

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ

CHANGE HAPPENS!

Guidance and Hope in Times of Transition

A Resource for Congregations



Table of Contents

SECTION I: LCMC TRANSITIONS IN MINISTRY	2
UNDERSTANDING TRANSITIONS	3
DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS	4
VALUES	4
 SECTION II: TRANSITIONS COME IN AT LEAST FOUR KINDS	 6
 SECTION III: FINDING HELP IN TIMES OF TRANSITION	 7
GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR SELECTION RESOURCES	7
THREE KINDS OF RESOURCES	7
ASSESSMENT	7
CONFLICT	8
THIRD PARTY HELP	8
 SECTION IV: HOW DO WE START	 10
FOR THE CHURCH COUNCIL/LEADERSHIP TEAM	10
FOR THE TRANSITION TEAM	10
A FINAL WORD	11
 SECTION V: APPENDICES	 13
APPENDIX ONE: PULPIT SUPPLY FOR LCMC	13
APPENDIX TWO: FINISHING WELL COACHING—DR. KENT HUNTER	14
APPENDIX THREE: MATERIALS FROM DR. DARRELL PULS/PEACEBRIDGE MINISTRIES	15
APPENDIX FOUR: MANAGING CHURCH TRANSITIONS—A SELECTED READING LIST	21
APPENDIX FIVE: OTHER TRAINING RESOURCES	22
APPENDIX SIX: AN ARTICLE BY PR. ROBERT GORDAN, INTERIM MINISTER	23

This resource for congregations was prepared at the request of the Board of Trustees of LCMC and was developed over the course of three days of conversation, prayer and study. The writing team included: Pastor Jaynan Clark, Pastor Brad Miller, Sharon MacFadyen, Pastor Steve Ernst, Pastor Paul Braafladt, Pastor Deborah Lunde, Dr. Darrell Puls, Pastor Kip Tyler, Dr. Kent Hunter, Pastor Paul Spaulding, Pastor Doyle Karst, Pastor Robert Gordon, Pastor Michael Chaffee and Rev. Mark Vander Tuig.
Special thanks for editing and formatting to Dr. Kent Hunter and Noah Ruppert.

September, 2012

Change Happens!

Guidance and Hope in Times of Transition

Did you hear what happened at 13th Lutheran Church just down the street? (a purely fictional account). A week after their pastor resigned, a meeting was called and the following statements were overheard:

- *"We need to call the denomination to have them give us a pastor!"*
- *"We need a pastor so we can have communion!"*
- *"Does anyone really know why the pastor left?"*
- *"I'm glad we got rid of him. Isn't it about time?"*
- *"He's the best pastor we've ever had."*
- *"I think we could get someone here within a few weeks."*
- *"Let's not change anything so we don't lose members."*
- *"Maybe we should do as study?" "No, that costs too much..."*
- *"Maybe we should do a survey, see what people want!"*

Later, in the parking lot, the conversation continued and it went on for a very long time...

I. LCMC Transitions in Ministry

Change is a normal part of life for individuals, families and congregations. This resource is offered to provide assistance during this time. Change can create anxiety but also tremendous opportunities for growth. Make certain to spend time in prayer for the ministry and mission of your church as you walk through the days of transition.

LCMC is an association of congregations. We are free in Christ, accountable to one another, rooted in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, and committed to the fulfillment of the Great Commission: to go make disciples of all nations. So it is the responsibility of the congregation to deal with transitions in a manner that honors the Gospel and fulfills the ministry of reconciliation given to us. (II Corinthians 5: 18-21)

Transition is something that all of God's people have gone through over the generations. The Bible identifies many such examples and will prove helpful for us to become familiar with them.

- The exodus – *Countless examples of grumbling followers:* [Exodus 16: 2, 6-8](#)
- Nehemiah – *Successful transition even in the face of significant resistance* [Nehemiah 2:17](#)
- Moses to Joshua – *Transition in leadership* [Numbers 27:18-23](#)
- Joshua- *Faithful transition for all of God's people:* [Joshua 1-5](#)
- Saul becomes Paul – *Transformation and conversion:* [Acts 9:3-6, 20, 13:9-10](#)
- The disciples -- *Changed and sent into the world:* [Acts 2: 2-4, 14, 38-39](#)

As your congregation faces a time of transition and change, remember what the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Again, we remind you to pray through every step of this process, knowing that the Holy Spirit desires to lead and guide you and we know that Jesus walks with us as well.

One more reminder...you gather as the people of God, followers of Jesus. Everyone, everywhere in everyplace is changing, all the time—it is the only thing that we can count on. With one exception: Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever. It is essential for us all to remember that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus changes everything.

Paul tells us in I Corinthians 13 that now "we see in a mirror dimly, but there is a day coming when we will see Him face to face—and in that moment all of the change and transitions that we have gone through will become clear. It is the cross of Jesus that allows us to see joy in the middle of sorrow, light in the darkness, success in the face of what seems to be failure, comfort when in pain, the riches of the Kingdom while struggling to pay the bills...and Life

out of death.

The church, your church, belongs to Jesus and He is enough.

Understanding Transitions

"Transition is the process of changing from one situation to another". Our congregations are always in some stage of transition. However, there are moments when those transitions are more intense or acute. Conflict during transitions is normal. The level of conflict and its impact will be directly related to the manner in which the transition is handled. A change in pastoral leadership creates the greatest level of anxiety regardless of its cause.

The key for our congregations is to help people become aware of the dynamics of transitions. The most effective transitions occur through careful planning. Change always brings conflict but healthy congregations see conflict as an opportunity for deeper understanding and growth.

The process of transition and change moves through four overlapping stages:



Developmental Tasks

Transitions are often messy. However, in the context of the congregation the following five developmental tasks might be a helpful conversation for the church council, the congregation and or the transition team (adapted from “Interim Ministry”, <http://www.ChurchTech.com>):

1. Identify the congregation’s history
2. Examine the leadership structure and the normal decision-making process
3. Review the LCMC documents and acknowledge it’s structure and purpose
4. Clarify congregational identity

5. Commit to the future and eventually the new pastor

See also: Loren Mead, “A Change of Pastors...and How It Affects Change in the Congregation”, <http://www.Alban.org>.

