow of human history. Paul specifically called Titus to bring order to the church in Crete while it floundered in chaos and Esther stepped forward to place herself precariously between her king and a genocidal madman. While anyone might be able to lead in the best of times with abundant good will and plentiful resources, occasions of difficulty and uncertainty call for additional qualities of character to be present within the heart of the leader who must

face them. Futurist Leonard Sweet likens the changes facing the church in the new millennium to the chaos of a tidal wave when a tsunami has struck.

There are three responses to a tidal wave. Each one has its defenders and manifestations in the church... **1. Denial**... the refusal to see the world from any other perspective than your limited one or the one in which you feel comfortable. **2. Out of Here**... this is the hunker-in the bunker response, the barrier building, trench-digging, wall-bricking activity that comes from dreaming of the past while demeaning the future. **3. Hoist the Sails**... the third response to a tidal wave is the belief that it is the church's task to catch God's wave and make some good waves ourselves in the wake of God's wave.¹

Staff pastors that face the challenges of leadership through a tidal wave of transition must already possess or work to acquire special leadership characteristics that enable them to choose the third response. Denial offers no remedy neither does it offer hope for the future of the church. An "out of here" mentality reflects a thought process and heart that is more mercenary than pastoral. The pastor who cares for the Lord's sheep must desire to "hoist the sails" and be ready for the risks inherent in joining with God's agenda

Leaders of Character

In military training men and women are intentionally shaped for the kind of leadership that may cost themselves and those around them their lives. There is a special focus on developing leadership qualities that will remain constant under duress. Inner qualities that arise under the threat of danger to a leader, his or her charge, and organization come to the forefront in the heat of battle when situations are unpredictable and in constant flux. Retired Colonel Larry Donnithorne writes of the leadership traits instilled in cadets at the Army's West Point Academy. The United States Army expects

¹ Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 18-21.

its officers to carry these leadership traits with them into the difficult situations they train to face on the battlefield. Donnithorne insisted,

Leader of character is the phrase the Academy uses to describe the kind of leader it wants its cadets to become. A leader of character has all the qualities we normally associate with leaders –ambition, confidence, courage, intelligence, eloquence, responsibility, creativity, compassion and one thing more which we unfortunately overlook all too frequently among civilian leaders: A leader of character is absolutely trustworthy, even in times of great stress, and can be depended upon to put the needs of others –the organization, the community, above personal considerations –not now or then or when the spirit moves him, or when it will look good on his resume –but in every instance.²

Leaders of character are essentially leaders with grit. The character formation of pastoral leaders cannot afford to overlook this vital component. It is this element of trustworthiness in times of distress that the Apostle Paul must have noted in Titus. Conversely it was the lack of this same trustworthiness in John Mark that brought about Paul’s sharp departure from Barnabas and in turn marked the dissolution of their joint missionary journey. Donnithorne describes West Point Academy’s vision of leadership in terms that uniquely parallel the needs of a church experiencing abrupt senior pastoral transition. The leaders who remain must be able and willing to put the needs of others, the organization and the community before personal considerations. “Leaders of character serve the public good, and go not only beyond their personal horizons, but even past the horizons of their colleagues, to serve everyone whose interests are affected.”³ In this way leaders of character who encounter sudden transition can become a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem.

² Larry Donnithorne, *The West Point Way of Leadership* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1993), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

Leadership Lacking Character

When a leader scores high in the first half of Donnithorne's list of qualities such as: ambition, courage, confidence, creativity, and intelligence, and yet lacks the other less charismatic but more essential character ingredients of fidelity and grit, the opportunity that God may be presenting in a moment of sudden transition may be compromised, betrayed, and lost. There is a long, unfortunate history of pastors and military leaders whose story ends in a manner such as this while serving their respective kingdoms. The wider research of literature turns up one such powerful example in the life of Major General Benedict Arnold.

History records that Benedict Arnold was among the most heroic leaders of the American Revolution. If he had possessed a greater sense of inner character Arnold would be a leader remembered for daring bravery and intelligence. Henretta noted,

No general was more imaginative than Arnold, no field officer more daring, no soldier more courageous. Yet Arnold has gone down in history not as a hero but as a villain, a military traitor who, as commander of the American fort at West Point, New York, in 1780, schemed to hand it over to the British.⁴

Few people are aware that as a military leader Benedict Arnold led an invasion of Canada, won several battles, was wounded in conflict, and captured the British fort of Ticonderoga which paved the way for a colonial victory in the crucial battle for Boston. In spite of his many victories and accomplishments Arnold eventually placed his personal loyalties and considerations above those of the community, organization, and nation he had committed himself to serve. Author Barry Wilson points out that Benedict Arnold became disillusioned with the plight of the colonies and began to question the motives of

⁴ James Henretta, "The Enigma of Benedict Arnold," *Early America Review*, (Fall 1997) <http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/fall97/arnold.html>. [accessed February 12, 2008].

the revolutionary leaders. Arnold became suspicious of the American alliance with France and was further motivated by a need for money. “He was broke or close to it and the prospect of recouping his losses in inflation devalued continental currency were dim. He needed money for his growing family and to rebuild his business after the war.”⁵ It is perhaps more providential than ironic that the vision for “leader of character” is espoused and taught at Westpoint, the very place Major General Benedict Arnold’s lack of inner character betrayed himself and his cause.

Arnold’s inner character was tested by disillusionment, frustration, and financial desperation. These tests are not at all uncommon in the life of pastoral leadership in times of stability and may only be heightened during the instability an abrupt transition produces. For a staff pastor to remain to weather transition in the local congregation once a senior pastor suddenly departs demands the same selfless grit and sense of duty to mission that is intentionally fostered in the formation of West Point cadets.

Managing Organizational Transition

Staff pastors who choose to remain and face the tidal wave of transition that inevitably results when a senior pastor is suddenly removed may not be called to serve in the official capacity of senior pastor. At the same time the mantle of spiritual leadership that every pastor carries automatically makes such an individual a key player in managing the transitions that the church will face. In light of this fact it is important for staff pastors to possess a rudimentary understanding of the basic components of managing organizational transition.

⁵ Barry Wilson, *Benedict Arnold: A Traitor in Our Midst* (Quebec City: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), 155.

Understanding Transition

In the best instances in life, change and transition are seen coming and their arrival is planned for long before change lands in the center of an individual, community, or organization. This is not always the case and dealing with unannounced change and transition are a major part of life. On his eightieth birthday I asked my grandfather what the most amazing thing he had seen throughout his lifetime was. His reply was simple and yet profound: “Change.” William Bridges has written about managing change and transition in the business world and offers wisdom that is especially relevant to transition in ministry. Bridges noted:

It isn't change that does you in, it's the transitions. Change is not the same as transition. Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal... Unless transition occurs, change will not work. That's what happens when great ideas fall flat.⁶

While the sudden loss of a senior pastor may not seem to fall in line with the term “great idea” it may still, in a providential sense, be viewed as a great opportunity. What may seem sudden to a congregation is by no means sudden to the Heavenly Father.

Transition begins, in Bridges' point of view, when the individuals faced with change determine how they will process and handle the changes that life has laid before them. In determining how to process new changes and transition Bridges also asserts that an individual needs to be willing to let go of old realities in order to face new beginnings.

⁶ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991), 3-4.

“...There are endings, there are losses...the failure to identify and be ready for the endings and losses that change produces is the largest single problem that organizations in transition encounter.”⁷

This can be a huge problem in the church when abrupt transition occurs. Change surprises the leadership and the congregation. Abrupt change takes place without warning. It may arrive on the scene through a phone call, an announcement in the bulletin, a sudden confrontation, a scandal, or even a massive heart attack. People suddenly find themselves in such a state that a change has already happened and transition must follow. If the church, the board, and the pastoral staff have never taken the time to identify who will need to let go of what before a change like this has occurred a healthy transition is made much more difficult to implement. Bridges observed,

Once you understand that transition begins with letting go of something, you have taken the first step in the task of transition management. The second step is understanding what comes after letting go: the *neutral zone*. This is the no-man’s land between the old reality and the new. It is a time when the old way is gone and the new doesn’t feel comfortable yet.⁸

For a staff pastor letting go may mean letting go of certain relationships and projects initiated under the senior pastor’s leadership. It may mean a loss of status, influence or even pastoral position if an interim pastor comes to serve for a season or when a new pastor is elected. To begin to let go of and hold loosely things such as these means entering into the kind of “neutral zone” described by Bridges. As pastoral leaders model this kind of letting go it naturally follows that those who follow their lead will be willing to do the same. The facilitation of transition for the entire community should be

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

greased to move in this direction in a more natural and fluid manner. Kouzes has said, “Leaders go first. They set an example and build commitment through simple daily acts that create progress and momentum. Leaders model their way through personal example and dedicated execution.”⁹

The Limbo Zone

The limbo zone that Bridges describes while navigating transition holds potential for leaders to react negatively while making their way through it. Bridges cautions that leaders who do not expect or understand it may experience three typical problems:

1. If you don't expect it and understand why it is there, you're likely to try to rush through it and to be discouraged when you cannot do so. You may mistakenly conclude that the confusion you feel is a sign that there's something wrong with you.
2. You may be frightened in this no-man's land and try to escape. To abandon the situation, however, is to abort the transition, both personally and organizationally-and to jeopardize the change.
3. If you escape prematurely from the neutral zone, you'll not only compromise the change but also lose a great opportunity. Painful though it often is, the neutral zone is the individual's and the organization's best chance for creativity, renewal, and development.¹⁰

Exploring these drawbacks of Bridges' "Limbo Zone" adds additional weight to the importance of leadership character formation. Discouragement, fear, and the desire to be prematurely removed from the transition process may at times place overwhelming pressure on servant leaders who help lead a congregation through transition. To yield to these pressures moves the organization backwards rather than moving it forwards towards the ultimate goal of achieving the transition that sudden change has made necessary.

⁹ James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

The neutral zone is an uncomfortable and frustrating place for leaders to lead a group of people. At the same time it is logical when one considers that any season of re-orientation must first be preceded by a season of disorientation. Alicia Britt Chole alludes to this reality in her writings about Jesus' childhood years on earth:

During these uncelebrated years, Jesus submitted to a delayed destiny. A God-sized mission pulsated in his heart, but he was not free to explain it, proclaim it or actively pursue it... What grows in that underestimated gap between God's calling and others' perceptions, between our true capabilities and our current realities? We find God's pauses perplexing. They seem to be a waste of our potential.¹¹

Jesus himself endured the limbo zone while deployed on his mission to redeem the world. Pastoral leaders can follow this lead and commit to patient perseverance as the delay in destiny plays itself out and transition takes its course.

Managing Transition

If transition is essentially about letting go of the old so that a new beginning might be implemented it stands to reason that letting go and entering the neutral zone are merely preparations anticipating a return to forward organizational motion. A leader who transitions "from" something must in turn transition "to" something else. In the context of an unplanned and abrupt senior pastor departure the transition might be from the vision God has imparted in one individual to a new vision for the church God is imparting to another. It may be a transition from a discipleship-oriented focus to an outreach-centered focus. It may mean the transition of staff members and families out from the congregation or an influx of new attendees and members into the church family.

¹¹ Alicia Chole, *Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2006), 27.

In the book *Change Monster* author Jeannie Duck identifies three essentials a leader must consider when managing change:

1. Strategy: a passionate belief in where you're going. The strategy must be sound and the commitment unflinching. The more clearly the strategy can be articulated and the more easily it can be understood and translated into action the better.
2. Execution: good, basic management. A successful transition requires the same good management practices that are essential to running an effective organization during times of stability and "normal" operation. Good management becomes absolutely indispensable, however, when an organization is undergoing radical change.
3. Managing the monster requires a heightened sensitivity to the emotional behavioral issues inherent during change, and a willingness to address them.¹²

Strategy for Transition

While every staff pastor might agree that strategy is necessary, the question that immediately follows is how to strategize in the midst of a very uncertain transitional situation. What kind of strategy is feasible for someone serving un-officially, temporarily, and from the middle of an uncertain hierarchy?

Faced with such a situation, necessity dictates that a staff pastor lead with regard to what he or she *is* certain about. Pastors thrust into transition can be certain of their commitment to Christ and the ministerial calling. Pastors in these circumstances can be certain of their commitment to see the season of transition become a source of blessing to the church and not a destructive force within it. Pastors can be certain that they must lead by example and assume that their very presence during this season is intended as part of God's plan for the coming changes. These certainties can translate into simple strategies for perseverance in the season at hand such as:

¹² Jeannie Duck, *The Change Monster* (New York: Crown Business Publishing, 2001), 11.

1. Staying true to Christ and the people one leads.
2. Setting the best possible spiritual example in the midst of the chaotic situation.
3. Maintaining fidelity to the present assignment in this place until legitimately called to another context of ministry. This involves making a spiritually disciplined choice on principle rather than running to somewhere the situation might seem more appealing or lucrative.
4. Helping to ingratiate the new leadership God brings into favor with the church body.

Even a few simple strategies such as these provide anchors of stability for a staff pastor forced to navigate his or her way through abrupt transition.

Executing Management

When it comes to executing good management many of the same problems that present themselves in planning a transition strategy must be overcome. The management vacuum left by the departure of a senior pastor will look differently depending on many variables. If the church board is a strong and involved one it may consolidate many of the senior pastor's duties and responsibilities under its personal oversight. If an interim pastor is brought in to serve he or she may choose to assimilate these duties. In some cases either of the above parties may choose to task the associate pastor(s) with carrying out much of the day to day operational management of the church.

Regardless of how much or how little of the day-to-day management falls to staff pastors in a transitional period a good steward will manage people and resources to the best of his or her ability. Duck points out the added importance of good management practices in the midst of organizational transition. In the business world leaders pay

special attention to planning, budgets, marketing, and measuring productivity. In the church world executing good management may tend to look more like ensuring that pastoral care for the people continues through on-going services, prayer meetings, visitations, and counseling. It may mean managing an expense account in a more moderate way. It may mean cutting what were once routine expenditures to ensure there that there is no additional financial strain that might make the pastoral transition a more precarious situation. Executing good management will mean taking pains to understand and communicate the needs of the church body as well as responding to those needs.

Emotional Issues Affecting Change

When a church experiences a sudden transition it is susceptible to the same emotional dynamics that affect any other sort of corporate community experiences. “Changing an organization is inherently and inescapably an emotional human process.”¹³ Pastoral care in this context means that spiritual leaders must recognize and assess the emotional reactions and biases that their people are experiencing as the entire community enters transition together. Duck has put together a “Ready Willing and Able” (RWA) survey that she describes as a “quick and broad radar scan” to help assess the change preparedness of an organization.¹⁴ Through this survey Duck and her team are able to gain a sense of the predominant emotional state of an organization with regard to moving forward. The RWA survey makes divisions into three categories of readiness for change:

1. Readiness to change. Does the organization understand and believe change is needed?

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 124.

2. Willingness to change. Are they sufficiently dissatisfied with the status quo and/or worried about the future that they are willing to change?

3. Ability to change. Do they believe that the organization possesses the skills and tools needed to affect change? Are they personally equipped?¹⁵

A sudden transition in a church setting will happen without any notice of preparation and change will be thrown upon a congregation whether or not the above-mentioned attitudes are aligned. At the same time a spiritual leader should be able to communicate that God's providence is at work in the change, readying the people for the next step. A trusted staff pastor can help people become willing to change as they consider that God's perfect will has foreseen the situation that played out long before it occurred. Pointing out the new reality to the church is not the same as being on point with the emotional reactions being triggered in the community. By being sensitive to the readiness and willingness of a congregation to come to grips with a sudden transition the pastors who remain can help people see providence at work in an uninvited change and better enable a church to embrace new circumstances and direction.

Personally Responding to Transition

Before a staff pastor can lend his or her influence to a healthy transition process among the general population of a congregation the pastor must work through some or all of the dynamics of his or her own personal response to what has happened. The impact staff pastors feel when a senior pastor suddenly departs is felt even more keenly than most others in the church. Not only has a leader and mentor suddenly exited the scene but also the additional questions of job security, congregational politics, personal insecurities, disappointment, and former assumptions about the future may seem to disperse in

¹⁵ Ibid., 124-125

different directions. E. Neeld wrote: “The French philosopher Simone Weil once said that the only suitable question to ask another human being was, ‘What are you going through?’¹⁶ Weil is communicating that the human experience is one in which we pass through a sea of continual difficulty. This sea of continual difficulty springs from a stream of continual change constantly shifting the patterns of life once we adjust to them. Dr. Elizabeth Neeld writes: “We share the experience of living a threshold event, of navigating ourselves in that ‘floating world’ between how things used to be and how things will be.”¹⁷ Inherent in this experience is a certain degree of vulnerability. Os Guinness touches on this willingness to endure such vulnerability in his book *The Call*:

In a controlling, calculating age, the world’s ideal is always to be in charge, never to be caught out –in short to be “nobody’s fool”. On the contrary, say the fools for Christ, in a world gone mad through its own worldly wisdom, true wisdom is to “go mad for God” even at the price of being hopelessly vulnerable –to be everybody’s fools.¹⁸

Navigating in this vulnerable time in limbo as a staff pastor caught in rapidly changing winds of transition means first working through one’s own response to the changes that have occurred. Dr. Neeld asserts a pattern of reviewing, responding, reorganizing, and renewing as a useful framework for navigating through life’s difficult changes.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way Through Difficult Times* (New York: Warner Books, 2005), 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ O. Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 217.

Responding to Transition

The manner in which a leader responds to transition is at first inward. The shape of the inner world then proceeds to shape the outward responses that follow. Dr. Neeld asserts that the human response to transition primarily plays out in certain ways:

Two important shifts occur simultaneously when we are required to respond to some news or event that launches a tough transition. First, our physical bodies go into emergency mode. We can do nothing about this. It happens involuntarily. At the same time our assumptive world –the way we expected things to be, the way we had worked for things to be –shatters like a glass globe hitting a stone floor.¹⁹

The physical reactions the body experiences are described by Neeld as “hyperarousal”.

The body responds to the stress of the new situation that is being encountered in conjunction with the new set of circumstances that the mind also has to process. “I’m feeling tense.” –Those three words pretty well explain how stress affects your body –or, more precisely, how your body warns you it is being affected by stress. It warns you in the muscles of many different places.”²⁰ A sample of the signals that the body begins to send through its muscles in response to the new level of anxiety might be:

1. Headache
2. Tight jaw
3. Knotted stomach
4. Lower back ache
5. Tight lips
6. Tight chest wall
7. Rigid neck muscles
8. Clenched teeth
9. Folded arms that restrict breathing²¹

Other non-muscular indicators might be constipation, dry mouth, skin rashes, trembling hands, palpitations, inability to concentrate, fidgeting, over-reaction to events, grinding

¹⁹ Ibid., 34.

²⁰ Paul Wilson, *Instant Calm* (New York: Penguin Group, 1995), 27.

²¹ Ibid., 27.

teeth, and speeded up conversation. In addition to William's visible list of indicators from the body it is not uncommon for individuals to experience invisible physical responses such as upset stomach, loss of sleep, loss of appetite, sex drive reduction, increased blood pressure, heart attack or stroke.²²

Beyond the physical responses there are mental responses that arrive on the scene to affect the individual confronted with a stressful transition. Certain people may respond with emotions that are nearly out of control while others may seem to take the situation in good stride. "...another kind of emotion that we often experience during certain types of transitions: a low-grade, ongoing, chronic emotion that doesn't slap us around but does always seem to be there, pulling our energy level down and nagging at our sense of well-being."²³ Beyond this there are those who, for a while, are able to move along as if the situation is not a major life event. This quiet non-reaction however cannot remain an indefinite state. "Slowly, in a time right for each individual, the reality of the transition presents itself... For some, this acknowledgment brings collapse after weeks or months (or even years) of being strong and efficient."²⁴ The convergence of physical and emotional affects upon an individual in response to a sudden and stressful transition may take the shape of a few, many, or perhaps all of the symptoms listed in this section. What is for certain is that such transitions do demand a response of some nature and these physical or emotional reactions are not exceptions among individuals but the normative manner of response.

²² Ibid., 33, 35.

²³ Neeld, 39.

²⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

Reviewing in Transition

In the time that begins to pass after an individual's first response to the transition that has occurred, the need for a personal review of what has transpired and how it is affecting day-to-day life is essential. The act of review is crucial to getting back on track and eventually moving forward in a new way. "Perhaps it's time to take a second look. To reconsider, rethink, and reflect on how this tough transition is affecting our lives. To ask, 'What do I need to see? What reassessment can I make? What might I do differently?'"²⁵ It may be helpful, as always, to obtain the help of a close friend, a spouse or a mentor to see more objectively in this situation.

A staff pastor may need to see that the situation will never return to what it was before, even if he or she is able to continue to minister in the same community, capacity, and context. A staff pastor will need to review what providences have been and still are at work in his or her life. A staff pastor may need to come to grips with the idea that this season of ministry in this community may be nearing completion and a time of transition.

The reassessments a staff pastor may need to make might have to do with listening to God for the next step. It is time to begin to take measure of what experiences God has been preparing the individual and his or her family with in order to take that next step. A staff pastor may have to reassess the capacity in which he or she is called to minister. It is a time to pray about and assess moving in the direction of a new ministry or specialty focus. He may be confronted with new questions that had never occurred before such as: Is it possible that God might be calling me to assume the role that my predecessor has suddenly left vacant? How does my family feel about the idea? How

²⁵ Ibid., 97.

does my mentor or my accountability partners react to this idea? How does the church I serve feel about the idea? How do others on the staff respond to this idea? How might I properly assess if I am ready to move from a staff role to a lead role in this organization? Are there any hidden motives and agendas in my heart?

The final question while reviewing in transition is about what a staff pastor might do differently from this point on. A staff pastor might decide to pursue God's voice more intently than before. He might make a conscientious decision not to pursue and force fit a role but rather wait and see what opportunities naturally present themselves. He might hope with confidence in the salvation that God rewards those who maintain their integrity in the midst of trying circumstances. As Neeld noted:

At this point we don't have to know all the answers, and usually won't know all the answers. We just have to make an assertion: *I must and I will replan my life because things have changed.* ... We realize that if we do not replan our life, we will live as a person, in the words of the old French saying, whose clock has stopped.²⁶

Reviewing in the midst of transition is important because it allows the individual to survey the terrain of where he or she has been. It allows a person to reframe the narrative of his or her past in such a way that a new chapter can be written in the time that lies ahead. Reviewing in the life of an individual who is a spiritual leader in the church will open the door wider for the church to engage in this phase of transition corporately. The end result being that the whole body can gain a better sense of where God has brought it and where God may be leading it as it enters into the next phase of reorganization.

²⁶ Ibid., 102.

Reorganizing in Transition

In transitional ministry the individual is faced with a new reality that says: “The way I used to carry out my vocation in this setting is not what it used to be. Now I must make the changes necessary to carry on in a new way.” This does not mean that the past has disappeared but it does mean that the future is going to assume a shape that may not look the way it was envisioned before the transition took place. Reorganization is a process that a staff pastor can work to understand and embrace. It is a part of the transitional journey that deals with a change of roles, identities and behaviors. Need clearly articulates the reorganization phase of navigating a difficult transition as a chance to map out a new way to embark upon life:

As difficult as forging these new roles, identities and behaviors can be, the situation can be satisfactorily worked through. When that happens, our new identity may be more stable, secure and more closely linked to the core of who we are than the identity we had before.²⁷

This assertion with regard to reorganization can be seen in the pages of Scripture. Jacob’s son Joseph is one such example. Joseph experienced many sudden transitions that forced him to let go of old roles, identity, and behaviors. He was abruptly transitioned from the role of favored son, to slave, to head slave, to prisoner, to head of state. It was Joseph’s integrity and willingness to work through each new identity and master each new role that came with it, which prepared him for his final exaltation to Pharaoh’s most trusted advisor.

In the New Testament reorganization of identity and role is the central idea within repentance and spiritual rebirth. An individual such as Levi sheds his old behavior and former identity of tax collector in order to reorganize his life and bring it into alignment

²⁷ Ibid., 168.

with the new life into which Jesus calls him. If the reorganization of identity, roles, and behavior is the pattern of Christ followers in scripture it should serve as an encouragement to staff pastors who face their own transitional moments today.

The biographies of history's greatest leaders consistently reveal the stories of personal reorganization following seasons of sudden and dramatic life transitions. One such leader was Theodore Roosevelt in the years preceding his election to the office of President of the United States. At the age of twenty-five Roosevelt lost his mother, his wife and became a father all within a twenty-four hour period. Author Nathan Miller writes:

Racing up the steps to Alice's room two at a time, Roosevelt discovered that she was barely conscious and hardly recognized him. He held her in his arms for the next two hours as if struggling to prevent her from slipping away from him. Someone murmured that if he wished to see his mother before she died, he should hurry to her room on the second floor.²⁸

When considering the difficulties a leader faces in the midst of a sudden shift in circumstance it is worth remembering men such as Theodore Roosevelt who in one day's time became a father, widower, and orphan long before becoming the President of a nation.

Faced with the prospect of reorganizing his identity, role, and behavior Roosevelt chose immediately to head from the New York to North Dakota and exchange his urban political life for the rural western life of a rancher. As Miller wrote: "For Roosevelt, the West was a new and uncharted world. Background, family, education, position—all counted for little..."²⁹ In the time of reorganization that follows transition embracing and

²⁸ Nathan Miller, *Roosevelt: A Life* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992), 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

exploring a new and uncharted world is a strategy that can benefit the one who engages it. The determination to reorganize identity, roles, and behavior in a transitional period is crucial to reemerging with opportunities to create a better life experience in the days that are ahead.

Renewing through Transition

A period of sudden or difficult transition will inevitably come to an end at some point in time. When this happens those who have managed to survive the response, review and reorganization phases of the process should be able to enter into a renewed approach to life. Pastors, leaders, and anyone else who journeys through the transition process have great reason to maintain an optimistic understanding of the future that awaits them once the process has run its course. The reality is that people who endure transition can do more than just survive; they can also *thrive*. Dr. Neeld describes renewing as “*being restored to freshness, feeling vigor and rejuvenation, experiencing a transformation that leaves you feeling regenerated.*”³⁰

Carly Fiorina became the CEO of Hewlett Packard Corporation in 1999. After joining the company and guiding it towards a tremendous rebound she was abruptly asked by the Board for her resignation in 2005. Fiorina’s personal renewal can be seen in her memoirs by examining and contrasting her description of the pain of transition at the time of her firing to the sense of renewal she eventually discovers at the conclusion of her memoirs. Fiorina describes the initial shock of her firing this way: “I was utterly devastated, but the sun still came up and life went on. That day, and in the days that followed, I was more hurt than angry...I had put everything on the line and suddenly it

³⁰ Neeld, 230.

was over.”³¹ After the better part of the year had passed Fiorina describes renewed feelings and perspective in the closing sentences of the epilogue she writes poolside on New Year’s Eve: “The children’s laughter echoes off the tiles. Their cannonball jumps into the pool splash water on this page. And as 2005 draws to a close, I know I have been given what I asked for. My life is filled with moments of spontaneous joy. I am happy.”³²

The transitional process can become not only a pathway to difficulty and dutiful perseverance but also a doorway to a renewed sense of living. In ministry this may mean finding a renewed sense of love for God and the people to whom one minister’s to. Staff pastors who endure organizational transition can hold forth the hope that a sudden and difficult circumstance will give way to something more than an ending but also the promise of renewed beginnings.

