



Best Next Steps: Starting Well

Transitions Workshop 2021

Hopefully, there is a sense of excitement and joy about a new beginning as the pastoral leader of a new church or charge. Maybe you are also experiencing some anxiety or hesitancy or the feeling of being overwhelmed in anticipation. This is normal.

The Bishop and Cabinet, whether you are a Full Elder, a Local Pastor or a CLM assigned, have been in prayer and discernment about your appointment. The Bishop and Cabinet have faith in you and believe you are the right person for the appointment. Your gifts and graces will be a blessing to the congregation.

Our desire is for you to have the best right start as possible. Here are some helpful steps for your new beginning.

- Lovett Weems uses an analogy when talking about a pastoral transition. As a new pastor you are walking in as the guest. The congregation has the role as the host. Think of it as being a guest in someone's home. When you walk in and look around you do not start by making suggestions about how the furniture in the rooms should be changed or the walls need a different color of paint or even that the carpet and curtains need replaced!

Being a new pastor, resist the urge to change/move/rearrange things right away. In the beginning you are not the host, you are the guest. Show respect and appreciation for who the congregation has been and the way they comfortably do things – even the sacred cows! Get to know their history. You do not have critical mass information to make changes right away. That time will come later on.

- Do not change the bulletin, newsletter, order of worship or style of worship.
- Do not move the pulpit, baptismal font, pianos, pews, etc.

Michael Watkins wrote: *“The actions you take during your first three months will largely determine whether you will succeed or fail. Transitions are periods of opportunity. But they are also periods of acute vulnerability.”*

Ken Callahan wrote: *“Your first three days shape the first three weeks. The first three weeks shape the first three months. How you as a pastor use that time together with your congregation shapes the first three years. How you begin shapes how you continue and where you end.”*

Bishop Mark Webb said, *“Taking time to build relationships in the first 6 months puts “change in your pocket.” The relationships you will build earns the credibility you will need in the future.”*

These three perspectives are a critical first step in a new appointment as you build relationships. You have one chance to make a first good impression and where you focus your time and energy in the early days will be an indication to the congregation what is important to you. Use this time wisely to make connections. Adopt a learning mindset. Become a student. Seek advice and counsel. Ask questions. Listen actively and respond appropriately. Leading with credibility must be earned.

- Moving into a new parsonage is time consuming and exhausting but try not to spend all of your first day moving and setting up your house.
- Introduce yourself to the staff. Ask questions to show you are interested in how they serve the church, ask them about their families, hobbies, etc.
- Call key people in the church. Key Leaders, matriarchs/patriarchs, those whose name surfaces often when others talk about the church. Call to introduce yourself as the new pastor and express your looking forward to working with them to bring glory to God. Do not get caught up in conversation about the negativity that might be in the church. Keep it positive. Let them know you are looking forward to working with them as the pastor.
- Connect with a member or a leader of the church who will take some time and introduce you to the community (influential leaders), businesses, school principals, Mayor, town council members, Kiwanis, Rotary, ministerium and the homebound/nursing home members of the church. Get to know more about the community and local traditions/history.
- If possible, with permission, after a conversation and meeting with the outgoing pastor, try to make connections with the leaders of the congregation and recommended members suggested by the pastor.
- Example: Reach out to the AA of the church to discuss items like what day of the is the information for the bulletin/newsletter/website due. Is there a list of the homebound? Password for internet access, for files/programs. What groups use the church and when?
- Meet with the tech person.
- Meet with the music/choir director. What is the choir schedule? Does the choir process at the beginning of the service; special services; etc.

- Meet with the Worship Leader/Team. What does a typical Sunday morning look like – ushers, hosts, acolytes, nursery, etc.
- Meet with the Lay Leader. What is the Lay Leader’s understanding of their role?
- Meet with the chair of SPRC and Trustees discuss any concerns there may be about the parsonage or other items of importance like the expectation of the pastor to be involved in community events, ministry activities, administrative duties (like Ezra reports, charge conference reports, vital signs, - who cares for these items) Does the church provide a cell phone for the pastor for church use or do you use your personal number. Does the pastor have a discretionary fund?
- Meet with the Leadership Team/Ad Council to discuss the current Covid plan/online services and gain some knowledge about current or future plans.

Be ready to work on July 1 – let the people know you have arrived. Try not to lose valuable time. Share with them your call and the clarity of your gifts that you bring as the pastoral leader.

Plan before July 1

- Outline of sermons for the first few weeks or months
- Meet with the outgoing pastor – predecessor should go over important files, future plans, membership, etc. with you.
- Contact the SPRC chair for questions to you and from you.
- Conversation with your family about the intenerate system, if needed. Pastor is the one being employed, no specific requirements for the family.
- Have a conversation with your family about the use of social media and contact with the former church. There is no restriction for the spouse and family on social media but explain the importance of being careful about what is shared.
- Be clear about your family expectations as a clergy family and their involvement in the church. Be transparent with the congregation as well.
- Be very clear with the congregation about your Sabbath day off, day off, family time.
- Begin to care for family changes: school, doctors, banks, hospitals, dentist, etc. ask for recommendations.
- Do not talk negatively about your previous appointment or the current appointment.
- Discuss with the new DS the change of mentors.
- Go through and read the material in the Transition Packet and respond and care for items that will need your immediate attention.
- Love the people! Pray for the people!
- Watch for those who show up first from the congregation. Some folks are truly being hospitable; some have an agenda!

- Never criticize the former pastor even if it is justified. Never speak in a way that your words may be interpreted as affirmation to a member who did not care or had issues with the former pastor.
- Let people know it is okay to grieve the loss of their former pastor. Do not be threatened by positive comments about the former pastor. We all have a hand in building the kingdom with our gifts and graces!
- It is also okay for you and your family to grieve your former congregation. Acknowledge losses with understanding. Be attentive to your own emotional health and wellbeing.
- Honor the progress and achievements of the church and the former pastor.
- Never ask right off when you get paid (but do provide important information to the treasurer)
- Take time to read/explore the church files, previous years minutes of Council meetings/trustees/other groups. Get familiar with what they are doing – mission, outreach, upcoming events. Visit the history/archive room.
- As you pre-prepare getting to know the new congregation let what you have learned shape your priorities: Ask yourself:
 - Which of my gifts are most needed?
 - What gifts do I need to develop?
 - How can I apply my gifts to the church's context?
- Read the letter from your District Superintendent about expectations. (Being involved in District Events, Cluster Group, checking your conference email, keeping your DS informed of family and church concerns or celebrations.)

Suggested reading: *Your Best Move*, by Robert Kaylor (Seedbed, 2013)

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