Values

Transitions are a good time to re-examine the mission, purpose, and core values of our congregations. As we seek to discern new directions and the leading of the Holy Spirit, these fundamental values can help as you work through transition:

1. The church belongs to Jesus and not to us, or any one group
2. Trust in the work of the Holy Spirit, the process, and the participants
3. Maintain openness to all points of view
4. Establish transparency in making decisions and identifying plans
5. Practice effective and consistent communication, with opportunity for feedback

II. Transitions Come in at Least Four Kinds

Transitions can be intentional, organic, accidental or catastrophic.

- **Intentional**—some change in our congregations is the result of careful planning and implementation. In some of our congregations, a task force has been formed to address needs like building space, or a capital fund campaign. It might also be formed to address a change in affiliation, confirmation programs, worship services, worship times and more. Sometimes a pastor becomes aware of the need for change and announces a retirement and gives the congregation a period of time to adjust. And there are many other such intentional change events.

All of the above changes are the result of planning, study, communication, decision and implementation. Even so there will be resistance and even conflict. Change is normal and it normally includes conflict, even in the best of circumstances.

- **Organic**—sometimes change is the result of things that happen naturally and incrementally. No one planned on it, but it happened. A congregation grows and has to adjust to that growth. Sometimes a congregation declines and adjustments have to be made. There are times when a given part of a congregation seems to be “on fire” and the needs of that ministry have to be addressed. No one wants to put out the fire of the Holy Spirit, but change takes time, resources and careful planning in order for it to be lasting and meaningful.
- **Accidental**—we live in a changing world and there are times when the congregation will have to adjust to circumstances that are

beyond its control. Some cities are changing their zoning laws that will now affect the church building, grounds or parking lot. There are times when accidents happen on our properties or to our people and it results in a change in the way we structure our steps, sidewalks and restrooms. Unfortunately, accidents happen to pastors and leaders that may dramatically affect their ability to carry out their assignments. And sometimes weather creates transitions: tornados, floods and fire will each create dramatic changes in the way we think about everything.

- **Catastrophic**—when ministry leaders fail morally or criminally, not only will our way of carrying out ministry change, but everything else will change as well. When trust has been broken, people in congregations feel betrayed and abandoned, and some will struggle to hang on to their faith. When lies have been offered as truth, some will begin to doubt everything that has ever been said. When finances have been compromised, giving to the ministry may dry up and never recover.

This is a critical time to step back, take a deep breath, take a “long-term” view of ministry and reach out to others who have expertise and experience and ask for help! There are many who are trained to help in this kind of a circumstance, draw on them to create a strategy for healing and hope.

III. Finding Help in Times of Transition

A time of transition may be great opportunity to deal with issues in congregations that may have been going on for a long time. Every congregation has its issues and no congregation is perfect. Because of the nature of congregational life, issues can remain under the surface for years, even generations. And not every congregation has concerns that merit intervention...many of our congregations are healthy, functioning and encouraging to each other. But every congregation ought to have a desire to offer their best for the sake of the Gospel.

But where do we turn for help?

General Guidelines for Selecting Resources

Congregational resources are not endorsed by LCMC, rather they are recommended by congregations who have used them and found them helpful. We encourage congregations to examine several resources before selecting one.

If the congregation seeks to use a resource, carefully select the organization, and get to know the consultant. Prayerfully consider your decision. We recommend that you interview with consultants before making a choice. Talk with other congregations and check references.

Each congregation is unique. Resources should fit each congregation. Avoid the approach that one-size-fits-all.

One final caution. Consider prayerfully the full recommendation of the resource/consultant when that report is given. However, the ministry of the church belongs to the church and not every recommendation may be relevant or even desirable. Each congregation is responsible for its own ministry

and that will be discovered through prayer, the use of resources, conversation and discernment. This is about discovering God's will for our congregations. Therefore, every consultation and resource tool should be understood as the congregation's servant, not its master.

Here are seven things to consider when selecting an assessment resource:

1. Does the assessment report include recommendations to the whole congregation?
2. What kind of follow-up is offered to help interpret the results?
3. Is the assessment based on a particular theological emphasis? If so, what is it?
4. Is the assessment consistent with your congregational culture?
5. Are there trained consultants who are familiar with the assessment?
6. What is the expertise, training and experience demonstrated by the consultants?
7. Is the assessment available within the needed timetable?

What follows are three kinds of resources to you in times of Transition.

Three Kinds of Resources

Assessment

We encourage congregations to engage in the process of assessment in order to strengthen the Body of Christ on a regular basis. We would love to see developing in our association a "culture that values assessment" in each of our congregations, wanting always to bring our best to the work of ministry.

There is no “mandate” for assessment, but only encouragement to see it as a valuable tool.

Even so, assessment can create anxiety for members, staff, and pastors. Roadblocks to assessment include fear, pride and ignorance. Despite these challenges, it is still a valuable resource to help grow our ministries. To engage in assessment is really a matter of good stewardship that seeks to make the best use of the gifts and abilities that God has given every congregation.

Congregations engaging in assessment should not see it as a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process. Congregations change over time. Assessments should not only be utilized through conflict, but also used regularly to strengthen the church. Different assessment tools should be sought rather than using only one. Congregations could choose to do this on a regular basis, similar to a regular checkup with your doctor.