³¹ Carly Fiorina, *Tough Choices: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 303.

³² *Ibid.*, 309.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

As in any research paper the quality of the information collected in this project will directly impact the quality and practicality of the results produced at the end of the project. It is therefore necessary to provide insight into the research methodology and procedures that are being utilized in its creation. Because this project relies heavily on studying the experiences of staff pastors who have navigated abrupt transitions following the departure of a senior pastor, the main staple of research is qualitative. At the same time quantitative data, such as demographic information, has also been collected to clarify and characterize who exactly is being impacted by the sudden departure of senior pastors and to what extent. As such the research has not been monolithic in method but is better described and understood as a hybrid of qualitative and quantitative methodology and documentation.

Choosing the Online Survey

While considering how best to gather information and experiences from pastors in the Ohio District of the Assemblies of God the research was directed by three primary questions:

1. Is there a method of gathering data that makes it easiest for those contacted to respond to the request for information?

2. Is there a method of gathering data that provides a cost and time advantage for the researcher?

3. Is there a method that allows easy integration of the research questions and that will also provide assistance in analyzing the results of qualitative and quantitative responses?

The original research plan was to conduct personal interviews with as many of the pastors in the Ohio District as possible over the course of a year's time. After soliciting and scheduling interviews with two pastors dawned the realization that the project, the interviewees, and the researcher might be better served if an alternate method of contacting and gleaning the insights of peers was utilized. While one-on-one interviews are highly personal the decision to use an e-mail survey was reached. Such surveys meet the three criteria established above and offer a more efficient and inexpensive way to make contact with pastors who might be willing and able to render assistance with the study. To utilize a survey format with open-ended questions would also give the respondents time to reflect more intently on their responses, edit, and submit them when they feel their answers most accurately characterize their experiences.

While searching for a proper template for posing the research questions via a mass e-mail to the pastors of the Assemblies of God fellowship in Ohio, the online research service called Zoomerang came to light.

Zoomerang was founded in 1999 as a web-based research tool for businesses and individuals. The company bills itself as blazing the first trails into the field of online self-service survey creation and boasts being utilized by as many as 70 Fortune 100 companies.

Research indicated that the capabilities of Zoomerang would provide the efficiency, format, ease of use, and response needed for gathering necessary research data. In addition to this, Zoomerang was able to provide instant data analysis of quantitative demographic questions embedded into the survey. This method eliminated virtually all paperwork from the initial design and gathering of data and allowed the responses and data collected to be printed and quantitatively interpreted at the project's end. As such Zoomerang became the obvious vehicle of choice for collecting qualitative research data.

Introducing the Research Survey

After transferring the interview questions into a Zoomerang research interview template the question became how to introduce the research questions and the ideas guiding the project to those from who would provide feedback. A web page was designed that introduced the project and described the research and its goals. This synopsis included a short case study designed to intrigue those whose experiences could be shared for the purposes of the project. A link was embedded to the Zoomerang survey page and 740 e-mails were sent to Assemblies of God pastors who are affiliated with and or serving in the Ohio District. These pastors had registered their e-mail contact information in the Ohio District Minister's Directory, which is accessible via the World Wide Web. Ministers who received the e-mail would be able read the introduction, synopsis, and case study and decide whether or not their personal staff pastor experiences qualified as an abrupt transition. Those who felt they had encountered and navigated a similar situation were invited to click a web link that would open the survey that had been pre-designed through Zoomerang software applications.

After the Zoomerang survey was designed and the introductory web page had been created, the next step was to invite the pastors of Ohio to share their experiences. The initial invitation was sent on August 17, 2007 to 841 pastors. Some e-mail addresses from the directory were listed incorrectly or had been changed. This resulted in 101 e-mails not being delivered and only 740 e-mails actually delivered to Ohio pastors. On August 27, 2007, after receiving 16 completed surveys, a follow up invitation to take part in the research was sent to the same list in an effort to solicit additional responses. This second e-mail generated an additional 11 completed surveys for a total of 27 before the survey was closed on October 18, 2007 after two months of data collection.

Defining and Selecting the Sample

Because the focus of this project reflects the ministerial experiences of people who have served as staff pastors through a specific type of experience, defining and selecting the sample was a clear-cut process. This project focuses on producing a resource for the Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God. The Ohio District has hundreds of ministers who may potentially serve as respondents depending upon their personal experiences. This requires a simple two-tiered qualification that survey respondents must meet to participate in the study. First, individuals who participate must be credential-holding ministers in the Ohio District of the Assemblies of God. Second, participants must have first-hand experience serving as a staff pastor in a church in which the senior pastor has departed or been removed with little to no advance warning.

Addressing the e-mail invitation to participate in the survey specifically to the individuals listed in the Ohio Minister's Directory would protect against accidental sampling of respondents who do not fit the criteria of Assembly of God ministers

affiliated with the Ohio District Council. This guarantees that the correct people receive access to the online survey. The second qualification requiring first-hand experience with navigating abrupt transition is embedded within the body of the initial contact survey, the website synopsis, and the online survey itself.

Profile of Interview Subjects

A demographic profile of the interview subjects communicates the age range, gender, educational level, and how successfully each respondent felt he or she navigated the transition at the time. An analysis of the data collected by Zoomerang shows that of the 740 invitations that were sent to Assemblies of God ministers in Ohio a total of 79 ministers visited the introductory website to learn more about the project. Of the 79 who visited the introductory website a total of 27 ministers felt qualified to respond to the survey questions. Of the 27 respondents two ministers hold credentials outside of the Ohio District. One was a pastor who ministers across the border of Toledo, Ohio, in Bedford, Michigan, and holds credentials in the Michigan District of the Assemblies of God. The other non-Ohio pastor is the female depicted in the introductory case study that was raised in the Ohio District and now serves on the east coast.

Coding Qualitative Research Data

Once the survey answers were returned the coding process began. While the demographic data had been instantly collected and processed by Zoomerang, the coding of narrative answers given in response to open-ended research questions fell to human hands. This process was a simple and straightforward matter of creating categories for each response based on the dominant idea being expressed by the respondent.

It was during the coding process that the dynamics of the “Wheel of Forces” emerged. Categories were created for each role change, congregational matters, protocol issues, and personal matters early in the coding process. As the remainder of the process played out it became apparent that each response fell into one or more of those categories.

Case Study Research

While the research conducted via the online survey portion of the project was informative it was also helpful to conduct interviews in a one-on-one setting with pastors who had acquired first hand experience with abrupt senior pastor transition. The original concept for this project was to conduct dozens of interviews in this fashion. The author soon found that the extensive time and travel expense involved conducting interviews in such a fashion throughout the state of Ohio was prohibitive. As such appointments were made with two local pastors who were willing to share first hand experiences as case studies for this project. The first will be designated as Pastor X, and the second as Pastor Y for the remainder of this chapter.

Interview Case Studies

Pastor X and Pastor Y were interviewed with the set of four specific and practical interview questions complement the framework of this project. The questions were:

1. What common staff pastor questions arise in the midst of abrupt senior pastor departure?
2. What common expectations arise from the people of the congregation?
3. What common pitfalls lie in wait for staff pastors in this type of transition?
4. What guiding principles are necessary for enacting a successful transition?

The interviews with Pastor W and Pastor X were insightful and were helpful in developing perspective and context for interpreting the results of the online research.

Pastor W. ministers as an associate pastor in a large church with many hundreds of weekly attendees. On February 8, 2007 the author conducted an hour-long interview with Pastor W at his office. During his lengthy tenure of service he had encountered several abrupt senior pastor departures and has had to overcome the many unique and adverse experiences that resulted. Due to his request for anonymity and uniqueness of the situations he has encountered it is not possible to include his specific experiences as a case study in this paper without compromising his identity. As such his answers to the interview questions are reproduced below without the benefit of narrative specifics from his personal story.

I. What common staff pastor questions arise in the midst of abrupt senior pastor departure?

1. Do I need to submit my resignation?

There is no reason to make a decision in the midst of a very confusing situation!

Both times staff pastors were left completely out of the loop adding to the dynamics of self-preservation and fear of the unknown.

Do I submit my resignation *after* the new guy comes?

2. What is my role without a senior pastor?

Who do I work for?

What authority do I have in day-to-day situations?

Who do I call if I have a situation?

3. Is it ethical for me to leave or put out my resume; and if so what about loyalty?

II. What common expectations arise from the people of the congregation?

1. The people may desire a staff member (senior staff member) to step into the gap.

This is a matter of calling and not succession.

When the departure is sudden or confusing people are possibly less prone to raise their level of expectation.

2. Fill multiple roles and staff gaps.
3. A source for inside information.
4. Spiritual leadership.
5. Pastoral care.
6. Continuation of present ministries.

III. What common pitfalls lie in wait for staff pastors in this type of transition?

1. Remember: The body of Christ will confirm your ministry.
2. Reacting prematurely.

Reflection on the “why” of transition.

3. Lack of preparation for seasons of change.
4. Two sides to every story. (resignations & splits)
5. Failure to recognize the dividends of longevity.
6. Failure to take responsibility for our choices and heart attitudes.

Cultivate a grateful and dependent heart.

7. Know yourself. (self-awareness is key) -Psalm 139:14
8. Self-discipline/Failure to make the most of opportunities & be grateful despite the inherent difficulties of the situation.

IV. What guiding principles are necessary for enacting a successful transition?

1. Cultivation of the proper attitude.

Col 3:17 -Whatever you do, do as unto the Lord.

Faithful to God and as a result -his call.

Grateful for the opportunity to serve.

2. Cultivate a prayerful spiritual sensitivity.

React only with prayerful deliberation.

3. Lay your personal agenda aside.

4. Make the list of pros and cons.

5. Choosing your battles wisely.

6. Be honest and genuine.

The interview with Pastor X was conducted at a local restaurant over lunch on March 12, 2007. Pastor X had experienced a single occurrence of abrupt senior pastor transition years ago during his initial foray into pastoral ministry. He is now the senior pastor of a robust and thriving local church that he has planted and cultivated over the period of the last several years.

Pastor X found out about his Pastor's resignation inadvertently one Saturday afternoon when he picked up the Sunday morning bulletin and saw it printed on the back. He expressed his astonishment and feelings of betrayal at this discovery. Pastor X had served in youth ministry for a mere six months and was pursuing his pastoral education and credentials with his senior pastor serving as his mentor. He held a full time job and invested many hours each week commuting from a nearby town to serve his church. Pastor X's pastor had painted a vision of long-term ministry and a full time position in the future for Pastor X and his wife. The Pastor and his wife decided to leave the ministry and although the disclosure was sudden, Pastor X learned that the decision had been made and plans were being implemented months before. The senior pastor discouraged Pastor X from pursuing his own personal call to pastoral ministry. Before leaving, the

senior pastor told the board that Pastor X would be a good candidate for the lead position. Some people were shocked and Pastor X later came to realize there was much conversational nuance he hadn't noticed before. Pastor X learned there were also factions of people who did not like him. The Superintendent met with Pastor X and warned him not to stay there. The board met with him and told him that there was no future for him and his wife at the church. Pastor X moved on. Pastor X's answers to the interview questions are reproduced below.

I. Common Staff Pastor Questions

1. Why didn't I get a heads up -when all the other leaders knew? I had sacrificed and commuted as a bi-vocational pastor and now my life had been massively impacted.
2. Why wouldn't they share the behind the scenes with me?
3. Did he think I wouldn't keep it quiet?
4. Why poison us on the way out by sharing bitter information/experience?
5. Why wasn't the loyalty both ways? I was loyal and transparent.

II. Common expectations from the people?

1. Assumptions he would take over.
2. Are you going to start new ministries? (lobbying for new ministries)
3. Some expected us to leave simply because we seemed too sharp "for our church" and said "all the good pastors leave!"
4. To join the factions in the church against the Pastor -to pull you into the fray.
5. That we were part of the conspiracy.

III. What common pitfalls lie in wait for staff pastors in transition?

1. Letting people's strokes become a reality -listening too seriously to either the critics or cheerleaders.
2. Joining the factions.

3. Assuming the transition to the lead role is automatically “God’s will”.
4. Could have pushed and made the transition happen when it shouldn’t have.
5. Could have had a verbal confrontation with the outgoing senior pastor.
6. Let the wound of the hurt affect later ministry.

IV. What guiding principles are necessary for enacting a successful transition?

1. Humility -that there is not an assumption that you will naturally step in. It is not automatic that you remain.
2. Steer clear of factions and the power plays associated with a leadership vacuum.
3. Don’t allow what God wants for you to be molded by the circumstances and people rather than him. Criticism and flattery could be intentional/unintentional types of “bait”.
4. Stay pure. Watch your tongue.
5. Seek out mentors. Bounce huge life-changing decisions off of those you respect. True mentors are eager to mentor.
6. There was no mechanism of District involvement for “Pastor X the staffer”. No devoted personal care.

An interesting result of comparing the responses of Pastor W and Pastor X are the areas of each interview question where the pastors initial concerns overlapped. In response to the first question both articulated a sense of being left out of the information loop as associate pastors. Neither pastor felt privy to the sensitive transitional discussions that were taking place all between the outgoing pastor and the board. Both communicated a sense of confusion in the midst of the situation with which they were faced.

In the second question, dealing with congregational expectations, both Pastor W and Pastor X communicated the desire of the congregants to see them step up and keep the current level of ministry intact and even provide additional ministry. Both pastors also describe an assumption of senior pastor succession among the people. It appears that

congregants see senior pastor succession being accomplished in a manner similar to a vice president being automatically designated to fulfill an absent president's term in the event of an untimely vacancy.

With regard to question number three and the potential pitfalls that exist Pastor W and Pastor X both touch on the ideas surrounding factions. Pastor W warns that pastors must remember there are two sides to every story. This implies that to choose one side is to dismiss the possibility of legitimate concerns of an opposing viewpoint. Pastor X states flatly that joining a faction is a potential pitfall and asserts that a confrontation with the outgoing pastor is a potential peril. To engage in such a confrontation would certainly place the one who confronts automatically into whichever faction is a party of opposition.

Question four concerns guiding principles for pastors navigating abrupt transition. In this category both pastors assert issues related to attitude. Matters of gratefulness, humbleness and purity of heart are overlapping concerns when it comes to making ideal choices in a less than ideal situation.

E-mail Case Studies

Both Pastor W and Pastor X expressed questions, feelings, frustrations, and hurts that echoed one another. Pastor W and Pastor X's interviews are similar in tone and to thoughts expressed by other pastors who took part in the online research portion of the project and to those who submitted their personal stories for the project via e-mail.

Many pastors who participated in the original research survey were desirous to share their experiences via e-mail after receiving the original e-mail solicitation to participate in the research project. Some pastors submitted their transitional stories for the author's review in order to see if their experiences fell in line with the parameters of the

research being conducted. Two such e-mail submissions from Ohio pastors are reproduced to illustrate typical case studies on the following pages. In each case the narratives demonstrate dynamics corresponding to those presented in the “Wheel of Forces” model that resulted from this research associated with this project. Proper nouns have been altered for the sake of anonymity and the pastor who submitted the following narrative will be referred to as Pastor Y.

Dear Pastor,

I could not get your survey address to come up so I'll write you this way. I went through that transition 6 years ago. I was the assistant pastor of our church for 8 years under the leadership of our senior pastor. I also worked outside of the church because our church budget could not afford me full time.

I worked 22 years for a utility company and worked several hours at the church too. After 14 years our pastor decided to take a church in another state. He candidated for this church without telling anyone and after receiving the necessary votes to become pastor he took the position.

Our church had a full time youth pastor but he resigned before this happened and the pastor was in the process of hiring another full-time youth pastor. However, he took the new youth pastor with him to the next church. I was the only staff member left so the board approached me and asked me to become the next senior pastor.

Being in my early 50's, and with no previous experience as senior pastor, I faced the career change of my life. After much prayer and the agreement of my wife we decided to take the position. There were benefits to this as well as problems.

The benefits - I did not have to relocate, I knew the community of the church, my only daughter was already married and was on her own, I knew the problems of the church and the attitude of the people. Basically, I knew what I was getting myself into.

The problems - I never was a senior pastor before and had little training for the position, there were several problems that needed to be addressed, and I never hired any staff people in my life before. I was also very poorly qualified to face some of the problems that would soon erupt. I had no idea how to handle the missionaries that were calling, or other ministries such as evangelists, teachers, music ministries, etc. I immediately faced the challenge of several little pockets of resistance that would challenge my leadership. My wife and I prayed together, but

we never prayed so hard before in our lives. We lost some people who decided to start their own church, and others to outright sin in their lives, and many good families because of job situations and the poor economy in our part of Ohio. Our church went from 180 to about 130.

The church provided health insurance but the District dropped their health provider and we now had to shop for health insurance. Another new experience for us.

I also wasn't use to speaking every Sunday. Everything seemed so challenging. (It still does at times.) I made many mistakes and still make some now and then. But, praise the Lord, we managed to survive even though my wife and I were soon to face some very major health challenges in our life. (Bypass surgery and cancer) Our board stuck with us and gave us great support. My youth pastor help out greatly along with his wife and by the grace of God we're still here and have great expectations for the church.

The experiences of Pastor Z describe the experiences of a mature adult who has little formal pastoral training but does have the advantage of having served his local congregation for the better part of a decade before experiencing an abrupt senior pastor transition. Pastor Z describes experiences that all fit within the Wheel of Forces model described in an earlier chapter. Pastor Z also describes the personal dynamics of how the changes brought about by abrupt senior pastor transition affected choices in his personal life such as navigating a career change late in life as well as addressing issues such as health insurance shopping and even his own transparent lack of confidence in his personal qualifications. Pastor Z spends time relating matters of congregational expectations such as the board approaching him to serve as the next senior pastor and the resulting pockets of resistance among congregants who opposed his call to serve in such a capacity. Although Pastor Z does not ask a direct question about protocol dynamics in his story his comments about the senior pastor stealthily candidating in another church and even taking the youth pastor with him as he left most certainly raises protocol questions in the reader's mind. Role dynamics are explored in Pastor Y's narrative as he

communicates taking on responsibilities he had never before handled such as receiving calls from missionaries, evangelists, and itinerant musicians.

An individual, who will be referred to as Pastor Z, submitted a relatively short narrative and limits his experience mainly to the realm of personal frustrations. This e-mail is notable mainly because Pastor Z expresses his feelings with a passionate tone that should also be allowed to inform the research:

I was at a HUGE church in Florida when suddenly the senior pastor resigned without much explanation. Being in a little bit of leadership, I found out that none of the Board/Staff knew that he would resign that Sunday. (hence the look of shock when he announced it) I love the man, and he was a great pastor and communicator, BUT ...a pastor should always relay major decisions to his leadership team before his congregation; even if it's only a week before the congregation is told.

The pastor really should even get their opinion and blessing before going with a major decision such as leaving, resigning...

Also, if an associate pastor is "released" (ok fired) the Pastor should do as Paul instructed and have him openly confess the problem to the church and allow for repentance and forgiveness, instead of confusion, deceit, and bitterness. I have also witnessed this first hand.

Pastor Z's story reads passionately because of his use of capitalization, and the expressive and terms he chooses such as: major, suddenly, shock, bitterness, confusion, and deceit. Pastor Z communicates that he is navigating personal dynamics with the transition when he says: "I love the man, and he was a great pastor and communicator, BUT..." Pastor Z also communicates a strong sense of his struggle in the area of protocol dynamics by offering his preference for how a senior pastor ought to transition. Pastor Z believes the leadership team deserves transitional news in advance of the congregation. He goes further in suggesting that a senior leader even solicit the opinion and blessing of leadership before moving on. With regard to congregational dynamics Pastor Z uses the

expressive and powerful adjectives mentioned earlier in this paragraph. The only quadrant from the “Wheel of Forces” that Pastor Z does not explore is that of role change dynamics.

Summary

The use of an Internet-based research tool proved to be an excellent and expedient method for quantitative and qualitative research. Zoomerang met the unique needs of the project in a manner that surpassed the researchers expectations. Utilizing cutting edge web-based technologies allowed the research phase of the project to move forward in an effective and rapid manner. The ministerial database compiled by the Ohio District was also enormously helpful in saving both time and postage. Integrating data from the Ohio District with an online research service proved to be a timely and inexpensive method of initial contact and follow-up. The collection and encoding of research data gave birth to the “Wheel of Forces” model that provides crucial insight for understanding the complexities of abrupt transition.

The case studies that have been collected for the project and analyzed through one on one interviews and through e-mail submissions provided an exceptional window into the experiences of pastors who have grappled with the sudden departure of a senior leader. The case studies illustrate the confusion experienced by those who remain after the senior pastor’s departure. They communicate the subtle and overt temptations that exist to draw a staff pastor into congregational division, as well as shedding light upon the common expectations of average churchgoers. Through the case studies veteran pastors articulate sound pastoral heart attitudes and provide the depth of understanding

necessary to interpret the data collected through the Zoomerang service in manner that allows for practical application.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH RESULTS

Analysis of the research gathered from staff pastors who have first hand experience navigating abrupt senior pastor transition reveals a fair amount of disorientation that occurs simultaneously in several different dimensions of pastoral life. These different dimensions of disorientation include: personal life, pastoral role, congregational expectations, and protocol concerns. A model I have developed to communicate the way in which disorientation affects the staff pastor in each of these areas is called the “Wheel of Forces”.

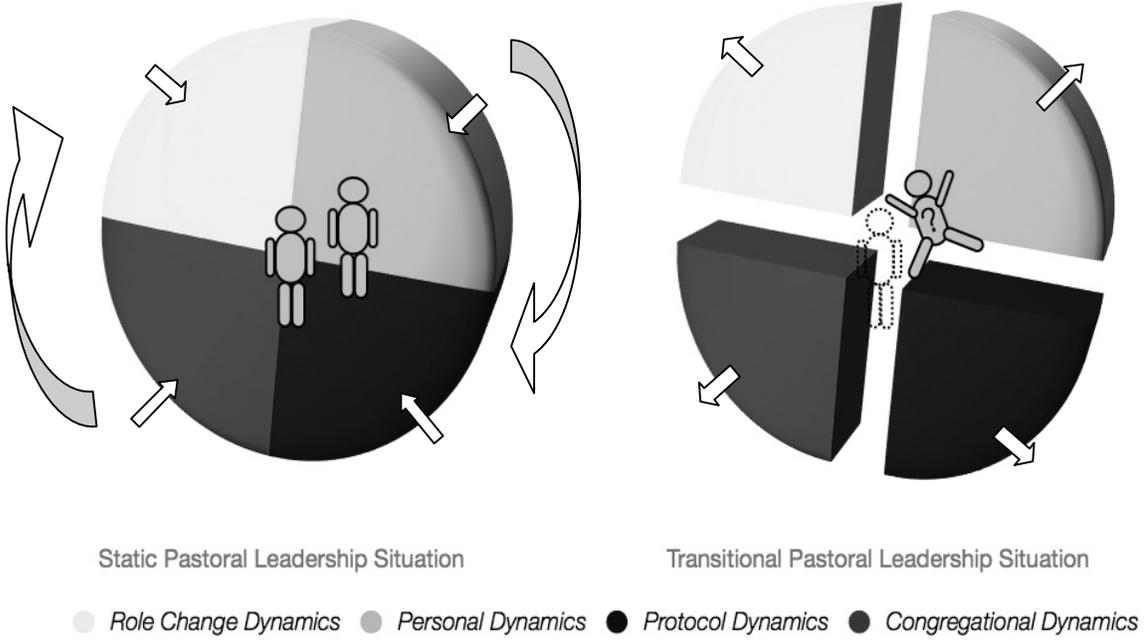
The Wheel of Forces

The Wheel of Forces (*Figure 1*) is a model for identifying and illustrating commonly experienced dynamics staff pastors encounter during the disorientation of an abrupt senior pastor transition. The wheel on the left illustrates a static and functional church leadership role situation with a senior pastor and associate pastor acting as a balanced and functional team. The functional leadership team lends balance and forward momentum to the organization. This type of team generates a sort of centripetal force around which the quadrants of personal, vocational, congregational, and standard ministry practices gel together. The wheel on the right illustrates a newly dynamic leadership situation. In this model the senior pastor role is vacant and equilibrium is lost. The centripetal force that once helped to hold the organization together from the center

changes to centrifugal force as a leadership vacuum occurs in a key role. This force disrupts and disorients the fabric of the entire organization particularly affecting remaining pastoral staff members. What was once working and pulling together now threatens to pull apart as the delicate balance and patterns of each quadrant are suddenly disrupted. New questions and patterns of personal and congregational life threaten what was, until recently, the status quo.

Each of the four quadrants in the Wheel of Forces corresponds to a particular ministry dynamic inherent in an abrupt pastoral change situation. The coded quadrants and definitions pertaining to each are listed as part of figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The Wheel of Forces Dynamics



Quadrant Definitions

Role Change Dynamics: This quadrant is colored yellow and identifies that the roles of staff pastors are tied in a relative way to assisting and promoting the vision and ministry of the senior pastor. The sudden vacancy of a senior position means immediate shifts, questions, and expectations come into play with regard to staff pastors and the organizational roles they carry out. Such dynamics are communicated here.

Personal Dynamics: This quadrant is colored green and identifies questions that a staff pastor faces regarding his or her own personal interests, family, financial, and vocational concerns.

Protocol Dynamics: This quadrant is colored blue and addresses concerns about understanding and processing procedural changes staff pastors come to grips with during a season of abrupt transition.

Congregational Dynamics: This quadrant is colored red. Congregational expectations naturally play an important role in the way a transition is carried out in the local church. Concerns about understanding and serving reasonable expectations as well as concerns about identifying, avoiding, and correcting unhealthy expectations are expressed here.

Staff Pastor Responses By Category

The quadrants identified in the Wheel of Forces model are the result of analyzing the responses made by staff pastors to the first two research questions:

1. What common questions do staff pastors grapple with during this type of transition?
2. What common congregational expectations do staff pastors encounter during this type of transition?

In an effort to clarify the concerns of staff pastors and how they correspond to the four quadrants that compose the Wheel of Forces model, excerpts of written responses from the research survey are listed under the appropriate headings below. It is important to note that many of the concerns listed overlapped entirely or in part. For the sake of space redundant concerns that surfaced in the research have only been listed once.

Role Change Dynamics:

- “What will happen when/if someone new comes in to Pastor the church?”
- “What is my role in the interim?”
- “How will this affect my leadership responsibilities?”
- “I am expected to handle weekly services with other staff members.”
- “The church made me do hospital visits, weddings, funerals etc... but the District advised the board not to let me preach Sundays so I would not get the wrong idea about my future there.”
- “Responsibility without authority.”
- “As a staff pastor you are expected to ‘be’ the pastor without being or getting the pay of the pastor.”
- “Pull together a financial system that was out of control.”
- “Office coordination.”
- “Counseling.”
- “Provider of stability.”
- “Childcare issues.”
- “I was voted in as senior pastor within a month of his leaving with no search committee.”
- “The board took out their frustrations with the senior pastor on the staff. We became lackey boys.”

- “Filling in duties I was asked to perform and becoming Senior pastor by default.”
- “Being spread too thin.”
- “I held the interim and youth pastor duties all at once.”
- “Moving forward without clear permission.”
- “None -they asked me to leave as well.”

Personal Dynamics:

- “Am I the next person God will call to the senior position?”
- “How will I differentiate the call from my own desire to ‘achieve’?”
- “Should this be viewed as an opportunity to leave or an opportunity to stay?”
- “Am I out of a job?”
- “Will the senior pastor take me with him -and if I go will it work out?”
- “Where am I going now?”
- “Will I fit into the new Pastor’s vision for the church?”
- “Who can I count on to answer my questions?”
- “Why did he leave that way and why didn’t he inform us as his staff?”
- “Will they take my job next?” *-in response to a pattern of the board firing other staff members.*
- “I know God was walking me through it.”
- “Will I be looked down upon for supporting my pastor even though he resigned unexpectedly?”
- “Will I lose friendships over this?”
- “How will this affect my family?”
- “Will my family have to relocate?”

- “Am I ready for the senior pastor position?”
- “Why would he do this knowing he just brought me on 2 weeks ago?”
- “How can one abandon a church?”
- “What caused this to happen so unexpectedly?”
- “I just moved here, bought a home and had a child. Do they need me to be pastor?”
- “When am I done?”
- “Am I too young for the senior pastor position?”
- “Its fun to relax, preach, and love the people during transition.”
- “I am worried about the temptation to command too much authority. –I don’t know where the line is.”

Protocol Dynamics:

- “How long will the transition process take?”
- “How will the board function in coordination with District leadership guidance?”
- “Will the current ministries of the church change during this process?”
- “Will I need to submit my resignation?”
- “Should I submit my resume for the senior pastor position?”
- “Who will be my covering during this transition?”
- “Who should be answering my questions?”
- “Why don’t they teach this in Bible college?”
- “Am I hireable by another local church?”
- “What do we do about Sunday preaching and midweek services?”
- “How do I answer questions regarding the pastor leaving?”
- “To whom and how should I be communicating?”

- “Will my presence put inappropriate pressure on the new pastor to keep me?”

Congregational Dynamics

- “How will the congregation respond as far as attendance and income?”
- “Will submitting my resignation add to the congregation’s trauma?”
- “Whose side in this matter is ascribing the truth? -The pastor or his opponents?”
- “How will I maintain peace between the two opposing sides?”
- “Is it possible to restore, heal, and attain peace between two opposing sides?”
- “Will the two sides ever repent and mesh together in unity?”
- “If I am called to another local church how will long-standing relationships be affected?”
- “Where do I stand with the board and other leaders?”
- “How will this affect the congregation’s morale?”
- “How long can these new workers continue to be counted upon?”
- “The board expected me to stay in my position and worked to find a leader I would serve under.”
- “The board expected me to pursue the position immediately if I felt called to it.”
- “The people wanted me to listen to all their suggestions about what we need to do.”
- “Expectation to step up with confidence in the future of the church.”
- “Many people wanted me to be a source of inside information.”
- “Direct approaches about filling the senior pastor’s role.”
- “People were shocked and confused about the pastoral selection process.”

- “Polarization of opposing sides and residual hurts.”
- “Unrealistic expectations”
- “The congregation fails to consider how the change affects the pastors – only themselves.
- “Temptation to be all things to all people.”
- “The board and the congregation expected that things would run as usual and that I would pick up the slack.”
- “I was expected to be the spokesperson for certain people to the board.”
- “People inquired about the selection process –of which I was locked out.”
- “Ugly church politics.”
- “Lack of communication between board and staff.”
- “A temptation to talk too much about personal and intimate details.”

It is important to indicate that the removal of the senior pastor from the center of the Wheel of Forces does not necessitate a total breakdown of all or even any one particular quadrant listed in the research. The Wheel of Forces model simply identifies areas in which those who have responded to the research expressed the most commonly occurring questions and issues. A spiritually vibrant and healthy organization may in fact carry on with merely the potential for disruption in one or more of these quadrants. Such a church may even rally and navigate the transitional process without encountering many of the problems that have dogged other churches in similar situations. As such there is no reason to impose the worst of any or all of these expressions upon a transition in a local assembly. Each leadership transition, abrupt or otherwise, uniquely plays out within its

own culture and context and will exhibit unique dynamics in each of the above listed quadrants.

Pitfalls

Once the quadrants within the Wheel of Forces are disrupted and the transition has begun staff pastors begin to live in a tension that is for the most part beyond their ability to control. The staff and congregation of a church negotiating an abrupt senior pastor transition will not return to a completely functional state with balance, legitimate leadership, and forward momentum until the vacancy in the senior pastorate is resolved. When the context of ministry is drastically altered and many circumstances lie beyond an individual's control, the choices and decisions that a pastor makes in response to such circumstances is one of the few things that do remain within his or her control. For this reason a second set of research questions for this project was also created. While questions one and two focused on identifying concerns and expectations in a newly transitional landscape, questions number three and four asked pastors to share the wisdom they have acquired while navigating real life trials.

Question three asked respondents to reflect on potential pitfalls that might take a precarious situation from bad to worse. In the case of a sudden transition the centripetal force that once held the organization around a solid core threatens to change to centrifugal force pushing the leaders and congregants farther away from one another. A staff pastor most often will not possess the power to counteract the organizational ripples that result and hold the church body together. The power does exist however, for a staff pastor to choose attitudes, words, and actions that exponentially multiply the forces

pushing everything apart. These choices are best described as pitfalls into which a staff member may intentionally or inadvertently chose to step.

Because each of the pitfalls is found in the context of church leadership and an abrupt transition scenario it is not surprising that each of the pitfalls listed by survey respondents also fits into the four quadrants identified in the Wheel of Forces model. What follows are the survey responses of staff pastors who were asked to reflect on the potential pitfalls they encountered while navigating abrupt senior pastor transition. The responses are organized and listed in conjunction with the quadrant to which they are most connected.

The responses reflect the expressions of survey respondents and have been modified slightly in a few instances for the sake of readability while preserving the integrity of their original ideas.

Role Change Pitfalls:

- The temptation exists to command and exercise too much authority.
- Not having an interim pastor can create role conflict within a staff pastor filling the senior pastor duties.
- Not having an interim pastor can create role conflict among the congregation with regard to the associate who carries out the senior pastor duties.
- Without a clearly leadership structure the potential for taking action without permission is always possible.
- Filling the pulpit has the tendency to create extra demands and expectations on staff pastors.
- Working with an interim who is too different in age and culture can create conflict that may inflame an already fragile situation.
- An inexperienced group of board members may make demands from an associate that exceed his or her training and experience level.

- Taking up organizational slack can create a tremendous work overload for staff pastors.

Personal Life Pitfalls:

- Pride can be a pitfall that creates a stumbling block in transition and it must be dealt with. There is the temptation of feeling empowered without a leader to whom one must submit.
- Unclear communication with the board is detrimental to the transition process.
- Talking too much with people in the congregation usually means revealing too much as a result.
- Core character issues that were problematic before may emerge to a greater degree in the crucible of abrupt change.
- Personal defense mechanisms may increase tensions.
- Staff pastors may be so involved in caring for the needs of the congregation that they fail to care adequately for themselves.
- Lack of day-to-day covering from the senior pastor for the staff leaves pastors exposed to all sorts of problems that which they might otherwise be shielded.
- Failure to know and understand one's own limitations may lead to burnout.
- Stepping us as a leader in a time of crisis does nothing to teach a leader about how to step back down.

Congregational Life Pitfalls:

- Power plays among leadership and church members are magnified in a leadership vacuum.¹
- Congregations often hold unrealistic expectations of staff members.
- People want their church to remain “the way it was” before the senior pastor left.
- Lack of repentance, unity, and peacemaking exist in divisive situations.

¹ There is no official written directive that I have been able to locate that requires staff pastors to resign when a senior pastor leaves. There seems to be lots of confusion regarding the origins of this idea.

- Hurtful and sinful actions often take place in transitional seasons.
- Congregants are often too subjective rather than objective when it comes to the changing nature of the staff pastor's role.
- A staff pastor may find it extremely difficult to deal with the emotions of congregants when a transition is finally nearing its completion. The joy and excitement of a new pastor coming may mean conflict with those who do not share the same feelings.

Protocol Pitfalls:

- Within the culture of some fellowships has evolved a requirement for all staff pastors to resign when the senior pastor exits.
- Conflicting and confused expectations surround the way transition plays out. It is necessary to obtain clarity from some legitimate source.

Of the four quadrants listed above the least comments from respondents with regard to transitional pitfalls was in the category of protocol. The lack of response related to this specific category raises several different possibilities. It might mean that staff pastors are well attuned to what is expected of them when a senior pastor suddenly makes an exit. In light of the second response listed however, this does not seem all that likely. The lack of focus with regard to protocol pitfalls might indicate that staff pastors feel relatively comfortable dealing with protocol questions process and find themselves more concerned with the perils of navigating personal dynamics, role dynamics, and congregational dynamics instead. Another possible interpretation is that staff pastors view most of the pastoral transition process as playing out between a church board and their district office. As such staff pastors facing these issues may feel isolated from the process and whatever protocol might be expected. Whatever the case it is important for those facing these situations to be aware of pitfalls other pastors have encountered and to

do their best to finish well. In so doing a staff pastor may help preserve the local work of the Kingdom in his or her community while setting the kind of example that others can respect and follow.

Patches

Avoiding potential pitfalls is an important part of the strategy to restore a shaken congregation back to health. At the same time it is important to recognize that there remains another vital part of the equation. Question number four asked pastors to share principles that they believe might help someone else successfully navigate an abrupt senior pastor transition. Applying the wisdom these pastors shared might be appropriately considered a matter of damage control.

An organization is often characterized as a ship at sea en route to its destination. An organization, such as a church, might abruptly encounter a storm along the way with the leadership doing their best to keep the ministry afloat. In naval terms a damage control technician responds to breaches that occur in a ship's pipes or its bulkheads. Once water begins breaching compartments it threatens the integrity and safety of the ship and crew. A damage control technician patches the gaps that threaten the loss of a ship's buoyancy through whatever means at his or her disposal. Damage control technicians have been known to repair holes with large plugs designed for that purpose, mechanical jacking devices, mattresses from the crew's quarters, and even, at times, the bodies of sailors themselves. The repairs of a damage control technician are temporarily put in place until a ship can arrive safely at a properly equipped dry-dock facility.

A proper understanding of a damage control technician's responsibilities can be helpful to a pastor who may be tasked with a parallel role in the church. The respondents

to this research question offer tools a staff pastor can engineer uniquely to his or her situation. The wisdom shared by respondents to this research survey is listed below. The responses have been edited for the sake of clarity and eliminate redundancy.

- Cultivate a sense of duty. Stick out the situation to a point of resolution rather than bailing out or looking for greener pastures.
- Be prayerful about staying.
- Lead in the best way you can. Do not let things fall apart in the in-between time. If you end up staying you will have more work to do putting it all back on track!
- Do not rush the process. God works in process.
- Get wisdom from people you respect.
- Be positive about the church being in God's hands. Speak in faith and hope, not worry.
- Keep clear communication with key persons in the transition. Clarify roles, responsibilities, expectations and boundaries.
- Be positive, cooperative, flexible, and relational.
- Find a confidant far removed from the situation.
- Surrender the need to know where everything stands.
- Try not to react, wait on the Lord, and be slow to speak.
- Be patient and prepare for the new pastor.
- Surround yourself with encouragers instead of complainers.
- If you cannot follow a new leader leave graciously.
- If necessary, initiate peacemaking efforts that involve all parties.
- Pray, listen, and seek Godly counsel.
- Communication with the board and among the pastoral staff is an important key.

- Integrity and humility are two of the biggest principals needed at a time like that.
- Request that someone from the outside come in to help outline the big picture.
- Recognize that God's plan is bigger than one person.
- Place your future and the future of the church in God's hands.
- Encourage the board to step in more. State your limits.
- Love the hurting sheep.
- Work to be sure what your role is in the transition.
- Be totally open with the congregation. If there is a hint of trouble simmering in the background bring it out into the open.
- Remain humble and do what God has called you to do.
- Do not expect too much from yourself. You do not need to be your own enemy.
- Understand that every ministry in the church is important to someone.
- Listen to advice and implement it if it is sound.
- Listen to your spouse.
- Accept constructive criticism and do not take it personally.

Evaluating the suitability of the wisdom shared in the survey and incorporating it as necessary can help bridge gaps that threaten the life of a local church caught in unexpected transition. The repairs done in the context of a transitional season are not permanent fixes but they are for the purpose of keeping the church above water until a permanent leadership solution is viable.

Conspicuously Absent

In Jim Collin's book *Good to Great*² Collins explains that the staff he assembled to study the factors that helped good organizations make the leap to great organizations took a unique approach. The team, inspired by a short work of fiction written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, spent time considering what factors they did not see in their research but had initially expected to find. Posing the same question about pastors who responded to this survey yields additionally informative results.

Search for a new position

At no point in the survey did a respondent ever recommend that a staff pastor encountering this type of situation prepare and distribute a resume. The advice to leave graciously was offered in a single instance and only then within the context being unable to follow a newly appointed senior pastor. While the initial natural instinct of many staff pastors caught in this type of situation might be to simply move on, those who have already encountered the same experience do not recommend or reinforce such ideas.

Suggested resources

None of the survey respondents recommended a helpful resource that they had accessed or used personally during their own abrupt transition experience. There is a very strong possibility that such a resource does not exist at this time or that if it does it is not widely known about in pastoral circles.

² Jim Collins, *From Good to Great: Why some companies make the leap and others don't* (New York: Harpers Collins, 2001).

References to timetables

None of the research participants offered a timetable for expecting transition to play itself out. There was no mention of timetables that could be utilized for making personal decisions such as: How long to weather a difficult transition, how long it might take a staff pastor to decide if he or she is called to the senior pastor position, or any other timeframe that might offer relief from living in an uncertain state of tension.

Personal advantage strategies

The wisdom shared by those who responded to the survey offered no advice directed at turning a transitional season to the advantage of remaining staff members despite the sudden vacuum of power occurring at the center of a church whose senior pastor has departed. There is no indication among those who took part in the study that this is a time to be in any way used for advancing personal agendas. While such approaches may be a very natural part of transition in a secular business setting pastoral leadership in this research presents a more selfless, Christian approach. This approach is marked by concern for the church as a whole rather than a myopic focus on personal advantages and pet agendas.

Ideas for resolving the process

The research gives no evidence or advice that implies staff pastors can fix or resolve the transition issue itself. No one likes to live in an uncertain situation and most people do their best to resolve uncertainties in which they find themselves. While some of the respondents make suggestions about facilitating reconciliation among congregants along lines of division, there is no indication that a staff pastor will be able to pull the

quadrants back together and restore forward motion. While the staff is advised by respondents to embrace the process and make the most of it, staff members are never advised that these tensions are within their power to be resolved.

Suggestion of vocational change

While several of the respondents endured times of intense discomfort, anxiety, and insecurity none suggested that anyone experiencing an abrupt transition consider a change of vocation as a result. The comments and wisdom shared are overall positive about life and ministry. At the same time it is important to note that those who responded to the survey are those who have retained their ministerial credentials and have continued in ministry to the present time.

Summary of Research Findings

The effects of an unexpected senior pastor transition upon staff pastors and their families are myriad and far-reaching. The research has shown that despite the circumstances unique to each situation there remain several common components that can clearly be identified. Staff pastors can be better prepared for the unforeseen and unexpected through exposure to and reflection upon the experiences of those who, having made the same journey, have passed their knowledge along for the benefit of others.

The data show an abrupt transition initiates a disruptive modification in the fabric of a congregation and its leadership. The survey responses of pastors illustrate a pattern of disorientation that initially results from a loss of organizational balance and the confusion of major unexpected change. These sudden alterations in the rhythms of congregational life threaten to exchange the centripetal force and forward motion of a

church under solid pastoral leadership for the centrifugal force and omni-directional lurches of a church in a fluid pastoral leadership situation.

The research has revealed that the questions and concerns that initially buffet a minister facing this situation fall into a very commonly experienced set of categories. Personal dynamics, role change dynamics, protocol dynamics, and congregational dynamics all pull at the heart and mind of pastors who remain. Successfully negotiating an abrupt transition will mean identifying and responding appropriately to these dynamics as each one is encountered.

In addition to dealing with the dynamics already mentioned above there are serious pitfalls inherent in a transitional situation that corresponds to each category. An example might be a staff pastor trying to negotiate the dynamics of role change. This is a challenge that is already extremely difficult and is only compounded by the fact that this pastor must function in daily ministry that demands concrete choices that are made in an organizational context that is fluid. She may be forced to make day-to-day operational choices and decisions by virtue of her presence at the scene. At the same time she might inadvertently be perceived as sidestepping or overstepping her actual authority and thereby incurring the anger of church members, other staff members, and even the church board.

Beyond situational pitfalls the research also reveals that there are choices staff pastors can make within this type of setting that hold forth the hope of a light at the end of the tunnel. Examples of such choices set forth in the Patches³ section of this paper point practical ways forward in troubling circumstances. There are controlled responses

³ Principals for preservation, as related by staff pastors who have navigated abrupt senior pastor transition, are listed under the heading “Patches” on pages 95-97 of this document.

that can be made within a seemingly out of control situation. Those who responded to the survey overwhelmingly expressed a sense of reassurance and hopefulness rather than being resolved to bitterness or focusing primarily on the difficulties each encountered. As such the research shows that many staff pastors have weathered an abrupt senior pastor transition in tough situations but have negotiated these transitions with success.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are summary findings, conclusions, and recommendations were distilled from research focused on abrupt senior pastor transition and its effect on staff pastors who serve in the transitional season that follows. The study focused primarily upon the experiences of staff pastors who have served or are currently serving in the Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God. This summary includes an overall evaluation of the project's methodology, an interpretation of the project's findings, and recommendations for the Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God based upon those findings.

Evaluation of the Project

This project was designed for the purposes of identifying key needs and acting as a resource for staff pastors ministering in the aftermath of a senior pastor's sudden exit. Such exits commonly leave the remaining staff pastors in an unenviable and often untenable vocational position through the resulting interim period. The most common issues and needs of pastors who have experienced this sort of transition have been identified and collected in this research. Beyond articulating the issues confronting pastors navigating sudden transition, the project itself is a resource that provides a theological, vocational, and functional framework with which a staff pastor can better

understand the intricacies of his or her situation and move forward to make the best choices possible.

Strengths of this Project

The key strength of this project is the expression of voices shaped by experience with abrupt senior pastor transition. Research for this project found no resources for such needs produced for or within the context of the Assemblies of God. This project holds value for those who have weathered abrupt transitions and now have a chance to reflect on those experiences and make such reflections heard. It also holds value for those who are yet to face similar challenges through proactively educating ministerial students and clergy about the dynamics inherent in such situations. The shared wisdom of veteran pastors carries this project beyond a merely academic exercise and grounds it in the gritty realities of ministry in the local church.

A second strength of this project lies in validating the questions and concerns that staff pastors feel in the isolation that accompanies transition. Pastor Bill McGinnis, who took part in this project, remarked after reading the survey responses listed in the Wheel of Forces quadrants that: “Reading through the questions and struggles of other pastors in the same situation makes me feel as if I am at least normal.” Although this research cannot provide a remedy for a church making its way through a sudden transition its strength lies in providing a sense of broader perspective and reassurance for staff pastors leading from the middle during seasons of change.

A third strength of the project is the road map for personally navigating organizational transition. Incorporating valuable research from literature provided by the corporate world provides for pastors, who feel they have no authority or control in their

church environment, a set of circumstances in which some degree of personal control may be exercised. The sense of control is important to combat feelings of helplessness and provide a sense of direction on the path forward. Part of this strength also includes the identification of potential pitfalls as well as principles for guiding decision making in a transitional situation. A staff pastor armed with this kind of wisdom will be better able to personally navigate the transition without triggering an avalanche of additional problems.

A fourth strength of the project is found in the “Wheel of Forces” model that resulted from the research. To be able to identify the quadrants in which an individual’s questions and concerns may fall will help identify where the bulk of transitional issues are concentrated. Knowing the key issues that confront a pastor and church can facilitate the creation of a strategy for prioritizing and dealing with those same issues. Such knowledge is beneficial not only for the staff pastors on the scene but might also be shared with an interim or newly elected senior pastor in the effort to pull the quadrants back together and regain forward momentum for the local church at the conclusion of a transition.

Limitations of this Project

While the project provides a framework as a resource at the scholarly level its language, length, and format might better serve younger and less experienced pastors if expressed in a shorter, more popular, and casually readable form. Many doctoral projects and dissertations are not widely available and are considered uninteresting reading by the general public. As such the valuable nature of much of the information in this project might not be communicated to or absorbed by those it would benefit most.

A second weakness of this project is that the survey portion was conducted entirely via e-mail. The use of e-mail is a double-edged sword in this instance. While e-mail allowed a fast and wide sample to be conducted there were over one hundred of the 841 e-mail addresses that were returned as “undeliverable”. This means there was a large pool of pastors in the Ohio District who were not afforded the opportunity to respond to the survey. The use of e-mail could also mean that pastors in the area who do not have knowledge of or access to e-mail may have inadvertently been left out of the research data. The data provided by the Zoomerang demographic research shows that only one respondent was over 65 years of age. This essentially means that a ministerial demographic rich in experience is nearly absent from the data that was gathered. In the end it was determined that these weaknesses were offset by the smaller sample the researcher would have been forced to utilize via traditional mail and the tremendous overlap of common concerns already voiced among survey respondents. Additionally, the representation portrayed is more likely to reflect the contemporary situation in which pastors are actively serving in the present day and age.

Findings and Implications

The research questions communicated in the first chapter of the project identified four areas essential to gaining a better understanding of abrupt pastoral transition. The research questions sought to understand common experiences and questions related to personal and congregational matters involved in such transitions. The questions also sought to provide insight into potential pitfalls and to identify guiding principles that might assist others through such transitions. The findings related to these questions have been reproduced at length and given a great deal of attention in the preceding chapter.

Additional Findings

Beyond the findings based on the research questions posed at the outset of this project came additional information for better understanding the dynamics of abrupt pastoral transition. As such these additional research findings produced in this study are included for the purpose of developing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics in play.

The Scope of the Problem

The findings of this project are diverse in their nature and implications. One of the initial implications of the data is that the problem being researched, while important to those who experience it, is not necessarily epidemic in its scope. At the present time the potential for abrupt pastoral change exists in one third to one half of Assemblies of God churches. Demographic analysis of the Ohio District indicates a similar proportion of multiple staff churches to that of the national average. Research in the Ohio District showed that only 27 of the 740 pastors to whom the survey was sent responded as having personally served as a staff pastor during the season following an abrupt senior pastor transition. While the potential for this sort of transition to occur is great, this project's findings are based primarily on the level of participative response in the Ohio District. The results that followed showed that those who actually weather this type of experience and remain on staff is in fact a relatively seldom occurrence.

Demographic Findings

The research findings also reveal demographic data collected for quantitative analysis. The age range of respondents demonstrates that the largest age groups of staff

members potentially impacted by this type of loss were 26-35 year olds. In addition to this many of the respondents in the older age ranges who participated were reflecting on experiences that occurred while they were a part of the 26-35 year old demographic. The age results of survey participants are shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Age Breakdown of Survey Participants

Under 20	0	0%
20-25	1	4%
26-35	11	41%
36-45	6	22%
46-55	6	22%
56-65	2	7%
66-75	1	4%
75+	0	0%

It appears from the survey data that the demographic involvement could be illustrated in the form of a bell curve illustrating the potential for experiencing abrupt senior pastor transition arising in the early twenties and peaking in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties. The likelihood of being involved in this situation then decreases and plateaus from the mid-thirties, through the forties, and into the mid-fifties before falling off again. The implications are that those in the 20-25-age range, which comprised only 4%, are just entering into positions as staff pastors and have yet to weather such predicaments. When these same pastors reach their mid-twenties to mid-thirties they are entering ministry from college, the professional world, or have possibly held multiple

church positions and thus have had greater exposure to transitional situations. This range shows a greater likelihood of being involved in such a type of transition. It also stands to reason that beyond the mid-thirties many pastors are assuming the lead roles in churches themselves and as such these more mature age groups are less represented in the survey.

Gender did not play a significant role in this project. Male pastors made up 77% of survey respondents while female respondents made up only 23%. This finding is in line with the national average of women who serve as credentialed ministers in the Assemblies of God Fellowship, which presently stands at 22.9%.¹ As such each gender is proportionately represented in the findings of this project. Both genders have an equal chance of experiencing the sudden exit of a senior pastor while serving as a staff member.

Theological Findings

An important theological finding, with regard to the theological reflection portion of this project, is that scriptural depictions of pastoral leadership generally do not lend themselves to vocational distinctions. In the Assemblies of God the idea has been communicated in different ways that one pastoral role in a church is essential while another is expendable. This is likely to have to do with organizational structure as well as practical leadership concerns. At the same time this understanding is somewhat at odds with sound biblical Christian leadership principles. The theological research illustrates an understanding of Christ-centered churches with Christ-centered under-shepherds uniting and ultimately serving under the leadership of Jesus Christ. There is no scriptural basis for pastoral ministry that is dedicated exclusively to a specialty or that is based upon a

¹ General Secretary's Office, Statistician, *Assemblies of God USA, Statistics Report for 2006*, http://www.ag.org/top/about/statistics/Statistical_Report_Summary.pdf, [accessed Feb. 29, 2008].

subcategory of vocational distinction. Spiritual leadership should be treated with equal honor and respect across the spectrum of age, experience, and specialty despite organizational designators that are often both necessary and practical.