This is not an exclusive or exhaustive list:

- The Church Vitality Profile Assessment; Diagnostic Consultation: Church Doctor Ministries—
<http://www.churchdoctor.org>
- Natural Church Development:
<http://www.ncd-international.org>
- The Glass Cockpit:
<http://www.ChurchTech.com>
- Reveal: The Willow Creek Association:
<http://www.WCA.org>
- Kennon Callahan: 12 Keys to An Effective Church
<http://www.missionleadersnetwork.com>

Conflict

Transitions by nature represent change and change often brings conflict. Conflict in and of itself is not bad. But it is crucial to handle it well. Many avoid conflict, but conflict approached biblically can be a blessing. The Scriptures tell us to, “Speak the truth in love.” ([Ephesians 4: 15](#)). One of the most important and least considered lessons of the early church is how to handle conflict, working toward reconciliation. This is what the Gospel is all about!

God understood the power of words and the vulnerability of the community of faith. Included in the Ten Commandments is one that protects the

members of the community, and the congregation by guarding what comes out of our mouths: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” ([Exodus 20: 16](#)). Martin Luther, in his explanation to the 8th commandment writes: “We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him, speak will of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way.”

James points out the power of our words as he describes the need to control our tongue ([James 3:9-10](#)). Jesus tells his disciples that if we have a problem with a brother or sister, go to them and talk to them about it ([Matt 18: 15-20](#)).

Sometimes, however, just like in our own families, we cannot work out the issues on our own, and need to ask for help. That is when an objective, outside consultant can help those who are willing to find a solution to the conflict, end the deadlock and move forward together. It is the responsibility of the leadership of the church to discern this need and then bears the responsibility take action on behalf of the church and seek out that help. It is better to do this sooner than later.

See also: “Conflict in the Church: A Predictive Escalation Model and Proposal for Healing“, Dr. Darrell Puls (<http://www.Conflicttopeace.com>)

This is not an exclusive or exhaustive list:

- Peace Bridge Ministries: Dr. Darrell Puls
<http://www.conflicttopeace.com>
- Metanoia Ministries: Pr. Jim Van Iperan
<http://www.metanoiaministries.org>
- Lombard Mennonite Peace Center
<http://www.lmpeacecenter.org>
- Livin’ with Jesus: Dr. Garry Seefeldt
<http://www.livinwithjesus.org>
- Training for Conflict Management: Church Doctor Ministries
<http://www.churchdoctorministries.com>
- LCMC Districts:
<http://www.lcmc.net>
- LCMC Pastors and Congregations

Third Party Help

Every transition and every congregation will be unique and there are many options to consider. If all

that is needed is “pulpit supply”, the congregation can first look to themselves. There may be people in your congregation who are able to preach on occasion and doing so might truly build up the body of Christ by hearing the testimony of its own members.

Sometimes congregations worry about the sacraments and how often they might receive communion without a pastor present. In LCMC we do not require a pastor to preside over Holy Communion. There is nothing in the Scriptures that requires a pastor to do so, but only the command to do things in good order ([I Corinthians 12](#)). The church council can authorize members of the congregation who have been trained and equipped, to lead the congregation in celebrating the Lord’s Supper and to do baptisms as well. [Augsburg Article 14](#) requires only a “regular call” and we believe the church council can do this.

Pulpit Supply

We, LCMC, has a list of pastors who are available to help on a weekly basis and you can find out if there is someone in your area by calling our office at 1-734-207-5400 and ask for the Pastoral Certification Coordinator. You can also check with the LCMC district in your geographic area.

Interim Pastor

An Interim Pastor is one who is willing to come and supply for the pastoral needs of a congregation for a given period of time. The work of an interim pastor is to basically carry out the work of a pastor, without intentionally making structural or programmatic changes to the congregation. Many of our retired pastors are available and interested in doing such work. Call the LCMC office for a list of possible candidates or check with the district in your geographic area.

Intentional Interim Pastor

An Intentional Interim Pastor is one who has training for interim ministry and is called to a term limit for the purpose of bringing healing and change to a congregation. A congregation may seek out an Intentional Interim when the congregation has gone through the resignation of a long-term pastorate (more than 12 years in office), the death of a pastor,

or conflict leading to the forced resignation of a pastor. Our LCMC office will have a list of those who have been trained and qualified for this specific kind of ministry.

You might also consult with:

- The Alban Institute: <http://www.alban.org>
- The Interim Ministry Network <http://www.imnedu.org>
- The Interim Ministry Training and Certification, a cooperative training program with ChurchTech and Niagara Lutheran Institute <http://www.churchtech.com>

There are other consultants that may be available to a congregation, for such resources please call the LCMC office and speak with someone there about your particular needs.

IV. How Do We Start?

Pray! What follow are a couple of examples, but feel free to write and offer your own!

“Gracious Lord, we thank you for this congregation and for this time. Forgive us for setting our own agenda; forgive us for deciding before discerning. We confess that this church belongs to you and our desire is that your will would be done. Help us Lord to listen, to hear your voice, and to have the courage to follow where you lead the way. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Or...

“Gracious God, your mercies never end. Today we need your mercy at this meeting. We are impatient people who so easily insist on our own way. Our actions betray loyalty to our own ideas when we are asked to trust the thinking of others. Bring us together O Lord, so that your Spirit guides us in every way possible and infiltrates every moment of this meeting. In Jesus’ name.”

For the Church Council/Leadership Team

As leaders of congregations, your role is to lead the church through transition, but not necessarily to lead the transition process itself. As leaders, we have much to do to oversee the on-going mission and ministry of the congregation.

If this transition concerns the calling of a pastor, you may be tempted to immediately form a call committee. Instead, consider using this time to evaluate your ministry.

One of your options is to appoint a transition team. You should consult your constitution and by-laws for the guidance these governing documents provide. Each member of the church council should have a current copy of the constitution and by-laws. Selection of the transition team should focus on spiritual maturity.

Final selection belongs to the church council. It will be easier to find members of the team if the council appoints the chair.

The transition team should make regular reports to both the council and the congregation.

For the Transition Team

1. **Take a Deep Breath.** You have been called/nominated/asked to be a part of this team to help your congregation through transition. This is going to take some time, there will be conflict, but God is in it and the Lord will be with you through it. Pray without ceasing and ask the congregation to pray for you and for your work.
2. **Connect With Others.** There are many others who have gone through the same things—other pastors, congregations, leaders or members who have been through a time of transition in the church. Reach out to them and use them as a resource. A good place to start might be a district coordinator/chair or the LCMC office.
3. **Develop a Plan.** A time of transition is an opportunity to conduct a thorough assessment of the relative health of a congregation. We encourage every congregation to do so regularly, not just during transition. There are many tools available and described elsewhere in this document (section III).

Part of the discernment process includes awareness of the remaining staff, their roles, and specific terms of their employment agreements.

Review the assessment tools and decide which best fit your circumstance. Interview

the consultant as needed, and contact a congregation that has used the consultant as a reference. This will help you discern suitability, cost and timeline.

A congregational assessment is similar to going to the doctor for a needed check up. Sometimes a checkup can discover issues in the early stages that need to be addressed. Intervention is minimal. It is better to address concerns early, rather than wait until major surgery is required.

There are those who have training and expertise in the area of assessment. Use them. An objective, third person point of view can be extremely helpful. Each congregation, however, remains responsible for their own ministry. Refer to section III for resources available in each category, remembering that these are suggestions, not an exclusive list.

4. **Seek Approval and Be Willing to Make Revisions.** Bring your plan of action back to the church council for their input and approval. Make a recommendation for the assessment tool/consultant to be employed. Revise the plan if necessary. Develop a budget for the plan as well as a timeline for action steps. Include measurable outcomes.
5. **Involve the Congregation.** Bring your plan to the congregation for consideration and input. Bring it to the congregation at a special meeting, along with approval of the budgeted expenses and the expected time needed for the process to be completed. The more often the congregation says “yes” to the plan the more likely it is to succeed.
6. **Keep Constant Communication.** Communicate regularly to the council and the congregation. You may want to develop a specific newsletter, email blast, website for the members to stay current with progress and to ask questions, and give feedback.
7. **Implement the Plan.** There are no short cuts, do the necessary work, it will pay amazing dividends later on.
8. **Review Results.** Once implemented, communicate the results and strategic objectives to the whole congregation for review. When calling a pastor, the call committee needs to have a face-to-face communication with the transition team so that they understand the assessment and strategic objectives.
9. **Regarding the call committee.** When formed, each member of the call committee ought to have a copy of the call packet, which can be found on the LCMC website (www.lcmc.net). The process of calling a pastor belongs to the congregation, which is responsible for background checks (vetting), calling references, and praying that the recommended candidate reflects the center of God’s will.
10. **Document Results.** The transition team is responsible to make a final report outlining their work. This report should be given to the church council. Assessment should become a normal and periodic part of the life of the congregation and the pastoral ministry. Remember, your final report could be a great resource to other congregations facing similar transitions as well.

A final word:

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace,

sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

--1 Thessalonians 5: 12-24

Although transition may be difficult, we are not alone. Pray together. We are doing the work of the Lord, so work well together. Be peaceful with each other. Find patience and persevere with one another. Focus on the ultimate goal of the Great Commission. If the Lord is at the center, than nothing can stand in the way of your transition.

Appendix One:

Pulpit Supply for LCMC

Many have asked what the procedure might be for securing pulpit supply for their LCMC congregation. As often is the case in LCMC there is no one answer. Sometimes this is the first area where the reality of congregational freedom and responsibility hits home.

The first suggestion is to pray. Who does God want to fill your pulpit on that Sunday? You are not just looking for warm bodies with credentials. You want a Word from the Lord. Some pastors brought in for pulpit supply have made a church council say, “Never again.”

Don’t forget to look to those God has already given you. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. We respect congregations asking one of their own to bring the message. We also respect that a congregation can authorize one of its own members to preside at Holy Communion. For the sake of good order the congregation council should authorize that person for the particular times needed. This is not just a “Who wants to volunteer?” process. Prayer, discussion and a decision is important.

An example of this is newly formed LCMC congregation that was desperate for a pastor for their first few weeks. When they heard they could assume responsibility themselves they did! They were excited to watch spiritual leadership rise to the surface and give them Good News. They were a stronger group by the time they called their first pastor

Another place to approach for help with pulpit supply is from your District. Congregations are not required to join Districts, but this is one of the benefits coming from involvement in a District. The networking that happens in Districts often will include ways to help congregations with pulpit supply.

If there is no ready-made network in your area, assign a couple people to call around to other

neighboring LCMC congregations. Larger LCMC congregations should consider sharing a pastor - perhaps one Sunday a month. “To whom much is given...” Also, check the “Seeking Call List” of clergy to see if there are available pastors near you.

Sometimes there are retired pastors in neighboring congregations or someone there may know of an available pastor. It is also not required that the pastor you invite has to be LCMC. There are many retired ELCA or other Lutheran pastors who share LCMC values.

And lastly, but perhaps something that should be an early effort, is to call those seminaries on the LCMC “working relationship” list, or check the “Seminararian” list on the website, to see if there are students who may love to come and share the Gospel with you!

Again, whoever you have come to your church, your council should authorize. God bless you as you “cross-ventilate” the Gospel.

- Paul Spaulding, Pastoral Certification Coordinator
For the Ministry Board

Appendix Two: Dr. Kent Hunter—Finishing Well Coaching

Multiplying Hope Through Healthy Churches



FINISHING WELL COACHING

Guidance for retiring ministers and churches transitioning toward new leadership.

- ~ Helping you develop a plan of succession that works for the retiring ministers, your church, and your successor.
- ~ Developing a transition plan Philosophy of Ministry document.
- ~ Structuring a timetable that honors the retiring minister, assimilates the successor, and serves your church.
- ~ Learning the do's and don'ts for transitioning toward the next leader.
- ~ Communicating the transition/celebrating the change.

This consultation helps a church transition toward a new key staff position.

- ~ Help to successfully fill a long vacancy.
- ~ Strategies to effectively transition after a long pastoral tenure.

A two-day, onsite visit by a consultant. Preceded by a review of values, beliefs, priorities and uniqueness of the church. A report is provided that represents a thorough strategy with recommendations.