Theological perspective and practical organizational concerns are not mutually exclusive but should inform one another. In an instance that requires one concern to take precedence over the other, theological concerns must trump concerns that are organizational in nature. The apparent lack of discussion and the resulting lack of consideration for addressing the needs of staff pastors facing abrupt transition indicate that these priorities may actually be inverted during the chaos of an unanticipated transition. Another possibility is that an unawareness of these needs reflects an attitude already embedded in the culture of the fellowship that certain pastoral roles are more valuable than others.

Common Transitional Dynamics

The coding process identified that the most crucial issues and concerns of staff pastors facing abrupt transition fall into four main areas of focus. These four areas are interrelated and all find their convergence in the pastoral vocation. While every church context is unique the patterns of anxiety and transitional dynamics for staff pastors are predictable to a large degree. The research shows that these pastors will have questions that will fall into four primary areas of concern: personal issues, role change issues, protocol issues, and congregational issues. Any work that is done on behalf of staff pastors confronted by these challenges will need to address these primary concerns at some level. It is also highly likely that finding a solution and restoring a sense of normalcy in just one of the four areas may be helpful in restoring balance more quickly in

other areas due to the fact that all are interrelated. For example, it is extremely likely that a pastor whose questions about appropriate protocol are quickly resolved can redirect his or her focus to addressing personal issues or role change issues that need attention. The ultimate goal of navigating sudden transition is to reverse the centrifugal forces that disrupt forward momentum and that move each quadrant out of balance. Conversely, to bring these same quadrants back together and return balance will mean stability in the life of the staff pastor has been reasonably restored.

Conclusions

There are several conclusions that can be drawn based upon the research that has been carried out in this project. These conclusions illustrate gaps that exist between the needs of staff pastors who encounter seasons of abrupt senior pastor transition and the lack of practical resources available for their assistance during such seasons.

Cultural Disconnect within the Fellowship

The first conclusion of this study is that the needs of staff pastors have not been thoroughly considered as a legitimate or compelling concern by those who are responsible for assisting local churches in the transition process. While the top shelf priority of achieving a healthy and stable lead pastor transition cannot be debated the emphasis of such priorities does not explain the silence that staff pastors are encountering during the same transitional periods.

The preceding assertion begs a second question regarding the motivation, or lack of motivation, that explains the failure of leadership to recognize and address this problem. Some have drawn the conclusion that in the Assemblies of God staff pastors are

considered as less valuable members of the fellowship and as such are written off until they attain more significant leadership positions. While this may be true in certain quarters it is difficult to paint this picture in such broad strokes given the fact that those who lead the fellowship made their own way through these same ranks and endured the same precarious situations. A more likely explanation for the inattention to these matters might be directly attributable to confused expectations between church boards, staff pastors, and district leadership regarding transitional expectations and proper protocol.

This protocol confusion appears to stem from the widely held belief that staff pastors are required to submit resignations following a senior pastor's departure. Dr. George Wood, the General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God, articulated a few reasons to the researcher why this requirement is at times a good move:

Sometimes a senior pastor might be threatened by an emerging young leader and so felt safer if there was a bylaw protection that the staff member couldn't pull a coup. I don't know that for a fact, but it's my guess. Also, when our churches had smaller staffs, the new pastor wanted some leeway in selecting his own staff and didn't want to get stuck with staff he or she had not had a chance to evaluate. I know of one case right now in a smaller church where a young pastor was forced to accept a staff pastor who wanted the church and didn't get it. He is very ineffective in his role, but the lead pastor is walking on eggs in trying to deal with this issue. It would have been helpful to him if he could have had a clean break.²

As is apparent in the statement above, identifying the origins of this expectation has been a particularly elusive part of this research project. To date no pastors, historians, or even top-level leaders in the movement have been able to articulate with any degree of certainty how this expectation found its place in the Assemblies of God fellowship. If Dr. Wood's assertion is correct it is highly likely that the idea of requiring staff resignations

² Dr. George Wood, e-mail message to author, February 22, 2008.

came about through a mixture of pastoral insecurity and the desire for a mechanism creating expediency in matters of church politics without adequate or even Christian consideration for the needs of those pastors who serve in the local church.

A real life example of this unwritten yet widely held idea was expressed directly in one of the project's survey responses. The respondent communicated that the District Superintendent required staff pastors to submit resignations regardless of whether the new senior pastor was willing to keep them on as part of the staff or not. During both formal and informal interviews with Assemblies of God ministers on the subject of abrupt transition this topic routinely surfaced and was summarily dismissed as an unevenly applicable and generally untenable expectation by pastors who participated.

If a wide swath of the Assemblies of God ministers and leadership expects, either in reality or in perception, that staff pastors should resign once a senior pastor departs it naturally follows that there would be little need to produce a transitional resource for staff remaining to assist through the transition. To produce such a resource for an individual or group of individuals who chose not to resign their positions of ministry would work against the fellowship's accepted cultural norm. A move such as this would threaten to encourage the very type of behavior that is deemed problematic in the first place and be seen as counterproductive to efforts focused on facilitating healthy transition in the local church.

The implications of church leaders and district officials requiring staff resignations in the past has undoubtedly produced an unforeseen effect on the number of respondents taking part in the survey portion of this project. It will never be known how many discouraged pastors may have left ministry altogether and as such cannot be included as

part of the data. All of these factors converge to obscure the full extent to which abrupt senior pastor transition plays out and affects pastors in the Ohio District. While the initial finding expressed in this document is that this problem is not epidemic in its scope it must also be articulated in this finding that the full scope of this problem may be partially hidden by the inherent cultural practices of the fellowship in the past and present.

Leadership Essentials

A second conclusion of this research stresses the tremendous need for a focus on spiritual and character formation within the pastoral leader before he or she is confronted with the challenge of navigating an abrupt senior pastor transition. The survey responses, case studies, and literature review that informed the project give illustrations of leaders among the clergy and laity alike, whose lack of character only added to the chaos all around them. The essential qualities of leaders who endure such seasons of change must be such that their concerns stretch beyond personal interests and consider first and foremost the concerns of the entire church body. A lack of spiritual and character formation within the life of a staff pastor enduring a transitional situation threatens to compromise the entire process.

A trustworthy individual with a servant's heart is the type of leader institutions such as West Point are working to produce. Local and national leadership, as well as academic institutions of the Assemblies of God, who prepare men and women for the joys and rigors of ministry, should settle for instilling nothing less when it comes to spiritual formation. A love for Christ and his people, a sense of duty and determination, and enough grit to help facilitate the transition process with integrity are the leadership essentials communicated through the research section of this project.

Recommendations for the Ohio District Council

The first recommendation of this project is for the Ohio District Council to create a way in which confusion surrounding resignation protocol might be abated. A position paper or statement from the Ohio District Superintendent's office that recognizes the existing uncertainty regarding the tendering of staff resignations upon a senior pastor's exit would be an excellent first step. Such a document should be constructed in a manner that brings clarity to the ambiguities of this type of situation. It should communicate clear protocol expectations, present pastors with a healthy perspective, a set of options, and articulate guidelines that staff pastors, a church board, or district leadership will be able to use to make important transitional choices. Once this document has articulated the expected protocol and confusion has been removed it will be left up to local churches and their staff pastors to choose to implement or ignore those expectations. The net result is a well-informed choice made with a clear understanding of expectation verses a less informed choice made amid the ambiguity of confused expectations.

Such a document might be even more beneficial if articulated by the office of the General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God himself. It could serve to establish clarity on this question across the fellowship as a whole. In addition it might relieve many staff pastors who are wrestling with the question of how to conduct themselves with a proper attitude and proper bearing in an unplanned transition process.

A second recommendation for the Ohio District Council is to address the theological problem of what appears at times to be a pastoral caste system. While a hierarchy may be a very necessary and practical reality within the context of a local church it must be less visible when it comes to the rank and file of those who take part in

a voluntary cooperative fellowship. When the needs of one portion of the fellowship are overlooked or dismissed while the needs of another portion seem carefully attended to the fellowship will eventually find itself weakened by its own uneven-handed conduct. This is the inherent danger of appearing less concerned with ministers who have significant problems but hold seemingly insignificant positions. At the present time the Ohio District does assist staff pastors who are transitioning with distributing resumes and finding placement. This should be recognized as an important service provided to staff pastors and yet its value is obviously limited to those called to continue in ministry in a different context but offers little support to those who remain to serve a wounded local body.

Credentialed staff pastors are required by the constitution and bylaws of the Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God³ to support the work of the District with 80% of the minister's tithes just as a senior pastor does. As such it seems a fair expectation on the part of every minister to have his or her needs considered and ministered to during any predicament that might arise. Time, attention, and resources needed to be directed towards staff members caught in sudden senior pastor transitions with the goal of encouraging and creating a win-win scenario of healing and forward motion for both the church and its remaining pastoral leadership.

The third recommendation for the Ohio District Council is to intentionally enter into a renewed emphasis on spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is an essential part of leadership formation and means that pastors are trained beyond sharpening ministerial skill sets and accessing resources available for local church leaders. Spiritual leadership

³ Ohio District Council, *Constitution of the Ohio District Council, Inc. of the Assemblies of God Constitutional Declaration Article XIV, Section 5: Financial Support*, paragraphs a-f, 2007. 55-56.

requires a sustained focus on the inner quality and substance of character upon which difficult seasons and situations will make demands. Without the formation of Christ-like character, kingdom values, and grit, pastors who face the uncertainties of their vocational context might become leaders of opportunity and expediency rather than men and women of honor who selflessly dedicate their lives to the task at hand. Leadership classes and conferences should be planned and prepared with opportunities for emphasis on the importance of personal spiritual formation in addition to and possibly over and above an emphasis on mastering leadership skill sets.

A fourth recommendation is to identify a group of transition coaches that staff pastors can be directed to for support, guidance, and mentoring. Such a group of pastors should be composed of ministers who have participated in the same type of experience and as such are able to share their personal insights and wisdom. This group should work hand in hand with the district and be composed of pastors from the entire state for the sake of availability and so as not to demand additional resources from District Council offices. Staff pastors might be directed to this sort of coaching group by the church development office, via the Ohio District Council web site, or through the Emerge Helpline number on the back of ministerial credential holder's cards.

A fifth recommendation is that the Ohio District Council create a contingency plan that it distribute to its member churches as a resource for pastors and board members to work through in advance of any sudden transitions. Such a plan could be as simple as a one-page questionnaire that includes prompts and blanks that, when filled in, create an agreed framework for navigating the initial stage of an abrupt pastoral transition. In the corporate world contingency plans exist in case a CEO or key executive exits for one

reason or another. In the church world, the sudden exit of a senior pastor is a matter just as serious and merits thoughtful consideration in advance. Helpful questions might concentrate on role expectations, emergency procedures, and create clear protocol expectations in advance of a situation that holds the potential for organizational chaos.

An example of contingency planning questions might look like this:

1. Who will contact the District Council offices?
2. Who will contact the staff pastors and inform them of what has happened/will happen?
3. What classes and ministries does the senior pastor presently lead? Will they be suspended or will the staff pastors be expected to carry them on? Which are most critical to the operation of the church? Which are least critical?
4. Who will be expected to lead weekly worship services?
5. Will an interim pastor be requested?
6. Who from the board will be the primary point of contact for the pastors for information?
7. Who will be the primary point of contact for informing the congregation? How will information about the transition be communicated to the congregation?
8. Who will the staff pastors report to directly from day to day?
9. Who is responsible for initiating this plan?
10. Where will this plan be kept so that it can be accessed?

A contingency plan provides a simple framework that can bring order into a difficult situation. Contingency plans that are thoughtful and specific offer a proactive advantage that a leadership team forced to simply react to adverse conditions will not

have. In addition to matters of office staffing and weekly services a plan might also designate an immediate financial audit and ascertain the location of church credit cards and expense accounts. A copy of such a plan might even be kept on record with the District Council so that leadership in Columbus has an immediate idea of the course of action a local church intends to follow. In cases where the situation demands it the plan can naturally be altered to fit a congregation's particular set of circumstances. A suggested template can be found in the "Faultlines" resource located in the appendix of the research project.

A sixth recommendation is the implementation of a short course on navigating pastoral transition. Such a course could be implemented into the Ohio School of Ministry (O.S.O.M.). In addition to O.S.O.M. this type of instruction might be offered to pastors and their boards during the district's yearly Leadership Tour of churches in the Ohio sections. The Leadership Tour is a desirable setting for basic teaching about transition due to the inclusion of lay leadership that might not otherwise be exposed to this type of material.

Another significant venue for teaching on transition would be as an elective at the annual Forum gathering at the Heartland Conference and Retreat Center. Educating pastors and church leadership about transition is an ideal preventative measure for the common problems that naturally arise in both anticipated and unanticipated transitions. Given the transient nature of society and the migration of pastoral leaders within and without the Ohio District a proactive approach to this topic holds the potential for reducing frustration and division. It also holds potential for communicating and promoting a district wide understanding of what constitutes a healthy transition in

favorable or even an adverse set of circumstances. By proactively defining best practices and setting well defined expectations pastors and lay people will be better equipped for transition at every level.

Recommendations for Further Study

Unfortunately the bulk of this research has been primarily reactive in nature rather than proactive. A more beneficial and proactive form of research might take aim at the question of whether staff pastors can work to prevent or prepare for an abrupt senior pastor transition. Such a project might be proposed as: “Indicators of Possible Abrupt Transition”. Learning and understanding warning signs preceding a sudden senior pastor transition might be especially helpful for pastors anticipating a potential church conflict situation.

Another recommended course of study would be a project that demonstrates the effects of requiring resignations of pastoral staff members once a senior pastor departs. This study could examine the dynamics that the departure of an entire staff produces within the context of a local congregation. Such a study might seek to better answer the question of whether there are specific instances when staff resignations are demonstrably a better or worse idea for a congregation and produce a resource designed for aiding in such a decision.

A third recommendation for further study is a research project that measures and analyzes the trend towards pastoral team leadership scenarios within the fellowship. If there is a genuine trend towards team leadership and away from the traditional senior pastor model, there will be unique implications with regard to the issue of multiple staff churches negotiating abrupt transitions. While there has been a steady stream of writing

concerning pastoral team leadership the question remains as to how quickly, if at all, Assemblies of God Churches are moving in this direction. The possibility also exists that idealism about team leadership is more pervasive than its real life implementation.

Final Summary

Abrupt transitional issues impact a relatively small segment of pastors ministering in the Assemblies of God and yet they do so in a lasting and formational way. The spiritual health and well being of local congregations, as well as the fellowship as a whole, is directly impacted by the spiritual health and well being of those serving in positions of leadership. The challenges facing staff pastors when a senior pastor suddenly departs are ultimately challenges facing the whole body of Christ.

The needs and issues that arise during such times are predictable areas of concern that have been experienced, overcome, and documented repeatedly in the fellowship. As such it is possible to proactively and systematically educate pastors regarding these types of situations before they are thrust into them unexpectedly. Pastors who are better prepared to handle the dynamics associated with unexpected transition will have more to offer the people they pastor whether they remain in place through a transitional season or transition to an entirely different context of ministry.

At the present time the failure to deliver a proactive and deliberate approach for aiding staff pastors who endure the abrupt transition of a senior pastor is due primarily to long held cultural paradigms within the fellowship itself. If this issue is not addressed it can be expected that this problem will continue to persist and grow in significance as more and more Assemblies of God churches move toward a team leadership pastoral model.

The Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God already has in place an array of educational avenues, interpersonal networks, and media resources it could utilize for training and preparing its ministers about these types of transition. Sharing the wisdom and experiences of pastors who participated in this research project with ministers and churches in this district would prove a notable first step toward better preparing new ministers for an abrupt transition scenario. By doing so the Ohio District Council has a unique opportunity to better serve its ministers and lead the way for healthier pastors and churches throughout the entirety of the fellowship.

APPENDIX A
ABRUPT TRANSITION SURVEY

Hypothesis Testing/Research

Please carefully read the following introduction carefully in order to complete the survey

From time to time pastos who serve as staff members to a Sr. Pastor experience an abrupt transition in leadership. A Sr. Pastor may leave the church suddenly due to death, disgrace, division, or other variables. The goal of this research project is to produce a resource that will use the experience of pastors who have experienced this type of transition in order to assist those who face these transitions in the future.

Each of the four main questions are open ended and as such you are encouraged to write as much as you feel neccessary to express and illustrate your experience. Your honest and candid feedback is an important part of creating this resource and assisting others.

- 1 Upon learning of the sudden departure of your pastor what questions were you most concerned with? Example: "Will I need to submit my resignation?"

- 2 What were some of the expectations from the people in the congregation that you were met with? Example: A source of inside information on the departure? To fill multiple rolls?

- 3 What potential pitfalls have you seen or experienced as a staff pastor during a Sr. Pastor transition?

- 4 What guiding principals do you believe are necessary for navigating successfully through this type of transition?

5 Please list your current place of ministry and position here:

6 How successfully do you feel you navigate this transition?

- Poorly
- I survived
- Well
- Very Well
- Other, please specify

7 If your position has changed, what factors influenced that change?

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION:

8 What is your age?

- Under 20
- 20-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 66-75
- 76-85
- 86 and older

9 What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

10 Please indicate the highest level of Education you have attained:

- Elementary School (up through grade 4)
- Grade School graduate (up through grade 8)
- Some High School
- High School Graduate
- Some College
- College Graduate
- Some Graduate School
- Post Graduate Degree
- No Formal Education or Schooling

11 May we contact you to follow-up on your answers to the survey or for an interview?

12 Please enter your name and contact information:

Last Name:

First Name:

Email address:

Phone Number:

While your answers to these questions will be incorporated into the overall research project your personal information will be kept confidential. Thank you for your participation!



Survey Page 1

APPENDIX B

FAULT LINES STAFF PASTOR FIELD TRANSITION RESOURCE

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San Andreas Fault
moved its fingers
through the ground
earth divided
plates collided
such an awful sound

San Andreas Fault
moved its fingers
through the ground
terra cotta shattered
and the walls came
tumbling down

o, promised land
o, wicked ground
build a dream
tear it down

o, promised land
what a wicked ground
build a dream
watch it all fall down¹

-Natalie Merchant

¹ “San Andreas Fault” Written by Natalie Merchant ©1995 Indian Love Bride Music (ASCAP); Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Introduction:

As a staff pastor serving in a local church you are called to a wonderful place of privilege and influence. All who feel called to enter the world of vocational ministry carry with them hopes and dreams with regard to what such a world might be like. Most pastors feel an innate desire to live authentically as world changers. They crave significance and impact for the Kingdom of God in their communities. They are people who believe somewhere deep inside that their time, prayers, and energy will be used for a lasting and powerful effect in our world for the Kingdom that God will one day bring into its fullness.

To minister is to accept an invitation or “calling” but it is also just as much about pursuing and building towards a God-given dream. It is about submitting one’s self to the path and the process that such callings and dreams entail. To serve as a pastor among any people or age group is about gathering others and bringing them along to share in that dream for the benefit of all.

How strange that this God-given calling and pursuit is by no means a safe one. It is often puzzling to consider that in following Christ and leading others in the same direction there exists an inherent spectrum of danger to be encountered along the way. There are dangers in vocational ministry that risk the ruin of men and women’s souls. There are also dangers that risk the ruin of men and women’s reputations. Finances and families run the risk of being decimated. Teams and trust that take years to gather and build can be wiped out in moments with little to no warning. As such vocational ministry

is at once a wonderful and volatile calling. It is a journey that begins packed with hopes and dreams, yet also promises those who follow such a call healthy doses of victories and defeats.

Vocational ministry, as carried out in the context of a local church, is from time to time shaken and devastated by the eruption of sudden and uncontrollable events. Shortly before such events occur, they might not even have seemed remotely possible. This is especially true when the senior pastor of a church is suddenly removed from the scene due to circumstances resulting from death, division, or disgrace. The loss of a senior leader is much different than the sudden loss of any other ministry leader. A senior pastor's abrupt departure sends its reverberations out in all directions simultaneously to all staff pastors, their families, ministry departments, and even local Christian ministries and fellowships. In this regard the sudden and abrupt nature of leadership transition and its potential for upheaval in a local church holds many parallels to the abrupt and devastating affects of an earthquake in a community.

Ministry in the local context is by its very nature ministry along a series of fault lines. The purpose of this resource is to bring clarity, insight and wisdom for staff pastors who minister along these fault lines in various congregational settings. This resource should be especially helpful to those serving in a context where the senior pastor has suddenly been removed from his or her position abruptly. Such unfortunate circumstances are by no means uncommon and usually leave staff pastors and their families reeling. In the wake of such events staff pastors are often times forced to resign. In certain situations staff pastors are allowed to remain in place. When this occurs these men and women remain to face a strange and complex new world of additional

responsibilities often without the aid of additional authority, consideration, or even compensation for their efforts

Pastors resign and leave abruptly for all sorts of reasons. Conversations with other ministers often reveals that the questions and dynamics staff pastors face are by no means anomalies and play out repeatedly across cultural, doctrinal, and denominational lines. At the present time there are few if any available resources that attempt to identify and tackle how such situations impact the lives of staff pastors and their families.

At the end of each chapter is a section titled: Connecting Point where the reader will have an opportunity to connect a present or past experience with the ideas that have been set forth in the reading. Readers are encouraged to use the Connecting Point exercises to reflect on and process personal experiences with abrupt transition. Readers can relate their experiences to the experiences of others as well as gain insights into what makes his or her personal situation unique among those described in the text. The charts and questionnaires produced in this document have been created personally and are the result of years of research in this particular field.

It is my hope and prayer that this will be the first of many resources to follow designed to help those who are called to serve in the local church continue to do so with joy and effectiveness until the return of Christ.

Jason Arant
Phoenix, AZ
April 26, 2010

CHAPTER ONE

Collisions

It is not uncommon in life to experience moments where a new reality collides with what was an established reality only seconds before. Like waves striking at a coastline, change rolls into our lives in persistent waves. Sometimes change is easily anticipated like the steady rhythm of the surf on a break wall every two or three seconds. At other times change catches and overtakes individuals unaware and results in disastrous consequences. Eileen Maybin writes about a devastating earthquake that rocked Maharashtra, India in 1993 and its effects upon one woman's life:

Chandrakala Dagadu was fast asleep in the small village of Matola when the mud and stone walls of her house came tumbling down around her, destroyed by the vibrations from the earthquake, which measured 6.4 on the Richter scale. Chandrakala, pinned down by the weight of the debris, would have suffocated like the 20,000 other people if she had not been pulled from the wreckage of her home by survivors of the disaster, which left 100,000 homeless... But Chandrakala's entire world collapsed on September 30. She lost her two sons, her parents-in-law, her sister-in-law, and her nephew.¹

The sudden and devastating effects of an earthquake upon the life of Chandrakala Dagadu is a case study that should resonate with anyone who has experienced an abrupt and painful moment of life changing transition.

A case study is a useful tool for communicating the nuances of a complex situation through its use as an illustration. The case study that follows is a true story

¹ Eileen Maybin, "Forty Seconds That Shook Their World: The 1993 Earthquake in India", *Focus on Gender*, Vol. 2. [1994]: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4030189> [accessed June 6, 2009].

involving characters that navigated an abrupt senior pastor transition. Although the names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved, the specifics of the story are all true to life. As you read the case study try to imagine trading places with the main character, Pastor Bettes, and reflect on the feelings you might have, the resources you might access, and the decisions you might make in a similar situation.

A Pastoral Case Study

Pastor Annie Bettes serves as the Associate/Music Pastor in a church located on the east coast of the United States. She is an honors graduate of Central Bible College where she received a degree in music and has since obtained a specialized license with the Assemblies of God. Pastor Bettes committed to her first pastoral assignment as an unmarried twenty-three year old with no family or pastoral network of relationships. Three months after taking this position, the senior pastor resigned, leaving her and two non-credentialed staff pastors to minister to the local congregation.

The senior pastor had served a total of five years at the church during which time his personal and family problems multiplied and took their toll on his ministry. Eventually these problems became so overwhelming that he chose to depart. The senior pastor's abrupt resignation set the stage for power struggles, staff dysfunction, and a host of complex interpersonal issues. Pastor Bettes found herself in a tug-of-war between certain families who believed they had earned the right to power. Pastor Parks, one of the other staff pastors, decided to begin preaching every Sunday. The District contacted him and advised him to put an interim pastor from the District in place for the purpose of forming a pulpit committee and to guide the people through transition. He chose to reject the advice about an interim and to personally choose members of the pulpit committee

that he believed would chose to install him as senior pastor. Pastor Parks did not help with the everyday office decisions or the pastoral care of the people. His main supporters were a wealthy couple who had their hand in almost every ministry at the church. During this period the church lost members and giving decreased. When people came to Pastor Parks with ideas or suggestions, he offered little support and routinely hurt them deeply. When Pastor Bettes privately questioned certain things that he did, he would become angry and threaten her job, claiming that he had the power to fire her. She later learned that he did not have that power at all.

During this time, Pastor Bettes made contact with her former youth pastor for counsel and direction. Her former pastor advised her to not stir the pot but to remain faithful to the people, to love them, and to take care of herself. Six months after the senior pastor resigned, Parks put in his resume for the senior pastor position. The District told him to step down from all his ministries so that the pulpit committee could come to a decision and choose to either present him to the congregation or not. This process was then drawn out another six months because he refused to step down. After the pulpit committee fasted and prayed, they decided not to present him to the congregation. Suddenly, a handful of Parks' supporters began writing letters to the District arguing that the pulpit committee had violated the church constitution. At this point the District was able to step back in. They held a special business meeting for the purpose of voting on Pastor Parks for the position or not. After a bitter meeting Pastor Parks was not chosen as senior pastor and his supporters, angry and vowing to continue the fight, made a scene after the vote. These same people are now gone from the church. They took with them all

the sound equipment that they had donated as well as other tools and supplies. Only Pastor Bettes and another staff pastor remained.

The experiences of Pastor Bettes and of Chandrakala Dagadu are similar in terms of abrupt and disruptive change although dissimilar in terms of the severity of the change each faced. Chandrakala was instantly confronted with the deaths of those closest to her as well as the loss of her home and her livelihood. Pastor Bettes was faced with the potential loss of her ministerial position, organizational disorientation, conflict among her peers and parishioners, as well as the reality that she lacked a local network and support system.

Neither woman anticipated encountering a moment of life-changing impact. Both women were affected adversely by circumstances beyond their control. Both women needed the assistance and support of their respective communities to carry on. While Chandrakala received this help immediately from those who had come quickly to her aid Pastor Bettes was forced to search out the assistance she required and was only able to obtain it from a former community hundreds of miles away.