Call for a price quote.



www.churchdoctor.org

www.churchdoctorministries.com

Appendix Three:

Materials from Darrell Puls

TRANSITIONS: A PROCESS OF PROMISE -- Peacebridge Ministries

Every organization goes through multiple transitions. In particular, churches go through a transition when its pastor leaves, no matter what the reason for leaving. It really does not matter if the pastor was much-loved or chased out of town—the outline of the transitional process will be the same. Understanding the transitional process allows you to plan for what many see as unexpected. Planning deletes most of the surprises.

The challenge is in the fact that the transitional process is generally not understood. We think everything will be wonderful when the new pastor arrives, but there are always remnants that we must deal with. When that happens or unexpected problems arise, confusion, anger, and even accusations are common.

Transitions take place over an indeterminate period of time marked by endings and beginnings, by leaving and by arriving, by the death of relationships and the birth of new relationships. Some transitions can be completed in a year while others will take between five and seven years. The longer the pastor was at the church and the more popular he or she was, the longer the transitional period is likely to be, regardless of the reason for leaving. Likewise, if the church was in conflict regarding the pastor's leaving, it will take longer to form the new Primacy of the Whole, which can also be defined as the healing of the body of Christ.

Reality check: You will almost certainly lose some people during the transition. That is normal and expected. If the transition is done well, they will be more than replaced by new people.

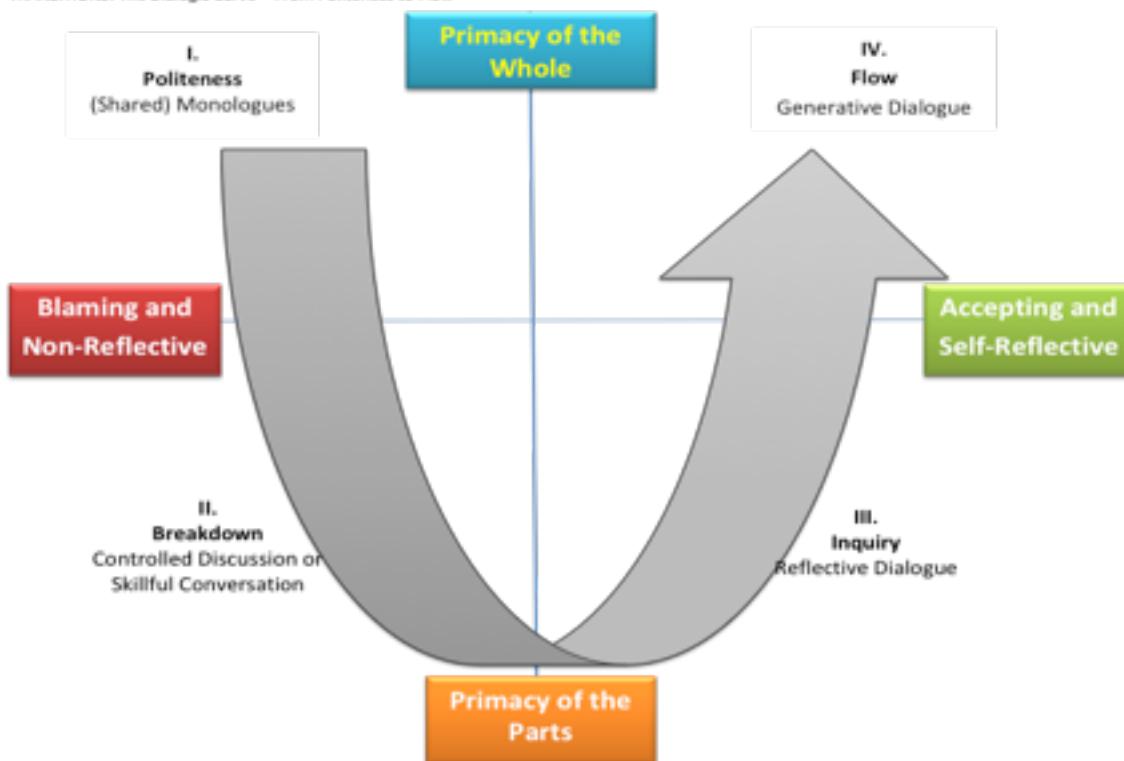
Transitions progress along a “U” shaped curve (See TRANSITIONS – The Dialogic Curve). While the process is broken into four parts for ease of understanding, the parts actually overlap.

SECTOR 1 - POLITENESS

The first sector encompasses monologues. Sometimes they are shared, but they are monologues all the same. They express an opinion and an interpretation of reality that may or may not resonate with others. It is essentially a time of separation where people feel oddly distanced from each other and even alone. This side of the equation consists primarily of blaming oneself or others for what has happened, particularly if the causes for leaving are not enunciated or are understood as not entirely truthful. This sector is particularly powerful when a pastor is forced out after a lengthy battle between opponents and supporters.

A culture of politeness often reigns here where the people talk to each other, but from a distance. It is not polite to discuss fully what has happened, and so it remains unexamined. People tend not to discuss their feelings of loss or abandonment. The underlying belief is that everything will be fine if it is just ignored. Ignoring it is the opposite of what must be done.

TRANSITIONS: The Dialogic Curve – From Politeness to Flow



MANAGING SECTOR 1

The elephant in the room must be addressed as it will not leave of its own accord. This is easier to do than you may suspect. (See chart 2, THE TRANSITION PROCESS)

1. **Identify what is being lost.** Be specific. Relationships are ruptured, trust may be broken, innocence may be a victim, familiarity and comfort are disrupted. . .
2. **Expect overreaction.** To some this type of transition is very threatening. Do not be surprised when people express feelings that you may believe are out of place. They are what they are. Simply acknowledge them as legitimate.
3. **Acknowledge the losses.** It is not only OK to talk about what has been lost, it is necessary. Accept all expressions of loss as legitimate for that person – never argue.

4. **Expect and accept grieving.** We grieve whenever we lose something of importance, and many things of importance are disrupted or lost during a transition. Acknowledge the grief as legitimate, which brings it into the open and allows healing to begin.
5. **Mark the endings.** What is ending? Identify everything that is ending. Don't hide it. Again, bring the endings into the open where it is safe to discuss them.
6. **Continuation of the important.** Stress that all of the important functions of the church will continue, and identify what those functions are. Be specific, and repeat it often.

SECTOR II – BREAKDOWN (Managing the Neutral Zone)

This is the area we most try to avoid, with disastrous effect. It is called the “neutral zone” and it is the space between coming and going, of ending and beginning.

It is a borderland of uncertainty where the congregation looks to its leaders for reassurance. It is a place of discomfort and unease. Conversations here tend to be a controlled discussion or skillful conversations, but they are not yet the call and response of deep-level dialogue.

1. **Acknowledge the uncertainty in order to legitimize it.** This normalizes it and allows people to begin to function within the neutral zone.
2. **Redefine mission and core values.** This is the time where you will have the best opportunity to redefine the mission and core values of the congregation. Every congregation is called to something unique, and that calling changes over time. Transitions are the perfect time to spend several weeks, and even months, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit to find your new place in God's ever-unfolding story.
3. **Redefine internal structures.** This is also a wonderful opportunity to examine your church's internal structures such as policies and procedures, to winnow out what no longer fits and streamline for the next leg of the race (The Apostle Paul had something to say about that. . .).
4. **Create a culture of transparency.** The people in the congregation are looking to the leadership for guidance, reassurance, and direction. Absolute transparency in everything you are doing will eventually create a culture of transparency throughout the congregation, redefining boundaries and relationships in healthy ways.
5. **Stress that this is a time of opportunity.** Yes, it is uncomfortable, but one cannot reach a new harbor without leaving the old harbor behind and encountering the open sea. The primary difference between ordeal and adventure at this point is attitude.

At the bottom of the curve between Sectors II and III is where the individual parts of the body take on more importance, which is why it is such a great opportunity to study what you do well, what you do not do well, what you can add, and what you can discard.

SECTOR III – LAUNCHING THE NEW BEGINNING

This is where reflective dialogue can be brought into the open. Reflective dialogue occurs when people uncritically reflect on their own experiential journey and those of others. It creates a safe zone where people encounter each other on a deeper level than where they have been before. It is a place where they can express their initial misgivings, but more than that it is a place to express and grow ideas and dreams for the future.

Sector III has carryover effects from Sector II and is the pivot point for the future. If you have redefined your mission and goals, a new picture of the future is formed. Sector II is where you formally enunciate and launch the New Beginning.

Be very specific:

1. **Bring the new mission, goals and core values into the plan to show how they are intertwined and inter-functional.**
 - a. Define the new goals.
 - b. Paint a vivid picture of the new future and mission.
 - c. Delineate "The Plan" of how you are going to get there. Leave yourself some wiggle room, but be specific enough that enthusiasm begins to build.
2. **Time it carefully.** Announce for several weeks ahead of time that it is coming.
3. **Do not expect immediate buy-in.** Some will need more convincing than others.
4. **Repetition, repetition, repetition.**

SECTOR IV – THE NEW JOURNEY

There were good reasons why the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. They had to mourn the old, unlearn the old ways, and turn towards their new future. Quickly completed transitions usually fail. They are fueled by discomfort with ambiguity and a rush to find the new "comfortable." One church I worked with is now in Sector IV – after more than 5 years. The energy there is amazing!

Sector IV is marked by a flow of generative dialogue. Trust has been restored, the old ways are no longer important, mourning is completed, healthy boundaries have been established, and the congregation, in following the pattern of its leaders, is forming a healthy communications culture where disagreement is met with curiosity rather than hostility. There is no longer a reason to stand back and watch.

There are four general markers to the New Journey:

1. **Excitement.** People are excited about the possibilities before them and meet challenges with optimism.
2. **Participation.** More people come in than leave, participation in various activities increases – and financial giving increases on a per capita level.
3. **Pushing back the borders.** The old constraints on what you can or cannot do as a congregation is gone. People become willing to risk moving well beyond their previous comfort zones in furthering the gospel. New ministry initiatives come from the congregation with the expectation that the congregation, not the pastor or staff, will bear the burden of success or failure.
4. **A better set of problems.** There are always problems, but now you will be dealing with a better set of problems, and with greater success.

THE TASKS OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS: Darrell Puls, Peacebridge Ministries

The accompanying chart looks more complex than it really is. It shows the tasks that must be completed to successfully transition from one form of church to another. It follows the same “U” pattern as the other charts and can be superimposed over them.

None of this can be forced. It will take its own time and many will become impatient (“Are we there yet?”). That is why it is about letting go (rather than casting off) and letting come (rather than grabbing on).

BACKGROUND COLOR

The potential for conflict is illustrated in the color shifts from hot (red) to cool (blue). Emotions run high in the opening tasks because of the grieving process (leaving part of the past behind) and fear of the unknown. As the transition progresses, the colors gradually cool as people come together, put aside their differences, fears, and grief at what has been lost, and focus on a common future.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Together we can only do so much, but together with the leadings and gentle coaxing of the Holy Spirit we can do much. By accessing an open mind, open heart, and open will, we become ever more sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. Please note that the entire process is one of co-sensing, co-becoming, and co-creating, both with each other and with the guidance and active involvement of the Holy Spirit.

OFFLOADING PATTERNS OF THE PAST

Every church has unspoken traditions and expectations. As the church begins to move away from the past, it must offload the unspoken expectations of the past by identifying them (what is being lost) and grieving them. It is also necessary to identify unhealthy patterns that have developed in terms of communications and boundaries. The transitional tasks will address and instill new patterns.