Fault Lines

To lead a group of God's people in the context of a local congregation is a sacred honor and a privilege. There are overt and immediate blessings pastors commonly experience such as helping someone commit their lives to Christ for the very first time, joining a husband and wife in the covenant of marriage, baptizing a new believer, or dedicating an infant. There are church picnics and community outreach events and sharing special moments with people whose lives are touched and transformed by the

power of God. These are the moments we look forward to and hope to encounter repeatedly over the course of a lifetime as pastors.

At the same time there are also covert dangers always lurking behind the scenes and out of sight. There remains an enemy who “prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour”.² This enemy often works silently behind the scenes arranging and orchestrating devastating events that come to light only too late in the very moment they are being carried out. The preceding case study gives a startling glimpse into the ugly underbelly of the type of havoc wreaked by the enemy in a local church setting. These types of events occur as suddenly as any devastating force of nature might. They cause spiritual tremors and earthquakes in the lives of people who are quite often doing their very best to serve God. Understanding how an earthquake occurs is actually quite helpful when it comes to understanding abrupt transitions in a local church setting.

For thousands of years mankind has struggled to understand the causes behind earthquakes. In ancient times earthquakes were attributed to the anger of certain gods, or to mythical creatures living below the crust of the earth. In modern times science has been able to establish the root cause of earthquakes in terms of plate tectonics shifting miles below the surface of the earth’s crust. Andrew Robinson writes:

It all starts with a fault, a joint between two rock planes. The joint is usually not exactly vertical and one plane of the fault overhangs the other. If the overhanging plane moves downwards, the fault is normal; if it moves upwards, it is termed a reverse fault.... Friction between two planes of the fault controls its movement or lack of movement. If the friction is low enough, the fault may slip constantly and aseismically; this is known as fault creep. If it is of medium size, the fault may slip frequently, producing

² Author’s paraphrase of 1 Pt 5:8

many small earthquakes. But if the friction is high, the fault may slip occasionally, and there will be few, but large, earthquakes.”³

In the local church context plate tectonics might accurately communicate the physics of congregational relationships that are constantly in motion beneath the surface as well. When an argument arises in the youth department about picking a day for a trip to the local water park it amounts to a low friction issue that may hardly affect the ministries outside of it. This could be compared to the hardly detectable “aseismic fault creep” as described above.

When the senior pastor preaches twenty minutes past the usual release time and children’s and nursery workers are corralling a group of children beyond their planned activities the shockwaves are felt to a greater degree. This might produce many small quakes as people are mildly inconvenienced but are able to make adjustments accordingly.

When a senior pastor has committed adultery and is forced to resign with little notice or explanation the shockwaves reach even further and a seismic shift has undoubtedly occurred. Such instances are few and far between as with a high friction fault slip but will undoubtedly produce large quakes that are much more difficult with which to deal.

In a manner similar to the shifting plate tectonics described earlier the circumstances playing out below the surface in a local church transition are able to produce far-reaching effects upon the seemingly ordinary events taking place out in the open on the surface. Staff pastors who encounter these situations are wise to recognize

³ Andrew Robinson, *Earth Shock: Hurricanes, Volcanoes, Earthquakes, Tornadoes and Other Forces of Nature* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1993), 60.

that each congregation sits atop its own shifting plate of “relational” tectonics whose movements are not always as docile or predictable as we hope they will be. All pastors are wise to remember that there is an enemy whose hand is often involved in the planning, execution, and exploitation these matters.

The Rest of the Story

The case study concerning Pastor Bettes ended well. After enduring a few months of difficulty she contacted the authorities in her fellowship’s District. The leadership of the District responded and managed to bring the situation in Pastor Bettes’ church under control. The church once again has a functional official board and an interim pastor who preaches on Sunday mornings. Amazingly, in only three months time, the midweek boys’ ministry grew from two boys to just under forty boys; the midweek girls’ group which had only five girls grew to thirty; the youth group consisting of two to five students more than tripled and is still growing. Attendance on Sunday mornings has doubled and giving has increased. Pastor Bettes has been running staff meetings as well as board meetings. People are smiling again, the church is back on track and thriving while the search for a senior pastor continues. As the story of Pastor Bettes illustrates even the most complex and unexpected tragedies can turn out for the better if spiritual wisdom and direction is applied and a staff pastor caught in the crucible of unexpected transition remains faithful to the Lord.

Chapter 1 Connecting Point:

1. Take a moment to reflect on a time when you first recognized your call to serve in vocational pastoral ministry. What kind of difficulties (if any) did you expect to encounter?
2. This chapter describes “fault lines” as factors that shift deep below the surface which cause seismic affects on things far above at the surface. What kind of factors do you believe were shifting below the surface that played a role in the abrupt transition you have faced or are now facing?
3. Although an earthquake is an example of a natural force there are often supernatural forces at work in the trials a local church encounters. Reflect on the ways in which the enemy may have played a part in exacerbating the transitional situation in your context.⁴
4. In the case study Pastor Bettes encountered a very difficult situation and was able to overcome it effectively. Re-read the case study and list the decisions she made that you believe were critical to navigating her problem with success.
5. Are you establishing relationships with the men and women in your fellowship’s authority structure so that they will be better able to aid you in difficulties that might arise?

⁴ “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Eph 6:12 [NIV].

CHAPTER TWO

Fault Zones

The San Andreas Fault is a geographic boundary that bisects nearly the entire state of California from north to south. In some places the fault can be seen in the rock formations scattered along the coasts and highways. Dr. David Lynch describes the fault in this way:

The San Andreas Fault is a transfer fault. Imagine two slices of pizza on the table and sliding them past one another where they touch along a common straight edge. Bits of pepperoni from one side crumble across the boundary onto the anchovy side. The same thing happens in a fault, and the geology and landforms along the mighty rift are extremely complicated.¹

In the case of the San Andreas Fault it is not pepperoni sliding against anchovy but massive underground plates moving against one another. Every year these plates press against one another with increased force. From time to time the plates move in larger increments causing tremors and earthquakes as their movements affect the ground above.

The U.S. Geological Survey reports that there are thousands of small earthquakes in California each year. In 1906 an earthquake occurred along the San Andreas Fault that resulted in the infamous San Francisco fire. The San Francisco fire claimed the lives of nearly 700 people, caused millions of dollars in damage, and its tremors extended far

¹ David K. Lynch, "The San Andreas Fault," *Geology.com*, <http://geology.com/articles/san-andreas-fault.shtml> (accessed Jun 08, 2009).

north into the bordering state of Oregon.² Science and history demonstrate that fault zones are areas that hold the potential for catastrophic events to take place.

Research among staff pastors who have navigated abrupt senior pastor transition illustrates that there are common fault lines that create fault zones in every local church. These fault zones are areas where precarious dynamics exist. Each fault zone lies beneath the surface of a local church during healthy and prosperous seasons of ministry as well as adverse seasons. Time and again these areas demonstrate the potential to experience seismic slippage when an abrupt senior pastor transition occurs.

In times of congregational health tremors in these areas are anticipated and responded to in a positive manner by a steady leadership team. This is comparable to the manner in which people anticipate and respond to the slow and measured movements of tectonic plates that send out thousands of small tremors through the state of California every year. With competent leadership in place government, industry, and private citizens all know how to respond and adapt. Business is carried on as usual although the tremors are felt from time to time. When a senior pastor is suddenly removed from the helm of a local church, however, productive harmony is quickly lost as the organizational structure is fundamentally disturbed. Such organizational disturbances quickly throw the fault zones into counterproductive and conflicting motion. Larger, more disruptive organizational collisions then begin to take place.

While the San Andreas Fault has two large plates that slide against one another the local church has a much more complex situation. A local church does not have merely

² Sandra S. Schulz and Robert E. Wallace, "The San Andreas Fault," USGS, Eastern Publications Group Web Team, [June 24, 1997], <http://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/earthq3/safaultgip.html> (accessed June 8, 2009).

two fault zones slipping past one another to create organizational tremors. Instead it is actually situated on at least four intersecting fault zones. A staff pastor living in the midst of this type of situation might readily identify with the dynamic issues that are commonly found in the four fault zones listed below:

- Personal issues
- Congregational issues
- Protocol issues
- Role change issues

The personal issue fault zone represents the various questions that a staff pastor faces regarding his or her own personal interests, family, financial, and vocational concerns. It is common for these interests to be seriously shaken during a season of abrupt transition. Personal issues might be complicated by circumstances such as a pastor and his family serving a relatively short time in a new environment. As the initial case study demonstrated Pastor Bettes had served only a matter of weeks before her senior pastor left abruptly. This left her in a situation where she had not had time to form a network of contacts in her local community. All of this left her feeling personally vulnerable and served to amplify an already difficult situation at the personal level.

The protocol issue fault zone represents concerns about understanding and processing procedural changes staff pastors must come to grips with during a season of abrupt transition. This is an area where staff pastors are likely to face organizational disorientation, as the situation in a local church enters and remains fluid and uncertain while transition plays out. Research for this project has shown that while there are often pre-existing protocols in place for the transition of a senior pastor there are few if any established protocols for staff people who remain in these situations. This leaves young men and women unclear about the expectations of those in authority over them. Is it

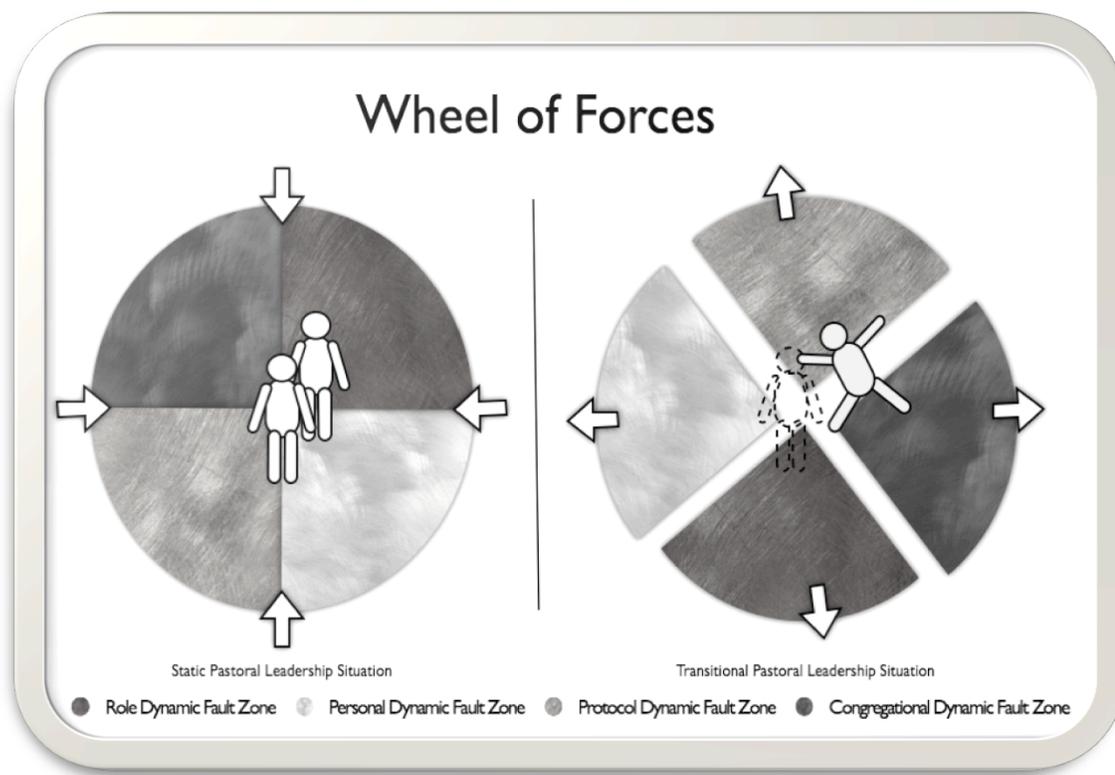
proper for a staff level leader to step up to the forefront in such occasions? Is the expectation for these leaders to maintain the status quo? Does proper professional etiquette require that he or she even step down from an associate pastor position on such occasions?

The congregational fault zone is an area where shifting congregational questions and expectations come to bear on a staff pastor once the senior pastor is removed from the scene. Concerns about understanding and serving reasonable expectations as well as concerns about identifying, avoiding, and correcting unhealthy expectations are likely to cause aftershocks in this area. Healthy expectations will be tied to helping the church continue to function effectively as it continues to carry out service to its community. Unhealthy expectations might be demonstrated in many ways that place the associate in a precarious situation. Church members might repeatedly approach a staff pastor and request inside information on the transition process for individuals or factions within the congregation. Congregants might push for the associate pastor to carry messages and suggestions to the transition team as a sort of errand runner or advocate. Such dynamics are unhealthy because they add to the existing disorientation and role confusion in the local church as well as tending to add to the volatile nature of a pastor's duties in an already tense situation.

The role change fault zone is an area that recognizes the roles of staff pastors are tied in a relative way to assisting and promoting the vision and ministry of the senior pastor. The sudden vacancy of a senior pastor position means a seismic shift will occur with regard to the organizational roles staff pastors will play in the new situation. Many pastors detail their experiences as retaining their pre-existing roles while also juggling

additional responsibilities. Such responsibilities may include an additional teaching and preaching load, hospital and home visitation, administrative and clerical duties just to name a few. It may mean also mean chairing meetings and facilitating discussions about the course of actions the church will take in the interim period. These role change expectations are not all unreasonable and yet may be placed upon a staff pastor who has little to no preparation to execute such duties. Such preparation depends a great deal on the mentoring investment that the outgoing pastor has made in the associate pastor preceding the sudden transition.

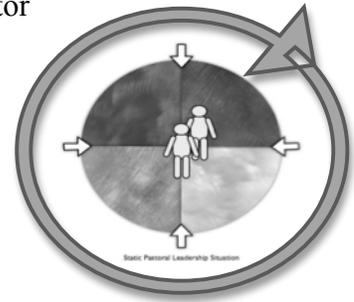
A model has been developed to assist in illustrating how each of these fault zones is set into motion and how a sudden senior pastor vacancy affects the various fault zones listed above. This model is called: “The Wheel of Forces” and has been reproduced in the diagram I created below.



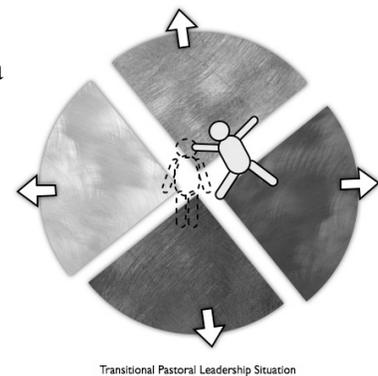
The Wheel of Forces is a model for identifying and illustrating commonly experienced dynamics staff pastors encounter during the disorientation of an abrupt senior pastor transition. Each of the four fault zones in the Wheel of Forces corresponds to a particular ministry dynamic inherent in an abrupt pastoral change situation.

The wheel on the left side of the chart illustrates a static and functional church leadership role situation with a senior pastor and associate pastor serving the local church as a balanced and functional team.

This type of team generates a sort of centripetal force or gravity around which the fault zones of personal, vocational, congregational, and standard ministry practices gel cohesively together. A functional leadership team lends balance and forward momentum to the organization. This team fosters wholeness, stability, growth, and momentum.



The wheel on the right side of the chart illustrates a newly dynamic leadership situation in the season that immediately follows a sudden pastoral transition. In this model the senior pastor role is vacant and equilibrium is lost. The centripetal force that once helped to hold the organization together from the center changes to centrifugal force as a leadership vacuum occurs in a key role. This new force is directed outward and sends tremors along the areas identified as fault zones. As seismic shifts occur the shockwaves disrupt and disorient the fabric of the entire organization. The results will profoundly affect



remaining pastoral staff members and their families. What was once working and pulling together is now shaken and threatens to be pulled completely apart as the delicate balance

and patterns of each fault zone are suddenly interrupted and thrown into disarray. In the “post-church quake” era of unexpected senior pastor transition new questions and patterns of personal and congregational life threaten what was once a secure and desirable status quo.

Common Pastoral Concerns

As illustrated in the Wheel of Forces model the seismic activity described in the fault zones of personal, congregational, protocol, and role change issues can cause all sorts of disturbances. Many pastors who are confronted with these situations share common concerns that have been identified through research questions. Learning from the experiences of others who have faced and overcome similar situations can bring peace of mind and help to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness in the midst of a trying situation. Many of the most commonly expressed thoughts and emotions among staff pastors who have experienced abrupt senior pastor transition are listed below according to its respective fault zone. With which concerns do you identify? Are there any about which you feel blessed not to worry? As you read each section place a number indicating your level of concern next to the expressions you feel most strongly about in your own ministerial context. Use a zero to indicate your lowest level of concern and the numbers 1-3 to indicate your moderate, elevated, and highest levels of concern for each category. Once you have completed each section total the numbers in the spaces provided to record your score. This will allow you to rank each area of concern as it weighs against the others in the table³ on page 22. Once you complete the survey and observe the scores

³ This chart was developed in collaboration with Kim Rimbey of KP Mathematics, LLC, Glendale, Arizona.

from each quadrant you will be able to see how to prioritize, respond, and pray specifically about your own situation.

Quadrant 1: Role Change Dynamics:

<i>Indicator:</i>	0	1	2	3
“What will happen when/if someone new comes in to Pastor the church?”				
“What is my role in the interim?”				
“How will this affect my leadership responsibilities?”				
“I am expected to handle weekly services with other staff members.”				
“The church made me do hospital visits, weddings, funerals etc... but the District advised the board not to let me preach Sundays so I would not get the wrong idea about my future there.”				
“Responsibility without authority.”				
“As a staff pastor you are expected to ‘be’ the pastor without being or getting the pay of the pastor.”				
“Pull together a financial system that is out of control.”				
“Office coordination.”				
“Counseling.”				
“Provider of stability.”				
“Childcare issues.”				
“I was voted in as senior pastor within a month of his leaving with no search committee.”				
“The board took out their frustrations with the senior pastor on the staff. - We became lackey boys.”				
“Filling in duties I was asked to perform and becoming senior pastor by default.”				
“Being spread too thin.”				
“I held the interim and youth pastor duties all at once.”				
“Moving forward without clear permission.”				
“None -they asked me to leave as well.”				

Total Points ___/60

Quadrant 2: Personal Dynamics:

Indicator:	0	1	2	3
“Am I the next person God will call to the Senior position?”				
“How will I differentiate the call from my own desire to ‘achieve’?”				
“Should this be viewed as an opportunity to leave or an opportunity to stay?”				
“Am I out of a job?”				
“Will the senior pastor take me with him -and if I go will it work out?”				
“Where am I going now?”				
“Will I fit into the new Pastor’s vision for the church?”				
“Who can I count on to answer my questions?”				
“Why did he leave that way and why didn’t he inform us as his staff?”				
Will they take my job next?” - <i>in response to a pattern of the board firing other staff members.</i>				
“I know God was walking me through it.”				
“Will I be looked down upon for supporting my pastor even though he resigned unexpectedly?”				
“Will I lose friendships over this?”				
“How will this affect my family?”				
“Will my family have to relocate?”				
“Am I ready for the senior pastor position?”				
“Why would he do this knowing he just brought me on 2 weeks ago?”				
“How can one abandon a church?”				
“What caused this to happen so unexpectedly?”				
“I just moved here, bought a home and had a child. Do they need me to be pastor?”				
“When am I done?”				
“Am I too young for the senior pastor position?”				
“Its fun to relax, preach, and love the people during transition.”				
“I am worried about the temptation to command too much authority. -I don’t know where the line is.”				

Total Points ___/72

Quadrant 3: Protocol Dynamics:

Indicator:	0	1	2	3
“How long will the transition process take?”				
“How will the board function in coordination with District leadership guidance?”				
“Will the current ministries of the church change during this process?”				
“Will I need to submit my resignation?”				
“Should I submit my resume for the senior pastor position?”				
“Who will be my covering during this transition?”				
“Who should be answering my questions?”				
“Why don’t they teach this in Bible College?”				
“Am I hireable by another local church?”				
“What do we do about Sunday preaching and midweek services?”				
“How do I answer questions regarding the pastor leaving?”				
“To whom and how should I be communicating?”				
“Will my presence put inappropriate pressure on the new pastor to keep me?”				

Total Points ___/39

Quadrant 4: Congregational Dynamics:

Indicator:	0	1	2	3
“How will the congregation respond as far as attendance and income?”				
“Will submitting my resignation add to the congregation’s trauma?”				
“Whose side in this matter is ascribing the truth? -The pastor or his opponents?”				
“How will I maintain peace between the two opposing sides?”				
“Is it possible to restore, heal, and attain peace between two opposing sides?”				
“Will the two sides ever repent and mesh together in unity?”				
“If I am called to another local church how will long-standing relationships be affected?”				
“Where do I stand with the board and other leaders?”				
“How will this affect the congregation’s morale?”				

“How long can these new workers continue to be counted upon?”					
“The board expected me to stay in my position and worked to find a leader I would serve under.”					
“The board expected me to pursue the position immediately if I felt called to it.”					
“The people wanted me to listen to all their suggestions about what we need to do.”					
“Expectation to step up with confidence in the future of the church.”					
“Many people wanted me to be a source of inside information.”					
“Direct approaches about filling the senior pastor’s role.”					
“People were shocked and confused about the pastoral selection process.”					
“Polarization of opposing sides and residual hurts.”					
“Unrealistic expectations”					
“The congregation fails to consider how the change affects the pastors - only themselves.”					
“Temptation to be all things to all people.”					
“The board and the congregation expected that things would run as usual and that I would pick up the slack.”					
“I was expected to be the spokesperson for certain people to the board.”					
“People inquired about the selection process –of which I was locked out.”					
“Ugly church politics.”					
“Lack of communication between board and staff.”					
“A temptation to talk too much about personal and intimate details.”					

Total Points ___/81

At this point record the scores from each section in the table on page 23. Because each section expresses a different number of issues it is helpful to divide the raw score by the number total possible in each section. The result will illustrate your level of identification with the expressions in each category in terms of a percentage and will provide a clearer sense of the level of concern related to each fault zone. Finally, compare the areas of greatest concern with one another.

Categories	Raw Score:	Divide by:	Final Score:
Role Change Dynamics		60	
Personal Change Dynamics		72	
Protocol Change Dynamics		39	
Congregational Change Dynamics		81	

A spiritually vibrant and healthy organization may carry on with merely the potential for disruption in one or more of these quadrants. Each local church has its own unique personality, level of spiritual maturity, and set of circumstances. As such each church will find its way through this type of transition in a unique manner. A church may even rally and navigate the transitional process without encountering many of the problems that have dogged other churches in similar situations.

It is important for spiritual leaders to recognize that these fault zones exist through no fault of their own. The key issue for staff pastors experiencing an abrupt transition is how he or she will choose to understand and react to the forces that have been set in motion.

The next chapter will focus on understanding change from an organizational perspective for the purposes of increasing the odds of navigating an abrupt transition successfully.

Chapter 2 Connecting Point:

1. Take a moment to reflect on your scores in the survey you completed in this chapter. In which area of concern did you score the highest?
2. Regardless of what the scores show which fault zone is the area of most pressing concern for you at this point in time?
3. If you are married consider asking your spouse to complete the fault zone questionnaire. Which are is the most pressing concern as far as your spouse is concerned?
4. Chapter two communicates that the fault zones in a local church experience smaller more manageable tremors even in the best seasons of ministry preceding an abrupt transition. What are some positive ways the leadership team dealt with past issues that might be useful to inform the present situation?

Find a mentor or pastor outside of your congregational context whose wisdom and experience you respect. Process the issues from the survey that represent your greatest concerns in this period. What suggestions and insights can you gather?

CHAPTER THREE

A Certain Kind of Leader

The morning of May 12th 2008 began like every other for a classroom full of second graders in Yingxiu, China but the day would end unlike any other. The town of Yingxiu, along with many others, were devastated by a 7.9 magnitude earthquake. The Chinese government reported that thousands of children were orphaned by the natural disaster. In the midst of this unspeakable tragedy nine-year-old Lin Hao inspired his town and his nation through his heroic actions. Lin Hao not only survived the collapse of his school by managing to free himself from piles of rubble, he also managed to pull two other students out from the rubble to safety as well. City News, a local news affiliate in Toronto, Ontario carried Lin Hao's description of the rescue: "The corridor collapsed as I was walking. Two of my classmates were trapped beside me. I tried as hard as I could to climb out, and after I had climbed out I pulled a classmate out," he explained.¹ The report continues to describe how Lin Hao managed to walk for the following seven hours in order to find help from the authorities. The courage, determination, and ability demonstrated by Lin Hao attracted the attention of people everywhere and resulted in the Chinese Government inviting Lin to lead the opening procession for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. It goes without saying that Lin Hao demonstrated some intrinsic leadership abilities that allowed him to function effectively in the midst of an

¹ CityNews.ca Staff, "China Hails 9-yr.-Old Earthquake Hero", [May 20, 2008], http://www.citynews.ca/news/news_22908.aspx (accessed June 12, 2009).

overwhelming calamity. Lin Hao's actions raise the question of how many adults might demonstrate the same courage and presence of mind if faced with a similar situation. It takes a special kind of person to meet and overcome an especially hazardous situation.

The Right Stuff

As the story of Lin Hao demonstrates there are adverse situations that individuals encounter from time to time who demand exceptional leadership characteristics. Certain leaders are chosen to lead for certain moments in the flow of human history. In the Scriptures special leaders are prepared for special circumstances and occasions. The Apostle Paul specifically called Titus to bring order to the church in Crete while it floundered in chaos. In the Old Testament the story of Esther depicts a young woman who stepped forward to place herself precariously between her king and a genocidal madman.

While almost anyone might be able to lead in the best of times with abundant good will and plentiful resources, occasions of difficulty and uncertainty call for additional qualities of character to be present within the heart of the leader who must face them. Futurist Leonard Sweet likens the changes facing the church in the new millennium to the chaos of a tidal wave when a tsunami has struck.

There are three responses to a tidal wave. Each one has its defenders and manifestations in the church... **1. Denial**... the refusal to see the world from any other perspective than your limited one or the one in which you feel comfortable. **2. Out of Here**... this is the hunker-in the bunker response, the barrier building, trench-digging, wall-bricking activity that comes from dreaming of the past while demeaning the future. **3. Hoist the Sails**... the third response to a tidal wave is the belief that it is the church's task to catch God's wave and make some good waves ourselves in the wake of God's wave.²

² Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 18-21.

Staff pastors that face the challenges of leadership through a tidal wave of transition must already possess or work to acquire special leadership characteristics that enable them to choose the third response. Denial offers no remedy neither does it offer hope for the future of the church. An “out of here” mentality reflects a thought process and heart that is more mercenary than pastoral. The pastor who cares for the Lord’s sheep must desire to “hoist the sails”.

Leaders of Character

In military training men and women are intentionally shaped for the kind of leadership that may cost themselves and those around them their lives. There is a special focus on developing leadership qualities that will remain constant under duress. Inner qualities that arise under the threat of danger to a leader, his or her charge, and organization come to the forefront in the heat of battle when situations are unpredictable and in constant flux. Retired Col. Larry Donnithorne writes of the leadership traits instilled in cadets at the Army’s West Point Academy. The United States Army expects its officers to carry these leadership traits with them into the difficult situations they train to face on the battlefield. Donnithorne insisted,

Leader of character is the phrase the Academy uses to describe the kind of leader it wants its cadets to become. A leader of character has all the qualities we normally associate with leaders –ambition, confidence, courage, intelligence, eloquence, responsibility, creativity, compassion and one thing more which we unfortunately overlook all too frequently among civilian leaders: A leader of character is absolutely trustworthy, even in times of great stress, and can be depended upon to put the needs of others –the organization, the community, above personal considerations –not now or then or when the spirit moves him, or when it will look good on his resume –but in every instance.³

³ Larry Donnithorne, *The West Point Way of Leadership* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1993), 4.

Leaders of character are essentially leaders with grit. The character formation of pastoral leaders cannot afford to overlook this vital component. It is this element of trustworthiness in times of distress that the Apostle Paul must have noted in Titus. Conversely it was the lack of this same trustworthiness in John Mark that brought about Paul's sharp departure from Barnabas and in turn marked the dissolution of their joint missionary journey. Donnithorne describes West Point Academy's vision of leadership in terms that uniquely parallel the needs of a church experiencing abrupt senior pastoral transition. The leaders who remain must be able and willing to put the needs of others, the organization, and the community before personal considerations. "Leaders of character serve the public good, and go not only beyond their personal horizons, but even past the horizons of their colleagues, to serve everyone whose interests are affected."⁴ In this way leaders of character who encounter sudden transition can become a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem.

Leaders Lacking Character

When a leader scores high in the first half of Donnithorne's list of qualities such as: ambition, courage, confidence, creativity, and intelligence, and yet lacks the other less charismatic but more essential character ingredients of fidelity and grit, the opportunity that God may be presenting in a moment of sudden transition may be compromised, betrayed, and lost. There is a long, unfortunate history of pastors and military leaders whose story ends in a manner such as this while serving their respective kingdoms. The wider research of literature turns up one such powerful example in the life of Major General Benedict Arnold.

⁴ Donnithorne, *The Westpoint Way of Leadership*, 59.

History records that Benedict Arnold was among the most heroic leaders of the American Revolution. If he had possessed a greater sense of inner character Arnold would be a leader remembered for daring bravery and intelligence. Henretta noted,

No general was more imaginative than Arnold, no field officer more daring, no soldier more courageous. Yet Arnold has gone down in history not as a hero but as a villain, a military traitor who, as commander of the American fort at West Point, New York, in 1780, schemed to hand it over to the British.⁵

Few people are aware that as a military leader Benedict Arnold led an invasion of Canada, won several battles, was wounded in conflict, and captured the British fort of Ticonderoga, which paved the way for a colonial victory in the crucial battle for Boston. In spite of his many victories and accomplishments Arnold eventually placed his personal loyalties and considerations above those of the community, organization, and nation he had committed himself to serve. Author Barry Wilson points out that Benedict Arnold became disillusioned with the plight of the colonies and began to question the motives of the revolutionary leaders. Arnold became suspicious of the American alliance with France and was further motivated by a need for money. "He was broke or close to it and the prospect of recouping his losses in inflation devalued continental currency were dim. He needed money for his growing family and to rebuild his business after the war."⁶ It is perhaps more providential than ironic that the vision for "leader of character" is espoused (Daniel C. Ganster 1988) and taught at Westpoint, the very place Major General Benedict Arnold's lack of inner character betrayed himself and his cause.

Arnold's inner character was tested by disillusionment, frustration, and financial

⁵ James Henretta, "The Enigma of Benedict Arnold," *Early America.com*, [Fall 1997], <http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/fall97/arnold.html> (accessed Feb 12, 2008).

⁶ Barry Wilson, *Benedict Arnold: A Traitor in Our Midst* (Quebec City: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), 155.

desperation. These tests are not at all uncommon in the life of pastoral leadership in times of stability and may only be heightened during the instability an abrupt transition produces. For a staff pastor to remain to weather transition in the local congregation once a senior pastor suddenly departs demands the same selfless grit and sense of duty to mission that is intentionally fostered in the formation of West Point cadets.

Field Testing

Ultimately every leader must face the reality of field-testing to know if character formation has truly taken place. Pastoral leaders, business leaders, leaders in government, and Cadets from West Point must come up against the unexpected hardships life hands to each and every individual. Real life brings situations that would otherwise seem impossible or unlikely. Such situations pull away at empty facades and reveal the underlying substance of a leader's core. As a staff pastor who is experiencing or has experienced an abrupt lead pastor transition this experience will test the meddle of what has already been formed inwardly as well as provide an opportunity for the continued development of your character as a leader. James writes in his New Testament epistle: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."⁷ Every pastor encounters the choice of adopting his or her own perspective in times of difficulty. Adversity can be encountered and counted on as a matter of the inherent unfairness of life. As such trying experiences can be hated, resisted, and discarded or they can be embraced and leaned into as gifts from above that will be redeemed through their work in

⁷ Jas 1:2-4 [NIV].

our maturation and refinement. A work that God is doing within an individual, however painful, will not be complete unless that individual endures that same work to its point of completion. As such it is important for a pastor who is caught in the disorientation of an abrupt transition to be able to discern the beginning and end points of his or her season of testing.

Due to the intense disorientation experienced in seasons of abrupt transition it is helpful to find a metric that challenges leaders to exhibit the highest degree of character for the duration of their time as the spiritual leaders at the scene of a ministerial disaster. This is the point where Donnithorne's West Point leadership character elements can play a helpful role to a pastor evaluating his or her own heart to obtain spiritual direction.

What follows is a listing and of the elements of character that West Point engenders as listed by Donnithorne in his book. Each element will be examined in the paragraphs that follow in light of its relevancy and practical application to an abrupt transition scenario. A staff pastor who is navigating a transitional season may find these character traits useful as an objective and premium standard for assessing his or her words, actions, and attitudes.

Ambition: The quality of ambition can be a powerful and positive force for creating and harnessing motivation in a leader. Ambition helps an individual to dream dreams and to choose goals. Ambition also works to assist that individual to aspire towards the realization those goals. William Shakespeare wrote: "The very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream."⁸ Shakespeare seemed to be communicating that a

⁸ William Shakespeare *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, World Library Inc, http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=35219 [accessed July 7, 2009].

dream is the fuel of the ambitious individual that causes him or her to move in forward motion towards transforming that dream into reality.

At the same time it cannot be said that the presence of ambition alone is a quality of character in leadership. A leader must be especially cautious with regard to recognizing the dangers of unrestrained ambition. As such character in leadership necessitates both the inward ability to harness and utilize ambition as well as be the ability to restrain or even release ambitious desires for the sake of God's Kingdom as well as for the sake of other people.

There are moments in seasons of transition where the spiritual leader who remains on scene may be tempted by the ability to take advantage of the opportunity to implement a personal agenda. A leader who is able to keep his or her ambitions in check and to forgo such opportunities will demonstrate the ability to keep in step with God's agenda.

Confidence: A leader certainly needs some level of self-assurance to be effective in the role of influencing others. The self-assurance of a spiritual leader should be rooted in the belief that God's hand and calling lies upon his or her life. A confident individual will be able to stand-alone and move forward in times of adversity when others may shrink into the background and disappear from sight. The Scriptures recount Saul as hiding from Samuel rather than stepping up to be anointed as King: *So they inquired further of the LORD, "Has the man come here yet?" And the LORD said, "Yes, he has hidden himself among the baggage. They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others."*⁹ Saul's example of hiding out among the baggage is an example of a self-centered lack of confidence. Other biblical figures such

⁹ 1 Sm 10:22-23 [NIV].

as Samson show a self-centered lack of overconfidence. To err on the side of self in either direction will always miss the mark.

The confidence of a spiritual leader must not be derived from his or her opinion of self. Likewise the confidence of a spiritual leader must not be driven solely by situation or circumstance. The Psalmist writes: “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”¹⁰ Instead the confidence of a spiritual leader must be rooted in an authentic relationship with Christ that is aligned with a proper understanding of the situation at hand. A confident spiritual leader will wait on the Lord and depend on God’s presence and power for the outcomes that follow.

Courage: A leader who is courageous is willing to face and endure risks for a cause that he or she believes in. The Scriptures are replete with leaders who demonstrate this quality. In times of duress, such as an abrupt lead pastor transition, a staff pastor might be brought to the trigger point of a biological response known as “fight or flight”. The research team of Mays and Ganser has written much about this impulse in the workplace:

The notion that individuals can exhibit either aggressive behaviours or withdrawal behaviours is recognized in both physiological and psychological literature. In the physiological domain Canon (1914) described the ‘fight or flight’ phenomenon commonly observed when animals are subjected to physical threat. A similar reaction has been described when humans are subjected to psychological threat or stress in the form of frustration.¹¹

When facing a tense and anxious decision a leader may chose to either pack up and move on or dig in and commit to ride out an uncertain situation.

¹⁰ Psalm 27:14 [NIV].

¹¹ Daniel C. Ganster and Bronston T. Mayes, “Exit and Voice: A Test of Hypotheses Based on Fight/Flight Responses to Job Stress ,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 9, no. 3 (July 1988): 199-216.

In a situation of abrupt transition the complex variables that are put into play all at once have the potential to create a threatening environment. The dynamics of personal, congregational, protocol, and role change will shift into a suddenly unstable situation. The natural feelings of fight or flight may be triggered through fear of uncertainty about what the future holds. Mays and Ganster, whose studies were based on employee responses in frustrating and unstable career situations, assert that while some employees withdraw and leave others see the opportunity to remain and change the organization.¹² The second option is one that might require a great degree of courage. As C. S. Lewis once observed: “Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”¹³ Choosing to remain and endure despite the uncertainty of a transitional situation is a courageous act that should be the result of obtaining solid spiritual direction. A courageous leader will choose fight over flight based on obedience to the Lord rather than fear of the situation at hand.

Intelligence: A leader who is committed to making the best decisions possible must be compelled to accrue wisdom and intelligence from a variety of sources. While every human being possesses some inherent level of intelligence a leader needs to commit him or herself to a lifestyle of serious reflection and a commitment to rigorously process information. This includes cultivating a willingness to gather wisdom and experience from sources beyond one’s own personal experience. Engaging in a deliberate and thoughtful process is part and parcel of loving the Lord with all our hearts, mind, soul,

¹² Ibid., 200.

¹³ Clives Staples Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1942), 138.

and strength.¹⁴ It also means loving our neighbor as ourselves as our decisions impact those we serve as spiritual leaders.

Solomon is said to have been the wisest man who ever lived. Solomon catalogued his wisdom and experience to pass on to those who would follow through the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. In essence Solomon understood the need to let others stand on his shoulders and benefit from what God had given him. In like manner a wise leader will be willing to stand on the shoulders of those who are willing to share their experiences and to include their data in the process of problem solving.

Leaders facing the rigors of an abrupt transition stand to benefit from the intelligence of people who are both inside and outside of the organizational issues they may be facing. While insiders have valuable knowledge about the context in which an organizational problem occurs there is also the potential for insiders to present solutions that are colored by church politics and personal agendas. This is no different than the situation faced by the for-profit corporate world. Paul C. Nutt writes about this affect in the workplace:

Staffers and line managers are continually on the lookout for ways to put their pet ideas and visions to use. Because problems, decisions, and strategic decision opportunities flow through organizations and often meet due to accidents of timing proponents position themselves to argue for their pet ideas and visions.¹⁵

Unfortunately the personal agendas of the corporate world are more often than not the same problems facing leaders of the local church. As such intelligent leadership must

¹⁴ Luke 10:27 [NIV].

¹⁵ Paul C. Nutt, "The Identification of Solution Ideas During Organizational Decision Making," *Management Science*, 39, no. 9 (Sept 1993): 1071-1085.

balance input from inside and outside of a situation to arrive at the best judgments possible. Every spiritual leader must seek the best counsel and must engage a thoughtful and deliberate decision-making process to perform his or her duty for the Kingdom of God to the best of his or her ability.

Eloquence: A leader with character must possess strong communication skills and be able to use those skills to provide leadership and guidance in response to the Spirit of God. In the power vacuum that follows an abrupt transition there will doubtless be competing ideas and interpretations regarding the cause and effects of a sudden pastoral vacancy. These ideas and interpretations will not only compete for dominance of interpreting what has happened but will also compete for a dominant voice as to what the next steps in the church's future might be. The most influential voices will effectively chart the course for the immediate future of the church. A leader of character will use eloquence for the sake of the fellowship rather than the pursuit of his or her personal agenda and best interests.

The eloquence of a leader's voice is also important for being able to express the intentions of his or her own heart. A whirlpool of emotion and instability exists when a church is thrust into sudden transition. Oftentimes a host of various emotions and experiences may effectually be projected onto a remaining pastor and other staff members. Such projections concerning a pastor's words, actions, character, motivations, ambitions, and intentions might range from being sympathetic and charitable to thoroughly hostile towards the leader. When a pastor is silent during tumultuous seasons or fails to communicate his or her own point of view individuals who are eloquent have the opportunity to communicate their own interpretation of the pastor's perspective.

To be a spiritual leader on scene is to be ordained with spiritual authority for the purposes of guiding the sheep entrusted to one's care. To exercise no voice is to exercise no guidance. This paves the way for those who have not been given spiritual authority, and as such have no accountability or responsibility, to make whatever assumptions and assertions they may desire. Jesus highlighted the importance of sheep hearing the voice of the shepherd and following that voice.¹⁶ The office of any type of pastor, due to its inherent shepherding nature, is one that demands the eloquence of the office holder for the sake of those who are being led. This is especially true in seasons that follow an abrupt transition.

Responsibility: Responsible leaders take ownership for their personal actions as well as for the situations and circumstances facing the group or organization they are charged with responsibility for. To lead in a responsible manner means willingly being accountable for personal words, actions, and attitudes in any given situation. President Harry Truman was famous for a small plaque on his desk which read: "The buck stops here!" In this way Truman fostered the image of a man willing to accept responsibility for the many diverse demands of high office.

In a fluid transitional situation the responsibilities that a pastor holds have the potential of expansion and contraction. The model of duties and rhythm of life before the senior pastor suddenly departs is quickly shattered and a new model quickly evolves. Previous initiatives and authorities may suddenly be removed from the table. Additional duties and initiatives may appear to replace them.

¹⁶ John 7:27 [NIV].

In many cases new tasks and duties may be heaped upon a staff pastor by those given transitional authority in the church. In many cases new responsibilities may not include additional authority but less. Unfortunately this is a common experience for many pastors who are confronted with this situation and it flies in the face of sound principles of organizational management. Author John Glennon wrote: "The need for coupling responsibility with authority is not only sound practice in business, but in all well-structured, well-run organizations as well."¹⁷ For pastors to function with heavy responsibility but unclear authority is not an optimal situation and only adds to the instability of abrupt organizational change. Unfortunately this situation is more often than not part and parcel of leading through a transitory season where a damage control mentality becomes the norm while awaiting the installment of a new senior pastor.

In the final analysis a responsible leader will recognize that a new set of circumstances in no way dismisses him or her from fulfilling a duty to Christ and the people he or she is called to lead. The exception to this responsibility is the release of God from the pastoral role through a change of vocation or pastoral calling.

Creativity: For a leader to be creative does not necessarily mean he or she will create sculptures, paintings, or write screenplays. A creative leader should be able to develop new ideas when needed and be able to invent and improvise for the sake of bringing order to a chaotic situation when it occurs. Creativity and innovation work hand in hand and both are especially important when it comes to working through the crisis situation of an unplanned senior pastor transition. When the regular organizational routines and

¹⁷ John T. Glennon, "MIS Systems: The Role of Authority and Responsibility," *MIS Quarterly*, (Management Information Systems Research Center, University of Minnesota) 2, no. 2 [June 1978]: 1-6.

strategies are interrupted former patterns and rhythms of life and ministry are suspended. A new and fluid situation emerges which will last for an unspecified period of time in the life of a local church. During this time ministry still needs to take place and leadership still needs to be enacted in manner that works with the transition occurring. Leadership at this level must be executed without inhibiting or damaging the transition process. To provide solid leadership in the midst of this context is a tricky matter that necessitates an innovative spirit in the leadership of the local church and a process that facilitates this spirit. According to Cameron M. Ford in his research on creativity and innovation:

Creative acts can influence processes and outcomes that affect multiple levels of analysis and can solve dilemmas that arise throughout the innovation process. One could even argue that creative acts are the definitive episodes that distinguish successful innovations from less noteworthy efforts.¹⁸

Ford's observation might be summed up succinctly in saying that a moment of creativity will give birth to a moment of innovation. Ford's idea relates greatly to the power of creativity and innovation on the part of a staff pastor who must provide some level of spiritual leadership during transitional crisis in the local church setting. A leader of character should be in pursuit of creative moments that will give birth to innovations. Running plays from the old playbook becomes an ineffective tactic when the make up of the team changes at the top position.

The West Point leader of character is expected to encounter the need for creativity on the battlefield in times of war. When an officer is lost in the heat of battle a transition in leadership necessarily takes place and innovation becomes a matter of necessity. This is no less true and should be no less expected in the local church where the situational

¹⁸ Cameron M. Ford, "A Theory of Individual Creative Action in Multiple Social Domains," *The Academy of Management Review*, [Oct 1996]: 1112-1142.

landscape and chain of command can also change suddenly and dramatically. Creativity and innovation in the local church cannot be limited to Vacation Bible School and church growth initiatives. Creativity and innovation must be especially fostered in moments of organizational disorientation and upheaval to bring about the most positive results for the Kingdom of God.

Compassion: Compassion, perhaps more than any other leadership quality, is a powerful touchstone to the leadership style of Jesus Christ. Repeatedly in the pages of the gospels Jesus is noted for his compassion upon people both as individuals and also as he looks upon them corporately in crowds. This same leadership characteristic is a mark of pastoral leadership. Philip Zielinski of Concordia Seminary writes:

Twice the Gospels describe Jesus as deeply moved because those who were coming out to Him were “as sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36 and Mark 6:34). Both times, what follows teaches us about the ministry of the Gospel and every Christian’s need for a servant of Christ, a pastor.¹⁹

For a leader to exhibit compassion means identifying with people and valuing people’s needs over and above organizational processes and outcomes. According to Zielinski, and the history of Christianity, all people are in need of pastoral leadership.

In the midst of tragedy and difficulty in the local church this need is intensified rather than diminished. The quality of compassion for those a pastor is called to lead should be a strong motivating force that causes a staff pastor to hold steady in his or her role during a demanding season of transition. A compassionate leader should be able to envision the

¹⁹ Rev. Philip Zielinski, "Pilgrimage: As Sheep Without A Shepherd... Every Christian’s Need For A Pastor," *Concordia Theological Seminary*, <http://www.ctsfw.edu/online/pilgrim/11-1/zielinski.php> [accessed July 07, 2009].

pain and trouble within the heart of the congregation and desire to shepherd his or her people through such times. Author Brian Carr writes:

Compassion considers other people's values, beliefs, needs, and wants in terms of which their suffering can be understood and hence be shared. Compassion essentially takes us out of ourselves into the hearts and minds of other people, and functions thereby as an important social virtue.²⁰

A leader of character has compassion on those he or she leads as they walk together through all sorts of situations and circumstance. By walking through this season with your people you will be able to share the experience like no one else is able. As Zielinski also writes: "Every Christian needs a shepherd. Every soul needs a pastor. There is a flock who needs you."²¹ The quality of compassion in a pastoral leader's heart will be tested against the dynamics of role change, congregational expectations, church protocol, and personal issues in any and every transitional situation.

Trustworthiness: The quality of trustworthiness is a matter of remaining faithful and reliable even when others are not. A trustworthy leader is able to prove him or her self to those who follow time and again. The quality of trustworthiness lends credibility to a leader while a gap in this area diminishes the leader's ability to effectively lead. Naturally this quality is tested and refined through adversity more so than through times of comfort and ease. The trustworthiness of a pastoral leader in the salad days of ministry is that of a different quality than trustworthiness exhibited in the furnace of sudden transition.

²⁰ Brian Carr, "Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues," *Philosophy*, [July 1999]: 411-429.

²¹ Rev. Philip Zielinski, "Pilgrimage: As Sheep Without A Shepherd... The Every-Christian Need For A Pastor," *Concordia Theological Seminary*, 2007, <http://www.ctsfw.edu/online/pilgrim/11-1/zielinski.php> (accessed 07 07, 2009).

Author Nannerl Keohane emphasizes the importance of trustworthy character in an article on leadership by writing:

In the long run it is important to successful leadership that people can count on the leader to do what she says and play fair. The element of trust must always be present if the leader is to have long-term success. If you lack this trait of integrity others will be disinclined to follow you and will always be suspicious of the real motivations behind your strategies. They may be intimidated, misled, or deceived but the energies that allow leaders and followers to accomplish great things together can never be galvanized without trust.²²

The level of trust in pastoral leadership that a congregation exhibits in the present and the future may have a lot to do with the example that is set during a season of sudden transition. If the senior pastor's departure was due to disgrace or division in the local church the people may already feel jaded about pastoral leadership and feel deeply wounded and grieved. In this same instance a staff pastor who also exhibits a lack of trustworthiness reinforces further these negative perceptions.

This only serves to make it more difficult for anyone who might come and serve in such a local pastorate to move the congregation forward at a future point in time. The trust that is traded and lost in the present can be made that much harder to build and to galvanize later on down the road. In the mean time the mission of the local church as an agent of Christ in its community can be severely crippled. Opportunities for people to come to Christ and be transformed by the power of the gospel of Christ will be diminished and even lost altogether if the people are unable or unwilling to place their trust in their pastoral leadership.

Beyond the damage an untrustworthy pastoral leader creates within the local church body there is also damage to the inner-life of an untrustworthy pastor that must be

²² Nannerl O. Keohane, "On Leadership," *Perspective on Politics* (American Political Science Association) 3, no. 4 (Dec 2006): 705-722.

considered. The character tests pastors fail are by no means left behind when they change location or vocational assignment. Character is portable and carried within from one assignment to the next. Trustworthiness cannot be manufactured in a moment's time but must be formed over time and testing in our lives. If not such shortcomings remain to be revealed when the next moment of leadership testing arises. Nannerl writes further:

A leader should not only appear to have the good qualities I have mentioned here, but actually strive to possess them. It is true that people in general judge by their eyes rather than by their hands because everyone is in a position to watch, but few are in a position to come close to a leader. Everyone see what you appear to be; few experience first hand what you really are. However, if a leader only appears to have these qualities, then as fortunes change the deception will almost surely fail and the leader's true colors be revealed.²³

As such staff pastors who lead through the fiery furnace of sudden transition are graced with an opportunity for testing and refinement. A season of leadership through testing can assure a leader of what has really been formed within and even to place what has yet to be formed within reach.

These are the elements of leadership character, as embraced by West Point Academy, listed by Col. Donnithorne, and expounded upon in terms of the local pastorate in this chapter. These elements provide a great starting point for assessing the inner life of a pastor navigating a difficult season of ministry. To learn about these qualities in an academic setting is beneficial. To be able to have these qualities of character formed and field-tested within one's life and ministry experience holds the potential to be transformational.

²³ Ibid., 712.

Chapter 3 Connecting Point:

1. Ambition: Are there opportunities you are tempted to take advantage of in this season of transition that would allow you to further your own dreams and desires? Have these opportunities been granted by those in spiritual authority over you (or) are they opportunities you are seeing and creating for yourself?

2. Confidence: As a spiritual leader what is your level of confidence and in whom/what is that confidence rooted in? Are there areas where your self-confidence is greater or maybe less than it should be? Is your self-confidence centered on God's hand upon your life (or) the circumstances that surround you?

3. Courage: What thoughts and emotions are driving your decision whether to remain or move on from your pastoral situation? Are you facing and confronting your fears or are they driving your decision process? If you have chosen to remain is this a decision based on courageous obedience?

4. Intelligence: As a spiritual leader what are the sources from which you gather wisdom? What people both inside and outside of your organization are you regularly accessing for wisdom? Do you have a process in place for reflecting on the information you gather and arriving at a conclusion or decision?

5. Eloquence: How effective have you been to this point with communicating your heart to the people you lead? Are there voices of influence competing for dominance among the leadership? Are you carrying out your responsibility to affirm and challenge such voices based on the your perception and interpretation of transitional events? Is your voice, as a spiritual leader, counted among those who are shaping the way forward from this point?

6. Responsibility: Are you taking ownership of you words, actions, and attitudes during this season of transition? What new demands have been added to your role prior to the transition? What demands have been removed as a result of the transition? Are there unresolved matters concerning the boundaries of your authority during this season about which you are seeking clarification? Who might you approach for such clarification?

7. Creativity: Have you been overly committed to running all the same ministerial plays and initiatives during this transition period that you ran before the transition occurred? Are you taking time to envision creative new ideas and strategies that might benefit the church as it moves through the transition process? What processes and ministries might need to be placed on hold until the transition is complete? What new process and ministries might need to be initiated?

8. Compassion: What is the level of compassion for the people you pastor in your heart? Do you envision your people as sheep without a shepherd? What kind of shepherd will you be for them in this season? Is your sense of compassion for the

people in your congregation heightened or diminished by the transitional situation at hand?

9. Trustworthiness: Have the circumstances surrounding the senior pastor's departure given a legitimate cause for your congregation to question their trust in pastoral leadership? As a pastor are you building and restoring trust through your words and actions or are you contributing to the problem in some way? What practical measures can you think of to bring healing to the congregation and set the next pastor up to lead the people forward?

CHAPTER FOUR

Creating A Pastoral Perspective For Transition

When a major earthquake takes place it profoundly affects the communities that experience its tremors and aftershocks. This impact is largely illustrated by the condition in which homes, buildings, and other man made structures are left once the tremors have subsided. From ancient times to the present day artisans and architects have worked to devise ways to protect such structures by learning about the forces at work in an earthquake and designing effective countermeasures in advance. In many modern day museums stand ancient statues from Greece missing heads and appendages due to the handiwork of earthquakes over the past several centuries. Some ancient artists began to sculpt extra thick support pieces on the back of their statue's necks and shoulders in the hopes of preserving the heads and arms of their masterpieces. The quest to anticipate destructive forces and preserve the efforts of artisans and architects continues.