TASKS

PART 1 – LETTING GO

1. **The Voice of Judgment.** Change always brings out the voice of judgment. People will complain. People will declare why something will not work. The people are uneasy and unwilling to change until the pain of staying where they are becomes greater than the fear of change. The key is quite simple: Stress that this is a time of creativity and

experimentation, a time of grieving and expectation. Please suspend judgment as we work together to seek our way in to the next chapter of God's story.

- a. In essence, you are asking people to see with new eyes, to not be afraid of looking at old things in new ways and new things as open possibilities.
2. **The Voice of Cynicism.** Some will be cynical and will express their cynicism by declaring "That won't work!" or "We did that once and it didn't work." Etc. Sometimes it comes in outright challenges and attacks. Rather than react with a rebuttal, instill in yourselves a spirit of curiosity. Redirecting their negative energies is often nothing more than listening to them with sympathy and deep interest.
 - a. The goal is to become open to the Holy Spirit in sensing a new calling for the church.
3. **Voice of Fear.** The voice of fear is almost always about the future and the unknown – and how they will fit into the new paradigm. Even though it may be couched in inclusive phrases or even "on behalf" of others, the Voice of Fear is deeply personal and must be treated with care. We must release it consciously and intentionally.
 - a. The key is gentle inquiry: "What is it that bothers you most about this?" "What needs to happen for you to be more comfortable?"

CONNECTING TO GOD.

This is where the process begins to change from concerns of the past to visions for the future. It relies in a very challenging question: ***What question lies at the heart of our work?*** Answering that question will take considerable time, prayer, and dialogue. It will be different for every church. Even the idea of there being a question at the heart of what you do will be a difficult concept for many, but it is something that Church leaders have wrestled with since the earliest days of the Church.

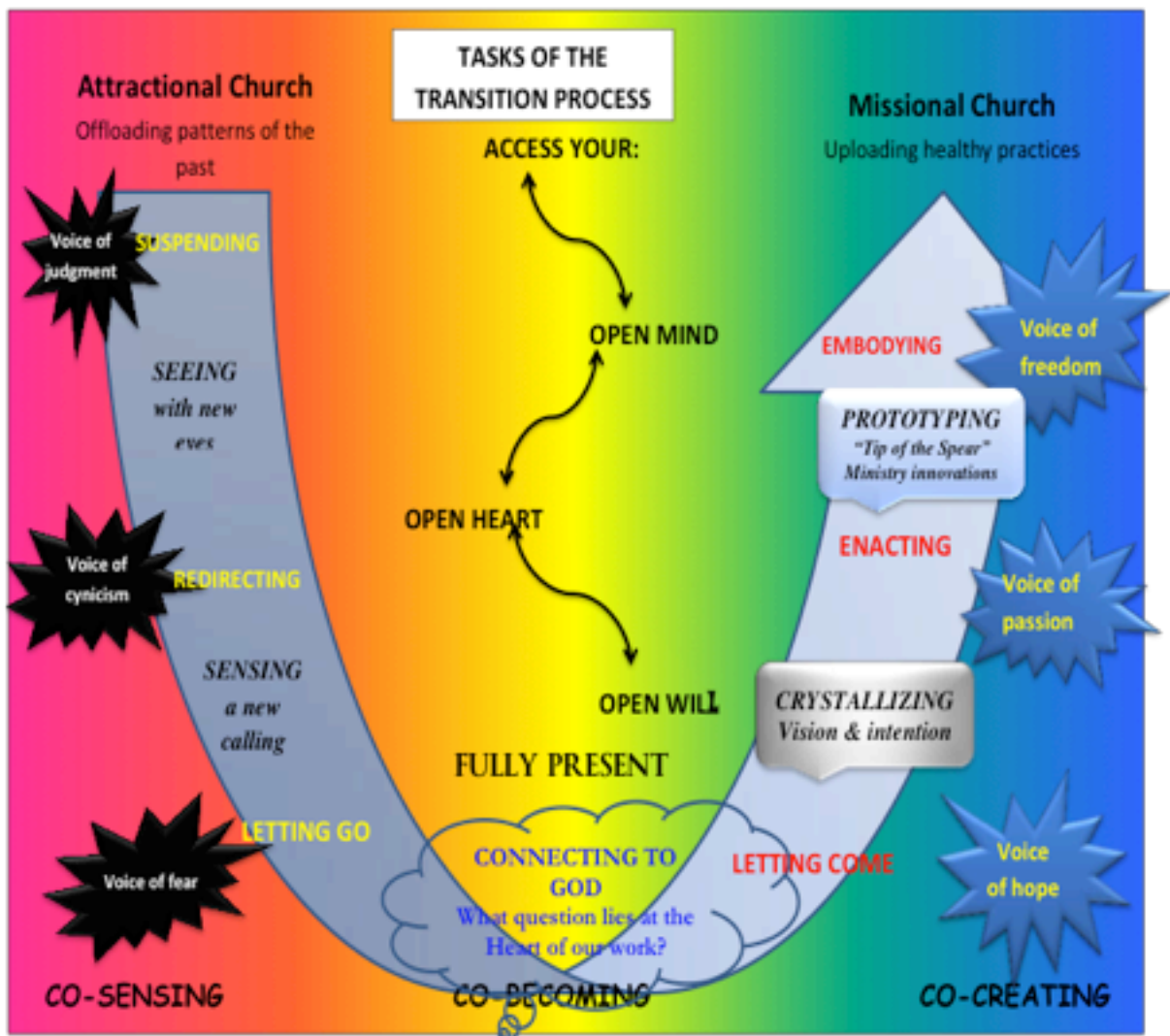
This is also where the Holy Spirit becomes a more and more powerful, even palpable, presence. Why? The question cannot be answered without the Holy Spirit.

PART 2 – LETTING COME

If we have done our work and have become fully present and open to the Holy Spirit, the task of uploading healthy practices gains speed and energy.