In modern building design architects use coefficient formulas and state of the art understanding of seismic activity to design buildings that will withstand the tremendous forces of earthquake activity. The factors that must be planned for in the event of an earthquake are commonly known to architects. Architect Christopher Arnold lists several such factors:

The coefficients that make up the seismic factor take into consideration:

- a. The geographic location, taking into account the history or frequency and size of former earthquakes
- b. The local ground condition or site of the building

- c. The use of the building or type of occupancy
- d. The type of structure used to resist the earthquake
- e. The natural period of vibration of the building¹

When the architect is able to understand and take these various factors into account the proper approach and precautions for the building can be enacted and a successful project may commence.

This goal of this chapter is to communicate what is substantively known about transitional factors and channel that knowledge towards creating an effective perspective and approach for steering through the tremors of transition. If a structural engineer can design a building with the expectation that an earthquake might strike at any time; a pastor should be able to construct a thought process that takes into account that an unanticipated transition might also occur at any moment.

The next several pages will focus on processing the ways a pastor may understand, manage, strategize, and lead, an emotional congregation. The purpose for exploring these factors is similar to an architect learning about soil, location, frequency of vibration, and the use of the structure being built. Grasping the transitional “coefficients” will help staff pastors develop an adequate understanding and a realistic expectation with which to interpret what is happening in their vocational lives during such seasons.

Whether a staff pastor remains on the scene in the same vocational capacity during a season of senior leadership change (or) whether he or she is removed from the pastoral staff there are many shared experiences that can serve to provide a better understanding and response to a transitional situation and its affect on the local church.

¹ Christopher Arnold, "Seismic Design," *JAE* (Blackwell Publishing) 33, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 19-22.

Understanding Transition

In the best instances in life, change and transition are seen coming and their arrival is planned for long before change lands in the center of an individual, community, or organization. This is not always the case and dealing with unannounced change and transition are a major part of life. On his 80th birthday I asked my grandfather what was the most amazing thing he had seen throughout his lifetime was. His reply was simple and yet profound: “Change.” Over and above space travel, miracle-like advances in science, medicine, and communications stands the amazing and unending flow of change that impacts all of life.

William Bridges has written about managing change and transition in the business world and offers wisdom that is especially relevant to transition in ministry. Bridges noted:

It isn't change that does you in, it's the transitions. Change is not the same as transition. Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal... Unless transition occurs, change will not work. That's what happens when great ideas fall flat.²

While the unanticipated loss of a senior pastor may not seem to fall in line with the term “great idea” it may still be viewed as a great opportunity. What may seem sudden to a congregation is by no means sudden to the Heavenly Father. God as part of his overall plan for our lives can redeem all situations.

Transition begins, in Bridges' point of view, when the individuals faced with change determine how they will process and handle the changes that life has laid before

² William Bridges, *Managing Transitions, Making the Most of Change* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991), 3-4.

them. In determining how to process new changes and transition Bridges also asserts that an individual needs to be willing to let go of old realities in order to face new beginnings. “...There are endings, there are losses...the failure to identify and be ready for the endings and losses that change produces is the largest single problem that organizations in transition encounter.”³

The failure to inwardly understand and be prepared for losses and changes can be a huge stumbling block for a pastoral staff member when abrupt transition occurs. Change surprises the leadership and the congregation. Abrupt change takes place without warning. It may arrive on the scene through a phone call, an announcement in the bulletin, a sudden confrontation, a scandal, or even a massive heart attack. People suddenly find themselves in such a state that a change has already happened and transition must follow. If you are in the midst of such an experience, or have had this experience in the past you can readily identify with the way that a sudden change sneaks up from behind. This is a common experience when an individual receives the news that a loved one has passed through a telephone call or hear a tragic report about a familiar place on the evening news.

A transitional situation not only means comprehending new information but it invariably forces us to let go of something that we formerly have held onto. It could be an understanding or belief, a relationship, a possession, position, or even a responsibility. A transition in life is a signal that we will soon be letting go of something or someone that a person has not let go of already. Bridges observes:

Once you understand that transition begins with letting go of something, you have taken the first step in the task of transition management. The second step is

³ Ibid., 5.

understanding what comes after letting go: the *neutral zone*. This is the no-man's land between the old reality and the new. It is a time when the old way is gone and the new doesn't feel comfortable yet.⁴

For a staff pastor letting go may mean letting go of specific relationships and projects initiated under the senior pastor's leadership. It may mean a loss of status, influence or even pastoral position if an interim pastor comes to serve for a season or when a new pastor is elected. To begin to let go of and hold loosely things such as these means entering into the kind of neutral zone described by Bridges. As pastoral leaders model this kind of letting go it naturally follows that those in their charge will be more willing to do the same. The facilitation of transition for the entire community should move forward in a natural and fluid manner by the demonstration from leadership that "letting go" is part and parcel of a healthy and reasonable process. It is a process where leaders must lead by letting go first. In his book *The Leadership Challenge* J. Kouzes wrote, "Leaders go first. They set an example and build commitment through simple daily acts that create progress and momentum. Leaders model their way through personal example and dedicated execution."⁵ In a transitional situation a leader's ability to let go of necessary and appropriate things in a measured way will release those who follow to do the same. This will in turn allow the process to move forward with much less difficulty than it otherwise might.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ B. Posner J. Kouzes, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 13.

The Limbo Zone

The neutral zone that naturally follows a leader “letting go” of certain things is a tricky situation to navigate. Moving through a feeling of “limbo” while navigating transition holds potential for leaders to react negatively to the process at hand. Bridges cautions that leaders who do not expect or understand passing through the feeling of limbo may experience three typical problems:

1. If you don’t expect it and understand why it is there, you’re likely to try to rush through it and to be discouraged when you cannot do so. You may mistakenly conclude that the confusion you feel is a sign that there’s something wrong with you.
2. You may be frightened in this no-man’s land and try to escape. To abandon the situation, however, is to abort the transition, both personally and organizationally-and to jeopardize the change.
3. If you escape prematurely from the neutral zone, you’ll not only compromise the change but also lose a great opportunity. Painful though it often is, the neutral zone is the individual’s and the organization’s best chance for creativity, renewal, and development.⁶

Exploring these drawbacks of Bridges’ neutral zone adds additional weight to the importance of leadership character formation. Discouragement, fear, and the desire to be prematurely removed from the transition process may at times place overwhelming pressure on servant leaders who help lead a congregation through transition. To yield to these pressures moves the organization backwards rather than moving it forwards towards the ultimate goal of achieving the transition that sudden change has made necessary.

The neutral zone is an uncomfortable and frustrating place for leaders to guide a group of people. At the same time it is logical when one considers that any season of re-

⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

orientation must first be preceded by a season of disorientation. Alicia Britt Chole alludes to this reality in her writings about Jesus' childhood years on earth:

During these uncelebrated years, Jesus submitted to a delayed destiny. A God-sized mission pulsed in his heart, but he was not free to explain it, proclaim it or actively pursue it... What grows in that underestimated gap between God's calling and others' perceptions, between our true capabilities and our current realities? We find God's pauses perplexing. They seem to be a waste of our potential.⁷

Jesus himself endured the limbo zone while deployed on his mission to redeem the world. Pastoral leaders can follow this lead and commit to patient perseverance as the delay in destiny plays itself out and transition takes its course.

Managing Transition

If transition is essentially about letting go of the old so that a new beginning might be implemented it stands to reason that letting go and entering the neutral zone are merely preparations for a return to forward organizational motion. A leader who transitions "from" something must in turn transition "to" something else. In the context of an unplanned and abrupt senior pastor departure the transition might be from the vision God has imparted in one individual to a new vision for the church God is imparting to another. It may be a transition from a discipleship-oriented focus to an outreach-centered focus. It may mean the transition of staff members and families out from the congregation or an influx of new attendees and members into the church family.

In the book *Change Monster* author Jeannie Duck identifies three essentials a leader must consider when managing change:

⁷ Alicia Britt Chole, *Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2006), 27.

1. Strategy: a passionate belief in where you're going. The strategy must be sound and the commitment unflinching. The more clearly the strategy can be articulated and the more easily it can be understood and translated into action the better.

2. Execution: good, basic management. A successful transition requires the same good management practices that are essential to running an effective organization during times of stability and "normal" operation. Good management becomes absolutely indispensable, however, when an organization is undergoing radical change.

3. Managing the monster requires a heightened sensitivity to the emotional behavioral issues inherent during change, and a willingness to address them.⁸

If a leader does not believe in where the organization is headed he or she cannot impart the enthusiasm needed to those who follow. If a staff pastor is called remain and serve through a season of transition he or she must be able to believe in the transitional strategy that is in place, be committed to managing the ministries and the transitional strategy to its end game, and be willing to address the emotional issues facing the local congregation. The inability or refusal of a leader to confront and take on these responsibilities only adds to a church's troubles rather than working towards an authentic solution.

Strategy for Transition

While every staff pastor might agree that strategy is necessary, the question that immediately follows is how to strategize in the midst of a very fluid and unstable situation. What kind of strategy is feasible for someone serving un-officially, temporarily, and from the middle of a hierarchy in flux?

Faced with such a situation, necessity dictates that a staff pastor lead with regard to what he or she *is* indeed certain about. Pastors thrust into transition can be certain of

⁸ Jeanie Duck, *The Change Monster* (New York: Crown Business, 2001), 11.

their commitment to Christ and the ministerial calling. Pastors in these circumstances can be certain of their commitment to see the season of transition become a source of blessing to the church and not a destructive force within it. Pastors can be certain that they must lead by example and assume that their very presence during this season is intended as part of God's plan for the upcoming changes. These certainties can translate into simple strategies for perseverance in the season at hand such as:

1. Staying true to Christ and the people one leads.
2. Setting the best possible spiritual example in the midst of the chaotic situation.
3. Maintaining fidelity to the present assignment in this place until legitimately called to another context of ministry. This involves making a spiritually disciplined choice on principle rather than running to somewhere the situation might seem more appealing or lucrative.
4. Helping to ingratiate the new leadership God brings into favor with the church body.

Even a few simple strategies such as these provide anchors of stability for a staff pastor serving in this type of situation.

Executing Management

When it comes to executing good management many of the same problems that present themselves in planning a transition strategy must be overcome. The management vacuum left by the departure of a senior pastor will look differently depending on many variables. If the church board is a strong and involved one it may consolidate many of the senior pastor's duties and responsibilities under its personal oversight. If an interim pastor is brought in to serve he or she may choose to assimilate these duties. In some cases either of the above parties may choose to task the associate pastor(s) with carrying out much of the day to day operational management of the church.

Regardless of how much or how little of the day-to-day management falls to staff pastors a good steward will manage people and resources to the best of his or her ability. Duck points out the added importance of good management practices in the midst of organizational transition. In the business world leaders pay special attention to planning, budgets, marketing, and measuring productivity. In the church world executing good management may tend to look more like ensuring that pastoral care for the people continues through on-going services, prayer meetings, visitations, and counseling. It may mean managing an expense account in a more moderate way. It may mean cutting what were once routine expenditures to ensure there that there is no additional financial strain that might make the pastoral transition a more precarious situation. Executing good management will mean taking pains to understand and communicate the needs of the church body as well as responding to those needs.

Emotional Issues Affecting Change

When a church experiences a sudden transition it is susceptible to the same emotional dynamics that affect any other sort of corporate community experiences. Duck writes: “Changing an organization is inherently and inescapably an emotional human process.”⁹ Pastoral care in this context means that spiritual leaders must recognize and assess the emotional reactions and biases that their people are experiencing as the entire community enters transition together. Duck has put together a “Ready Willing and Able” (RWA) survey that she describes as a “quick and broad radar scan” to help assess the change preparedness of an organization.¹⁰ Through this survey Duck and her team are

⁹ Duck, *The Change Monster*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

able to gain a sense of the predominant emotional state of an organization with regard to moving forward. The RWA survey makes divisions into three categories of readiness for change:

1. Readiness to change. Does the organization understand and believe change is needed?
2. Willingness to change. Are they sufficiently dissatisfied with the status quo and/or worried about the future that they are willing to change?
3. Ability to change. Do they believe that the organization possesses the skills and tools needed to affect change? Are they personally equipped?¹¹

A sudden transition in a church setting will happen without any notice of preparation and change will be thrown upon a congregation whether or not the above-mentioned attitudes are aligned. At the same time a spiritual leader should be able to communicate that God's providence is at work in the change, readying the people for the next step. A trusted staff pastor can help people become willing to change as they consider that God's perfect will has foreseen the situation that played out long before it occurred. Pointing out the new reality to the church is not the same as being on point with the emotional reactions being triggered in the community. By being sensitive to the readiness and willingness of a congregation to come to grips with a sudden transition the pastors who remain can help people see providence at work in an uninvited change and better enable a church to embrace new circumstances and direction.

When a major earthquake has run its course the buildings that remain are the ones that were constructed with the proper expectations in mind as well as attention to the critical factors of design. When a church endures unanticipated senior pastor transition its story is also told by what remains standing when transition has run its course. A

¹¹ Ibid., 124-125.

knowledgeable and intentional staff pastor will be able to understand and lead through transitional issues and his or her presence will greatly increase the chances that the church will exit a transitional period with its mission and ministries still standing.

Chapter 4 Connecting Point:

1. What losses, if any, have you experienced related to your authority, duties, and responsibilities during this season of transition? How do these losses affect you?
2. Have you encountered a feeling of being in a “neutral zone” that you find frustrating or from which you desire to escape? Which best describes your reaction to this situation:
 - a. The desire to rush through it
 - b. To abandon ship and find a new direction
 - c. Escape prematurely before whether or not real answers have developed
3. Have you come to the place where you are willing to let go of old realities in order to face new beginnings?
4. What will you be required to let go of, in terms of your role and responsibilities in the church, while this transition process plays itself out?
5. Many leaders want to rush through the discomfort of transition. If you could fast forward a portion of your situation with a remote control what part of this experience would you chose?
6. Do you presently believe in the direction that your church is headed?
7. What emotional factors are going on in the congregation? How are you addressing or responding to these factors? If you are not responding to these factors; what is preventing you?

Do you sense that your church is ready, willing, and able to weather the changes that are taking place?

CHAPTER FIVE

Creating A Personal Perspective For Transition

In keeping with the comparison of abrupt transition to seismic activity it is important to consider the deep emotional impact that earthquakes produce in an individual and the personal response and perspective that is formed as a result. David Anderson describes the profound personal experience of an earthquake experience below:

An earthquake is an awesome event, primal in its effect and enormous in its impact on the human psyche. Unlike fire or floods earthquake trigger the only innate fear in humans –the fear of falling. Even mature, well-controlled adults can end up whimpering in the corner. As one person described it to me, “Its like falling when everything else is falling too, the sensation a baby has if you lower it too fast. You know, when it throws out its hands and blanches”.¹

Exposure to an event such as Anderson describes can leave a long lasting impression in an individual’s perspective. These lasting impressions are chronicled in the stories of individuals who tell and retell the stories of their experience. The telling of these stories often take longer to recount than the brevity of the actual experience itself. This is in part due to the human brain’s manner of cataloguing peculiar events. Regina Bendix writes: “The human brain registers and is able to recall distressing or highly unusual experiences more densely than events that fall within the expected realm of experience –presumably

¹ David M. Anderson, "The Los Angeles Earthquake and the Folklore Disaster," *Western Folklore* (Western States Folklore Society) 33, no. 4 [Oct 1974]: 331-336.

again because they lack order”.² The peculiarity of the unexpected departure of a senior pastor has the power to create similar deeply seated perceptions.

Before a staff pastor can lend his or her influence to a healthy transition process among the general population of a congregation the pastor must work through some or all of the deeply seated personal response to what has happened. The impact staff pastors feel when a senior pastor suddenly departs is felt even more keenly than most others in the church. Not only has a leader and mentor suddenly exited the scene but also the additional questions of job security, congregational politics, personal insecurities, disappointment, and former assumptions about the future may seem to disperse in different directions. E. Neeld wrote: “The French philosopher Simone Weil once said that the only suitable question to ask another human being was, ‘What are you going through?’”³ Weil is communicating that the human experience is one in which we pass through a sea of continual difficulty. This sea of continual difficulty springs from a stream of continual change constantly shifting the patterns of life once we adjust to them. Dr. Elizabeth Neeld writes: “We share the experience of living a threshold event, of navigating ourselves in that ‘floating world’ between how things used to be and how things will be.”⁴ Inherent in this experience is a certain degree of vulnerability. Os Guinness touches on this willingness to endure such vulnerability in his book *The Call*:

In a controlling, calculating age, the world’s ideal is always to be in charge, never to be caught out –in short to be “nobody’s fool”. On the contrary, say the fools for Christ, in a world gone mad through its own worldly wisdom, true wisdom is to

² Regina Bendix, "Reflections on Earthquake Narratives," *Western Folklore* (Western States Folklore Society) 49, no. 4 [Oct 1990]: 331-347.

³ Elizabeth Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way Through Difficult Times* (New York: Warner Books, 2005), 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

“go mad for God” even at the price of being hopelessly vulnerable –to be everybody’s fools.⁵

Negotiating through this potentially fragile and distressing time in limbo as a staff pastor caught in the rapidly changing winds of transition means first working through your own response to the changes that have occurred. Dr. Neeld asserts a framework based upon a systematic approach. Neeld’s pattern is a simple but strategic pathway of reviewing, responding, reorganizing, and renewing as a means of finding one’s way through the difficult changes life sometimes presents.

Responding to Transition

The manner in which a leader responds to transition is at first inward in the form of mentally processing the events taking place. The shape of the inner world then proceeds to shape the outward responses that follow. Dr. Neeld asserts that the human response to transition primarily plays out in certain ways:

Two important shifts occur simultaneously when we are required to respond to some news or event that launches a tough transition. First, our physical bodies go into emergency mode. We can do nothing about this. It happens involuntarily. At the same time our assumptive world –the way we expected things to be, the way we had worked for things to be –shatters like a glass globe hitting a stone floor.⁶

The physical reactions the body experiences are described by Neeld as “hyperarousal”.

The body responds to the stress of the new situation that is being encountered in conjunction with the new set of circumstances that the mind also has to process. “I’m feeling tense.” –Those three words pretty well explain how stress affects your body –or, more precisely, how your body warns you it is being affected by stress. It warns you in

⁵ O. Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 217.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

the muscles of many different places.”⁷ A sample of the signals that the body begins to send through its muscles in response to the new level of anxiety might be:

1. Headache
2. Tight jaw
3. Knotted stomach
4. Lower back ache
5. Tight lips
6. Tight chest wall
7. Rigid neck muscles
8. Clenched teeth
9. Folded arms that restrict breathing⁸

Other non-muscular indicators might be constipation, dry mouth, skin rashes, trembling hands, palpitations, inability to concentrate, fidgeting, over-reaction to events, grinding teeth, and speeded up conversation. In addition to William’s visible list of indicators from the body it is not uncommon for individuals to experience invisible physical responses such as upset stomach, loss of sleep, loss of appetite, sex drive reduction, increased blood pressure, heart attack, or stroke.⁹

Beyond the physical responses there are mental responses that arrive on the scene to affect the individual confronted with a stressful transition. Certain people may respond with emotions that are nearly out of control while others may seem to take the situation in good stride. “...another kind of emotion that we often experience during certain types of transitions: a low-grade, ongoing, chronic emotion that doesn’t slap us around but does always seem to be there, pulling our energy level down and nagging at our sense of well-being.”¹⁰ Beyond this there are those who, for a while, are able to move along as if the situation is not a major life event. This quiet non-reaction however cannot remain an

⁷ Paul Wilson, *Instant Calm* (New York: Penguin Group, 1995), 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33,35.

¹⁰ Neeld, 39.

indefinite state. “Slowly, in a time right for each individual, the reality of the transition presents itself... For some, this acknowledgment brings collapse after weeks or months (or even years) of being strong and efficient.”¹¹ The convergence of physical and emotional affects upon an individual in response to a sudden and stressful transition may take the shape of a few, many, or perhaps all of the symptoms listed in this section. What is for certain is that such transitions do demand a response of some nature and these physical or emotional reactions are not exceptions among individuals but the normative manner of response.

Reviewing in Transition

In the time that begins to pass after an individual’s first response to the transition that has occurred, the need for a personal review of what has transpired and how it is affecting day-to-day life is essential. The act of review is crucial to getting back on track and eventually moving forward in a new way. “Perhaps it’s time to take a second look. To reconsider, rethink, and reflect on how this tough transition is affecting our lives. To ask, ‘What do I need to see? What reassessment can I make? What might I do differently?’”¹² It may be helpful, as always, to obtain the help of a close friend, a spouse or a mentor to see more objectively in this situation.

A staff pastor may need to see that the situation will never return to what it was before, even if he or she is able to continue to minister in the same community, capacity, and context. A staff pastor will need to review what providences have been and still are at

¹¹ Ibid., 40-41.

¹² Ibid., 97.

work in his or her life. A pastor may need to come to grips with the idea that this season of ministry in this community may be nearing completion and a time of transition.

The reassessments a pastor may need to make will have to do with listening to God for the next step. It is time to begin to take measure of what experiences God has been preparing the individual and his or her family with in order to take that next step. A pastor in this situation may have to reassess the capacity in which he or she is called to minister. It is a time to pray about and assess moving in the direction of a new ministry or specialty focus. He may be confronted with new questions that had never occurred before such as: “Is it possible that God might be calling me to assume the role that my predecessor has suddenly left vacant?” “How does my family feel about the idea?” “How does my mentor or my accountability partners react to this idea?” “How does the church I serve feel about the idea?” “How do others on the staff respond to this idea?” “How might I properly assess if I am ready to move from a staff role to a lead role in this organization?” “Are there any hidden motives and agendas in my heart?”

The final question while reviewing in transition is about what a staff pastor might do differently from this point on. A pastor might decide to pursue God’s voice more intently than before. She might make a conscientious decision not to pursue and force fit a role but rather wait and see what opportunities naturally present themselves. He or she might hope with confidence in the salvation that God rewards those who maintain their integrity in the midst of trying circumstances. As Neeld noted:

At this point we don’t have to know all the answers, and usually won’t know all the answers. We just have to make an assertion: *I must and I will replan my life because things have changed.* ... We realize that if we do not replan our life, we

will live as a person, in the words of the old French saying, whose clock has stopped.¹³

Reviewing in the midst of transition is important because it allows the individual to survey the terrain of where he or she has been. It allows a person to reframe the narrative of his or her past in such a way that a new chapter can be written in the time that lies ahead. Reviewing in the life of an individual who is a spiritual leader in the church will open the door wider for the church to engage in this phase of transition corporately. The end result being that the whole body can gain a better sense of where God has brought it and where God may be leading it as it enters into the next phase of reorganization.

Reorganizing in Transition

In transitional ministry the individual is faced with a new reality that says: “The way I used to carry out my vocation in this setting is not what it used to be. Now I must make the changes necessary to carry on in a new way.” This does not mean that the past has disappeared but it does mean that the future is going to assume a shape that may not look the way it was envisioned before the transition took place. Reorganization is a process that a staff pastor can work to understand and embrace. It is a part of the transitional journey that deals with a change of roles, identities, and behaviors. Need clearly articulates the reorganization phase of navigating a difficult transition as a chance to map out a new way to embark upon life:

As difficult as forging these new roles, identities, and behaviors can be, the situation can be satisfactorily worked through. When that happens, our new identity may be more stable, secure and more closely linked to the core of who we are than the identity we had before.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Ibid., 168.

This assertion with regard to reorganization can be seen in the pages of Scripture. Jacob's son Joseph is one such example. Joseph experienced many sudden transitions that forced him to let go of old roles, identity, and behaviors. He was abruptly transitioned from the role of favored son, to slave, to head slave, to prisoner, to head of state. It was Joseph's integrity and willingness to work through each new identity and master each new role that came with it, which prepared him for his final exaltation to Pharaoh's most trusted advisor. In the New Testament reorganization of identity and role is the central idea within repentance and spiritual rebirth. An individual such as Levi sheds his old behavior and former identity of tax collector in order to reorganize his life and bring it into alignment with the new life into which Jesus calls him. If the reorganization of identity, roles, and behavior is the pattern of Christ followers in scripture it should serve as an encouragement to staff pastors who face their own transitional moments today.

The biographies of history's greatest leaders consistently reveal the stories of personal reorganization following seasons of sudden and dramatic life transitions. One such leader was Theodore Roosevelt in the years preceding his election to the office of President of the United States. At the age of twenty-five Roosevelt lost his mother, his wife and became a father all within a twenty-four hour period. Author Nathan Miller writes:

Racing up the steps to Alice's room two at a time, Roosevelt discovered that she was barely conscious and hardly recognized him. He held her in his arms for the next two hours as if struggling to prevent her from slipping away from him. Someone murmured that if he wished to see his mother before she died, he should hurry to her room on the second floor.¹⁵

¹⁵ Nathan Miller, *Roosevelt: A Life* (New York: William Morrow Company, 1992), 51.

When considering the difficulties a leader faces in the midst of a sudden shift in circumstance it is worth remembering men such as Theodore Roosevelt who in one day's time became a father, widower, and orphan long before becoming the President of a nation. Faced with the prospect of reorganizing his identity, role, and behavior Roosevelt chose immediately to head from New York to North Dakota and exchange his urban political life for the rural western life of a rancher. As Miller wrote: "For Roosevelt, the West was a new and uncharted world. Background, family, education, position –all counted for little..."¹⁶ In the time of reorganization that follows transition embracing and exploring a new and uncharted world is a strategy that can benefit the one who engages it. The determination to reorganize identity, roles, and behavior in a transitional period is crucial to reemerging with opportunities to create a better life experience in the days that are ahead.

Renewing through Transition

A period of sudden or difficult transition will inevitably come to an end at some point in time. When this happens those who have managed to survive the response, review and reorganization phases of the process should be able to enter into a renewed approach to life. Pastors, leaders, and anyone else who journeys through the transition process have great reason to maintain an optimistic understanding of the future that awaits them once the process has run its course. The reality is that people who endure transition can do more than just survive; they can also thrive. Dr. Neeld describes

¹⁶ Ibid., 168.

renewing as “*being restored to freshness, feeling vigor and rejuvenation, experiencing a transformation that leaves you feeling regenerated.*”¹⁷

Carly Fiorina became the CEO of Hewlett Packard Corporation in 1999. After joining the company and guiding it towards a tremendous rebound she was abruptly asked by the Board for her resignation in 2005. Fiorina’s personal renewal can be seen in her memoirs by examining and contrasting her description of the pain of transition at the time of her firing to the sense of renewal she eventually discovers at the conclusion of her memoirs. Fiorina describes the initial shock of her firing this way: “I was utterly devastated, but the sun still came up and life went on. That day, and in the days that followed, I was more hurt than angry...I had put everything on the line and suddenly it was over.”¹⁸ After the better part of the year had passed Fiorina describes renewed feelings and perspective in the closing sentences of the epilogue she writes poolside on New Year’s Eve: “The children’s laughter echoes off the tiles. Their cannonball jumps into the pool splash water on this page. And as 2005 draws to a close, I know I have been given what I asked for. My life is filled with moments of spontaneous joy. I am happy.”¹⁹

The transitional process can become not only a pathway to difficulty and dutiful perseverance but also a doorway to a renewed sense of living. In ministry this may mean finding a renewed sense of love for God and the people to whom one ministers. Staff pastors who endure organizational transition can hold forth the hope that a sudden and difficult circumstance will give way to something more than an ending but also the promise of a renewed beginning.

¹⁷ Neeld, 230.

¹⁸ Carly Fiorina, *Tough Choices: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 303.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 309.

While the inherently traumatic events that take place in a season of abrupt transition will undoubtedly leave a lasting impression there is a pathway for understanding and guiding pastoral response. Reviewing the past and reassessing what might need to be done is a great start. Reorganizing old roles and identities to create the opportunity for new roles and identities is a blessed opportunity that may not have existed before. By embracing and engaging these processes a pastor is likely to one day discover a vocational rebirth that gives a new and fresh approach to his or her calling.

Chapter 5 Connecting Point:

1. How would you characterize your personal response to the transition experience? Have you adjusted: Poorly, reasonably, fairly, or excellently to the changes and challenges that are confronting you?
2. What adverse physical conditions, if any, have you experienced since the transition?
3. While reviewing the transitional situation that has brought you to this point is there anything that you might need to reconsider or reassess at this moment of your life? Is there anyone close to you whom you could trust to help you to answer this question objectively?
4. Is there anything that you need to do differently from this point on?
5. What life changes are necessary for you to make in order to continue on in a new direction?
6. If this process could result in a renewed beginning for your life and ministry where would you most hope that it will take you?

CHAPTER SIX

Contingency Planning

In anticipation of earthquakes and natural disasters many local, state, and federal Emergency Management Agencies create contingency plans based on sudden disaster scenarios that have the potential to affect their designated areas of responsibility.

In the summer of 2007 the Tennessee the Memphis/Shelby County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) conducted a three-day exercise drill simulating response to a full-scale emergency disaster. The scenario simulated a major earthquake that transpired along the New Madrid Fault and affected multiple states simultaneously. The exercise was set up to trigger various responses from government authorities all working from a pre-planned emergency contingency plan.

According to the plan an Emergency Operations Center was established in which local authorities would convene to monitor the situation and make decisions. An article posted by Sandra Mathias, an EMA reserve describes the intensity of the exercise and the lengths that government officials will go to prepare a contingency plan:

In this scenario, downtown Memphis was destroyed with numerous casualties. Transportation was halted with half the county's bridges down. Railroads and airports were heavily damaged. Chemical fires raged and imposed a major threat as only fifteen percent of the fire stations survived. Hospitals were damaged and over 1,000 citizens needed immediate care for life threatening injuries. 5,000 animals required shelter and it was reported that the big cats from the Zoo were loose. Law enforcement was on high alert as area malls were looted.

A Joint Information Center or "JIC" was created near the EOC so the media could be kept abreast of the situation. Large maps of the effected areas were printed by GIS officials and studied to pinpoint the areas hardest hit.

HazMat teams assessed chemical spills and toxic fumes. Government agencies and the private sector merged to help as buses were utilized to transport victims to shelters. Requests for resources and how to funnel the needed supplies to the areas affected was discussed. EMA Director Talford commented, "Our main concern in this drill was getting our roads clear so we could get citizens out to other hospitals and get needed resources in."

A drill is the time to make mistakes and correct them - not when lives are on the line. This event helped us assess the effectiveness of each agency's response to a disaster and gave us a chance to test our Basic Emergency Operations Plan, and evaluate our recovery plan.¹

From the moment that an alarm is sounded and an emergency has taken place government agencies have a plan to execute that is already in place. Many agencies spend years preparing and testing contingency plans in the event of natural disasters. If this kind of preparation takes place in human government should not spiritual leaders be concerned with preparing contingency plans for spiritual disasters among its leaders?

To their credit many fellowships and denominations have mapped out a process and support system that allows a church to navigate an abrupt lead pastor transition and continue on to the process of finding a new pastoral leader. Unfortunately the same level of commitment and attention to resourcing staff pastors who remain on the scene in such situations is woefully lacking. This chapter will focus on presenting a practical and useful contingency that will serve as a guiding resource for a staff pastor initially responding to an unplanned senior pastor departure.

¹ Sandra Mathias, "EMA Conducts Multi-Agency Earthquake Drill," [Aug 2007], <http://www.mscema.org/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=53> [accessed Jul 07, 2009].

A church that has a plan already in place will do well to know and follow the plan they have agreed on. It is wise to review such plans occasionally and to brief incoming pastors and lay leaders as to its specific provisions. Leadership that communicates and demonstrates a strategy will inspire the confidence of the congregation.

The contingency plan that follows is a model based on four important phases of response to an abrupt transition in the local church setting. The first phase of response involves clarification. It is important for the leadership of a church to have an accurate handle on what has transpired. Information and disinformation will be quickly passed around in an unclear and emotionally charged situation. It is the responsibility of the leadership to gather facts and bring clarity to the narrative of what is happening in the life of a church.

Phase two of the response plan deals with notification. Most local churches have their own polity and local church government as well as a denominational or network affiliated hierarchy. It is important that the leadership and proper authority structures are all properly apprised of the situation in a local body and working in concert towards resolution in and preservation of that body. Once the facts of the situation are clear these facts must be disseminated to those appointed to positions of authority.

Phase three involves communication between church leaders and the members of the local church. Communication must be articulate, intentional, and occur with a frequency that allows the people to feel informed and brought along on the journey of transition. When approached in a straightforward, deliberate, and transparent manner communication between church leadership and church membership will serve to strengthen the bond of unity and resolution to move forward of a local body.

Phase four has to do with preserving as much of the former way of church life as possible. Maintaining active ministries, retaining staff members and pastoral leadership, and demonstrating unity at the top has a way of inspiring confidence in a widespread way among the people of the congregation. Preserving not only means maintaining what has been going on in the life of a church but also adding new opportunities for gathering, praying, and processing the transitional situation through prayer and intercession.

The contingency plan that follows is intended for use in instances of unplanned senior pastor transition. Its basic principles may be applied to a variety of situations and circumstances. It should be noted that this plan is simply a generalized template and must be used and adjusted with wisdom appropriate to the situation and circumstances of a specific local body.

Unanticipated Pastoral Transition Contingency Plan
Strategic Operational Guidance For The Weeks Following A Senior Pastor's Sudden Departure

Section 1: Clarification

It is of paramount importance that all information being disseminated to the church and its leadership in a sudden transition situation is as accurate as possible. As such it is incumbent upon spiritual leaders to take the time to ascertain what has transpired in a reliable way first-hand.

1. If possible, contact the senior pastor directly to learn what is happening. As the official spiritual authority in the local church and the leading staff member the senior pastor should take responsibility for communicating details of his or her departure with those he/she is charged to lead.
2. If it is not possible to speak with the outgoing senior pastor directly seek out the next most senior leader in the church for detail and clarification of the situation surrounding the sudden transition.

Section 2: Notification

1. Directly contact mentor/spiritual oversight and notify him/her of what is happening and to request prayer, spiritual counsel, and support.
2. If you are part of a fellowship or denomination with a hierarchical structure ensure that those in positions of authority within this structure have been notified of the situation.
3. If you are married notify your spouse of what is transpiring as soon as possible. Remind him or her of the importance and responsibility of keeping the situation confidential and discreet until such a time as those in authority communicate the situation to the local church body.
4. If there are lay leaders in the church who serve in an official oversight capacity be certain to contact a representative for clarification and to offer pastoral assistance. *In the event that the senior pastor's departure is due to an issue of division involving some or all of these lay leaders refer to the counsel of the your spiritual mentor and/or denominational authorities to determine the appropriate course of action.*
5. Set a time, as early as possible, to gather and address the local body with details about what is transpiring. To leave people in the dark for too long will leave too much time and space available for counterproductive speculation, rumors, and gossip.

Section 3: Communication

1. Refrain from notifying individuals in the congregation or the congregation at large of what has happened without first meeting with the appropriate church leadership and creating a unified plan of action for informing the church body of what has happened.
2. When communicating with individuals or with the corporate body stick to the facts. Do not speculate about details or the inner personal motives of any parties involved.
3. If a process has been established with regard to how the church will move forward in the coming days and weeks communicate that process clearly to the local body. If this is well handled it will go far in promoting an atmosphere of trust and transparency that will in turn lend stability to the ongoing process. The creation of a website with 24 hour access and regular updates is a powerful tool to this end.
4. Route all questions from the congregation to a designated and trustworthy individual, or limited number of individuals, who will be responsible for answering with wisdom, clarity, and discretion. *Do not allow yourself, as a staff pastor, to be placed in the unenviable position of becoming a source for inside information for the people. This will compromise your ability to remain above the fray and unify people as a spiritual leader.*

Section 4: Preservation

The hours and days following an abrupt transition are filled with tenseness, emotion, and uncertainty. The pastor and lay leadership should be resolute in working to preserve the relationships, unity, and mission of the local body.

1. Do not add to the trauma of the situation by submitting a resignation as an act of solidarity for an outgoing pastor. In like manner resignations from staff members should never be requested during such disorienting times unless individual team members have demonstrated gross or criminal misconduct in some obvious manner.
2. Publicly praise the remaining leadership team members and demonstrate confidence in their leadership abilities. Present a united commitment to the mission and continued kingdom work of your local church.
3. Maintain, as much as possible, established ministry activities so that an atmosphere of normalcy can continue and the spiritual needs of the people in the congregation are still met. In these circumstances meeting such needs are even more crucial than before.
4. Schedule unifying ministry activities such as extra intercessory prayer meetings that draw people together. This gives an opportunity to strengthen a sense of community despite setbacks and for the people to call on God for guidance as a corporate body.
5. Make all decisions slowly, deliberately, and with the counsel of people you respect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shared Wisdom

Those who have lived through the devastating effects of a natural disaster such as an earthquake all have a story to share. A catastrophic experience is often etched indelibly into the mind and longs to be rehearsed for the benefit of others who may encounter the same situation one day or who might simply want to learn about the experience for the sake of vocational interest or personal enrichment.

In response to the tremors that followed the Los Angeles earthquake of 1971 many California residents began sharing more than experiential wisdom. Stories began to circulate about how an individual might detect an earthquake before it happened and take proactive measures. In his article on the Los Angeles Earthquake in the *Journal of Western Folklore*, David Anderson recorded many of the popular earthquake prediction myths that came about as a result of the Los Angeles quake of '71. Some people believed simply talking about an earthquake would cause the next one. Others reported strange feelings in their legs in the moments before an aftershock. Still others believed a quake could be predicted by dogs barking strangely at night and ants working in a hurried frenzy to remove eggs from their underground passageways.¹ Needless to say this type of “shared wisdom” offers nothing towards developing a genuine understanding about why or when earthquakes take place.

¹ David M. Anderson, "The Los Angeles Earthquake and the Folklore of Disaster," *Western Folklore*, Vol 33., No 4. [Oct 1974], <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1498550> [accessed July 3, 2009].

Regardless of the naïve prediction explanations offered by people who encountered the Los Angeles earthquake of 1971 there is value in sharing in the wisdom of pastors who have personal knowledge of unanticipated pastoral transition. While the causes of earth tremors are hidden from sight far beneath the crust of the earth pastors who have navigated quakes and tremors in the local church have come face to face with their causes at the surface. There is much that can be learned by interacting with the reflections of those who have already successfully navigated such a situation. Fortunately a number of pastors who took part in the research project that made this resource possible have been willing to pass along their thoughts and opinions as guidance for other pastors who remain to serve faithfully in their local church after the senior pastor's sudden departure.

The reflections of these pastors will be organized into two categories in the remainder of this chapter. "Potential Pitfalls" is a section that describes hazards along the transitional road that experienced pastors feel need pointed out to those who will travel the same path. The "Principles for Preservation" section will communicate guiding ethics these pastors feel are necessary for traversing this experience with integrity and commitment to Christ and community remaining central and intact.

Potential Pitfalls

When an organization experiences a sudden change in leadership there is nearly always a season of disorientation that occurs before a season of reorientation that is to come. During such times there are several potential missteps that a pastor might make that hold the potential to add to the difficulties of adjustment already in progress. What

follows are several potential pitfalls that a pastor will be wise to take into consideration if he or she is ever face to face with an abrupt transition situation.

1. **Authority:** The issue of overstepping authority and boundaries was cited several times by pastors as a problematic issue. Due to the lack of experience among lay leaders and staff pastors on this matter, as well as the lack of formalized protocol for abrupt pastoral departures, the boundaries of the playing field are rarely if ever articulated clearly for those who remain. This leaves a staff pastor in the awkward position of leading from the organizational middle without a concept of where that leadership begins or ends. A pastor should be careful about asserting too much or too little authority while the local senior leadership issue remains in question. He or she must hold the pastoral position loosely and work to find the balance between being proactive and reactive when it comes to spiritual leadership. Strong leadership, even with the purest of motives, might be misconstrued as a power grab. Weak leadership holds the potential to convey an attitude of distance or disinterest at a time when people need a pastor most.
2. **Interim Pastor:** There are several reasons that an interim pastor is a helpful addition to a local church that is enduring an unanticipated transition. Perhaps the reason this is an important issue to pastors serving on the staff of such churches is that staff members absorb so many of the senior pastor's roles by default. The absorption of duties and responsibilities that typically belong to the senior pastor create the sense between the pastor and the people of the church that a staff pastor is indeed the senior pastor in practical terms regardless of polity and process. If nature abhors a vacuum the leadership vacuum is no different.

For a staff pastor to serve in the lead role by default creates a situation with many difficulties regarding personal identity, congregational identity, as well as hearing and knowing the will of God in a vocational sense. It is noted in the research that a staff pastor filling the pulpit on a weekly basis significantly cements an identity among the people as the senior pastor. This holds damaging potential for the church, not to mention the trauma a pastor feels, when and if this pastor is asked to step back from such a role. An interim pastor can serve as a cover that allows a church to function while also allowing a staff pastor to search his or her own heart without being too affected and consumed by the gravitational force and drama of transition.

It is also noted that an interim pastor is not always a perfect match. There has been much discussion about the calamity that results when an interim is not a good fit for a church or its staff pastors. Many times this may have to do with generational or personality disconnect that creates conflict rather than facilitating a smoother and gentler transition.

- 3. Transparency:** While transparency is a great quality in a leader and organization it can at times be a strength that becomes a weakness. The nature of transition is such that there are many processes in play giving rise to a variety of expectations among the people of the local church. Properly managing those expectations through careful timing and accurate dissemination of information will create the best climate possible for transition. Communicating the wrong things at the wrong time may only lead to confusion as well as a false or inaccurate expectation among the congregation at large. Unmet expectations can quickly create points of

tension, frustration, and possibly conflict. As such transparency is a virtue as long as it is coordinated and properly managed to help an organization move forward. Transparency can become a stumbling block to a group when it is mismanaged and exposes the people to all the aggravations of the process. Such burdens are the responsibility of church leadership to absorb so that the entire church does not have to.

A staff pastor must be careful not to reveal too much about the ongoing transition. He or she must also be careful not divulge too much information about his or her own personal feelings and perspective to those being led. Processing feelings and frustrations is best done with a mentor or within a peer network where they can be properly vented and processed without adding to the drama already unfolding in the local church.

- 4. Being All Things To All People:** As illustrated in the “Wheel of Forces” found in Chapter 2 sudden transition creates a great deal of role confusion in addition to affecting the landscape of congregational expectations. Pastors may feel tempted to try and be all things to all people. To meet every possible need in every possible way is an unhealthy goal even in the best of situations and is patently impossible in transitional situations. Resist the temptation to be a people pleaser and focus instead on tackling a realistic range of responsibilities. If you have not learned to say “no” already now is the time to start. Know your strengths, weaknesses, and limitations and make only limited and occasional exceptions as prompted by God.

- 5. Church Politics:** Church politics are a constant and unavoidable snare. Refuse to be bogged down in power plays, bickering, and infighting. Be honest with your personal opinions and express them on appropriate occasions and in an appropriate manner. Let your alliance be to God rather than with factions obsessed with “voting one another off of the island”.
- 6. Communications:** Pastors have expressed frustration with a lack of communication between elders, board members, denominational authorities, and staff members. Good communication promotes trust and organizational unity. If you feel left out of the loop initiate communication yourself and take measures to become informed. While face-to-face meetings are preferable take advantage of whatever means at your disposal to keep the lines of communication open and frequently interactive.
- 7. Taking On Too Much:** With the senior leader position vacant there will be many collateral duties that fall to remaining staff members. Taking on too much too soon can cause a pastor to become overloaded and overstressed. God will never give you more than you can handle but that does not mean the people around you will not. As stated earlier it is important to know your limitations and to set boundaries carefully and with reasonable flexibility.
- 8. Resignations:** When staff members begin to submit resignations in the midst of the senior leader’s transition this is likely to only add additional stress and trauma to the congregation. Barring some grossly outrageous or criminal set of circumstances staff resignations are something to be avoided until a church has come back to the place of functional stability. Staff pastors are prudent to

remember that what seems like a resignation based on theology and principle in the heat of one moment may look more like a resignation out of pettiness and pride further down the road. Release your resignation only when God releases you.

- 9. Lack of Unity:** When the leadership of a congregation has lost stability this can greatly impact its overall sense of unity. While adversity has the potential to pull people together it also holds the potential for people to pull apart. A pastor has the power to move people towards unity by demonstrating peacemaking, forgiveness, spiritual maturity, and healthy conflict resolution. To ignore or neglect intentionally speaking about and modeling a spirit of unity will jeopardize whatever unity had been fostered before the abrupt transition took place.
- 10. Power Hungry Church Board Members:** The reality of church transition is that a vacuum of power will exist. There will undoubtedly be individuals in the church who, out of natural ability and skill (or) out of the desire for organizational influence and control, will gravitate towards appropriating and exercising that power themselves. It is important that a pastor, who is a spiritual leader and does have some degree of spiritual authority in the church, be willing to confront this issue with love and grace on occasions when individuals cross the line and seem to be pursuing power for personal agendas. The pastor is responsible for addressing real concerns in a proper and biblical way. Once the pastoral duty is discharged in this area the results rest with God. A staff pastor will not usually have the authority required to meet his or her responsibility in this area and as such must tread carefully.

11. I'm In Over My Head: Sometimes the expectations that an individual approaches a job or ministry with are not properly aligned with the reality of what such a position actually requires of him or her. It is easy for individuals to take on tasks, responsibilities, and offices that are beyond their real life experience level or temperament. When this occurs there are two options: The first option is that he or she may choose to step aside and continue accruing experience and abilities in a role more suited to the present level of ability. The second option is that he or she might decide that getting in too deep is an opportunity for skill development and personal growth. A pastor leading in an area of personal weakness or out of his or her personal depth has the potential to unleash further setbacks and even damage to the local church. Be careful to take on only what you are certain you can handle with regard to your spiritual gifting, maturity, calling, and experience.

Principles for Preservation

In addition to the pitfalls that lie along the road during the journey of transition there are also guiding principles. Pastors who have already made the voyage know that maintaining the proper attitudes and responses throughout an abrupt season of transition can mean the difference between failure and success. While many factors and circumstances will remain outside of a pastor's control there are appropriate choices and decisions that go a long way towards bringing about the most favorable outcome for a local church and its leadership.

- 1. Pray:** The most often repeated principle communicated by pastors with respect to the topic of sudden transition is prayer. Prayer is crucial to

expressing personal needs to God and as a way to listen to for God's response. Prayer is described as the key to obtaining wisdom, preparation, rest, confidence, direction, and healing by pastors that have walked this path before.

2. **Do Your Best:** Remember that although you may have been surprised about the changes happening all around you God was in no way caught off guard. The scriptures are brimming over with heroes who, when confronted with extraordinary challenges, gave their best, and depended on God for the outcomes.
3. **Don't Rush the Process:** The moments where God accomplishes great things in condensed periods of time are called "miracles". More often than miracles God chooses to work in processes. If possible embrace the processes of this season and allow them to be formational in your life. Experienced pastors counsel patience repeatedly for transitional situations. Rushing tends to make a person more reactive in any given situation rather than responding in careful and measured ways. God doesn't waste experiences and He will assuredly redeem yours if you keep the faith and allow the processes of this season to play out in a natural way.
4. **Be Positive:** Pastors who took part in the research for this project repeatedly advised those who follow to maintain a positive attitude. "For as a man thinks in his heart so is he".² Maintaining a positive attitude in the midst of a

² Prov 23:7, author's paraphrase

transitional season will allow those you lead to catch that same attitude for the benefit of the whole church.

- 5. Be Flexible:** While flying on a commercial airliner I once remarked to the private pilot seated next to me how much I feared watching the airliner's wingtips flex during flight. He explained that flexibility is designed into the wings so that they would not become brittle over time and break off. I learned that flexibility by design is able to counter stress cracks and breakage. Determining to be flexible in life is the best way to counter stress and to remain outside of the clutches of frustration. It is painful and nearly impossible to navigate transition without a willingness to bend as needed to the stream of change that is doubtlessly on its way. Staff pastors, lay leaders, and congregations must embrace the fact that former times are giving way to new seasons. Previous patterns, habits, and ways of life will need to be unlearned so that new patterns, habits, and ways of life can be enacted.
- 6. Find A Confidant:** Locate a mentor, confidant, and spiritual advisor outside of the local church. This is a crucial piece of the transitional puzzle. Such an individual can serve as a sounding board, source of trust, understanding, objectivity, accountability and wisdom. It is wise to develop these relationships regardless of whether a pastor ever encounters transitional issues at all.
- 7. Posture of Peacemaking:** When the waves of transitional circumstances are already rocking a church it is important to have a leader who is committed to being a peacemaker on scene for the sake of stability. A peacemaker works to

bring about healing and reconciliation. A peacemaker looks for creative and innovative ways to resolve conflicts and promote unity. A peacemaker demonstrates to others how to walk humbly with God and other believers. A leader with a posture of peacemaking challenges other believers to live up to the same Christ-centered ethic.

- 8. Learn To Release:** Sometimes the natural inclination in times of uncertainty is to hold tightly to people, things, and situations in an effort to bring it all back under our control. The counterintuitive response is to learn to release these people, things, and situations into the hands of God. To release such matters is a step of faith. This in no way is an admonition to withdraw or give up, but is simply a reminder to pastors that we work through transition as junior partners with God. There is a part for each of us to play, after which, the remainder must be placed to rest in the hands of God alone. One anonymous pastor even admonished the importance of releasing the “need to know where everything stands” adding, “it will haunt you”. It is important, after doing one’s best, to be able to release the church and the future fully to God.
- 9. Limit New Responsibilities:** There is always more than enough to do when it comes to leading ministry in a local church. As mentioned earlier in the “potential pitfalls” section there is a limit to the workload any one person can and should take on. A pastor should not only properly assess what his or her limits are but also be able to assert and maintain reasonable boundaries. Taking on too heavy a workload, while dealing with the emotional, physical,

and spiritual demands of transition, will only wear a pastor down and at best produce a mediocre level of ministry.

10. Love The Sheep: The role of a pastor in scripture is intrinsically tied to the role of a shepherd. Pastoral care is an important and essential ministry ethic. In the gospel of John Jesus asks Peter three times to demonstrate his love for Christ by caring for “my sheep”.³ When the regular routine is disrupted and change is taking place all around it is easy to invert or neglect the core priorities. The commission of a pastor as under-shepherd is to care for the sheep that belong to the Great Shepherd.

11. Honest Communication: Working through a season of unplanned transition with those given authority for the interim requires a strong working relationship. During this season, more than any other, it is important for a staff pastor and leadership team to converse with openness and honesty. It is important to learn and clarify role expectations as much as possible. To hedge or play games with regard to roles, intentions, ambitions, and processes threatens the church’s chances to move forward with minimal disruption. A pastor must do his or her best to model openness and honesty with other church leaders and trust that the same level of openness and honesty will be reciprocated.

12. The Only Way To Leave: If, as a staff pastor, you find it impossible to remain on the team for the duration of the transition process and God has released you to resign there is only one way to do so: Graciously. A pastor

³ John 21:17 [NIV].

who finds him or her self unable to lead or follow must be willing to be removed from the congregation in a manner that does not further damage the people or the fabric of the local church. When Christ commissioned Peter to feed His sheep he did not imply permission to strike them or burn down the sheep pen upon his departure. Pastors who leave a church do a disservice to themselves and to their calling when they are unable to control the impulse to lash out. If a pastor must leave it must be done with good will and class on his or her part regardless of circumstances surrounding that departure.

By reading and interacting with the potential pitfalls and principles for preservation expressed in this chapter you have come face to face with the wisdom of pastors who have encountered and overcome their own transitional dilemmas. In earlier chapters you encountered the “Wheel of Forces” model identifying the dynamics that come into play during a season of unanticipated transition. You also encountered frameworks identifying what it takes to manage personal and organizational transition as well as a contingency plan meant to guide church leaders through the initial days and weeks that follow an unplanned senior pastor departure.

The question that now remains is how you will make use of this wisdom in your own personal context of ministry. Because every congregation is unique you will certainly encounter experiences that have not been reflected in this resource. Hopefully what you have encountered here has helped to encourage, equip, and prepare you for the sometimes uncertain but always rewarding days ahead in your own pastoral journey. At the end of the day God has chosen you to serve as a stable leader through the tremors of shaky times.

Chapter 7 Connecting Point:

1. Review the “Potential Pitfalls” section and determine if there are any you have successfully avoided so far.
2. Review the “Potential Pitfalls section and determine if there are any you have fallen into. If so have they had negatives consequences for your situation or not?
3. Review the “Principles for Preservation” section and determine if there are any you have been successfully incorporating so far.
4. Review the “Principles for Preservation” section and determine if there are any you have neglected that you should be more careful about following?
5. Are there any “Principals for Preservation” you have violated? What consequences, if any, have resulted?
6. Now that you have finished reading the entire contents of this book how would you rate your handling of the transition? Miserable – Fair – Good – Excellent

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