1. **Voice of Hope.** The Voice of Hope will begin to saturate the leadership and congregation. At this stage it is about possibilities, not destinations. Hope restores confidence and cohesion. We are now co-creating with the Holy Spirit a new vision for the future. It is a time of possibilities and excitement.
 - a. Do not try to force it. Let it come. It will.
2. **Voice of Passion.** As energy and possibilities grow, so too does the Voice of Passion. This is where we crystallize the Vision and the intentions of new direction. Passion for what can be is contagious, and allows you to plan out the steps to be takes, and have people clamoring to be part of the process.
 - a. When this is being done, it is time to enact some of the more visible and accepted changes in direction. There will be resistance, but not nearly as much as there was.
3. **Voice of Freedom.** As the church settles onto its new course, the Voice of Freedom emerges. It is a sense of new beginnings where mourning the past has ended. This is where we begin prototyping new "tip of the spear" ministries that both pierce and heal the community and where the turn from the old [paradigm to biblical mission is completed.

Congratulations! You are now dealing with a better set of problems!



Appendix Four:

Managing Church Transitions – A Selected Reading List

- Block, Peter. *The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003.
- Block, Peter. *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996.
- Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1991.
- Brubaker, David. *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations*. Herndon, VA: 2010.
- Cloud, Henry, and John Townsend. *Boundaries*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.
- Dudley, Carl, and Nancy Ammerman. *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing, and Adapting in Changing Communities*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
- Fritz, Robert. *The Path of Least Resistance*. New York: Fawcett-Columbine, 1986.
- Oswald, Roy and Barry Johnson. *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities*. Herndon, VA: Alban, 2010.
- Scazzero, Peter. *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Shaw, Robert. *Trust in the Balance: Building Successful Organizations on Results, Integrity, and Concern*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Weese, Carolyn, and Russell Crabtree. *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004.

Appendix Five:

Other Training Resources

- Interim Ministry Training and Certification: A Cooperative Ministry Effort of Niagara Lutheran Theological Institute and Church Tech: <http://www.churchtech.com>
- Interim Ministry Network: <http://www.imnedu.org>
- National Association of Lutheran Interim Ministers: <http://www.nalip.net>

Appendix Six:

An Article by Pr. Robert Gordan, Interim Minister

SO YOUR PASTOR IS GONE?!

Some questions and answers about the interim time:

1. **What is Interim Ministry?**

Interim ministry begins on the day the pastor announces he or she is leaving the congregation and ends when the new pastor has been installed in the congregation. Interim ministry is what your congregation does or does not do during this in-between time.

2. **Isn't this in-between time a good time to save some money?**

Many congregations see the time between pastors as an opportunity to save money – to build up some cash reserves before the next settled/called pastor comes to the congregation. While it is an inviting temptation to put the congregation on “autopilot” for awhile, it is probably not the best plan for the long term health of the congregation. While it may be inviting to focus on the dollar and cent issues, the reality is your congregation is experiencing a major change, for some members it may feel like loss of a significant friend or family member. There will be grieving, maybe some anger and probably confusion as to why the pastor left. If your pastor was asked to leave there will always some members who are glad he/she is gone and others who are upset at the “trouble makers” for driving the pastor away. In other words there is going to be a lot of “emotional stuff” going on the congregation that needs to be recognized and addressed before the next settled pastor arrives. Unfortunately, too often the grieving and anger, the confusion and hurt feelings are set aside and the focus is on “getting a

pastor.” Shortly after the new pastor is installed, then all of the hard feelings, broken relationships and expectations of why doesn't the new pastor understand how we do things at our congregation (which is code for why doesn't he/she do all the things we liked about our last pastor and not the things we didn't like) begin to surface.

3. **Why don't we ask retired Pastor Smith to cover for a few months while we search for a new settled pastor?**

You could do that . . . but keep in mind that Pastor Smith was called into ministry many years ago and Pastor Smith felt called to retire from active ministry. All of the ministry work your settled pastor had been doing still needs to be done AND many other issues and concerns related to this in-between time need special attention. To name a few: how do we form a call committee? Where do we get persons to interview? Do we want another pastor, just like the last pastor or is it time for a change? Our congregation isn't growing – we want a pastor with new ideas to bring young families to our congregation. We love our traditions and traditional ways of doing things, but we expect the new pastor to help us grow so we can pay the bills. We need a bigger sanctuary, will Pastor Smith or the new pastor have the skills to get us through a building program? And what about all the hard feelings that some folks seem to have concerning our previous pastor's leaving, how do we work through the hurt feelings, broken relationships in the congregation and deal with those folks who say we should just get a new pastor as soon as possible and get back to doing things the way we have always done them.

4. **What is an Intentional Interim Pastor?**

An intentional Interim Pastor is someone who has served as a called and settled pastor and knows the hard work that needs to be done on a day to day bases in a congregation. An Intentional Interim Pastor is someone who God has called to the specialized ministry of walking with a congregation through the time between settled pastors and who has the professional training and competencies to help a congregation through an interim period that could be six months or up to two years long.

5. **So briefly, what does a trained interim minister know and do that any other pastor couldn't do?**

It isn't about what "any other pastor couldn't do." Interim ministry is about doing everything a called, settled pastor can/should be doing and the skill set and God's calling to do all the tasks that will help prepare your congregation to deal with all the emotions and dynamic changes that happen when a pastor leaves.

6. **What is the specialized work of an interim minister?**

- a. He/she will help the congregation deal with the emotions and grief of a pastor leaving.
- b. The interim pastor will help the congregation refocus it's self by guiding the congregation through a process to discern to where and what God is calling the congregation at this point in her ministry.
- c. The interim pastor will share congregational self study tools with the congregation and help the congregation pick the self study tool that best fits the size and needs of the congregation.
- d. The Interim Pastor will not be a member of the call committee, but he/she can help the congregation set up the call committee and when asked, give guidance to the call committee and/or the church council throughout the search process.
- e. Congregations always have questions about what is appropriate, expected and sometimes – legal during the interview, negotiation and call processes, the Interim Pastor is available to guide and share referrals to other experts.

7. **What kinds of things happen during this**

interim time between settled pastors?

During the interim time the interim pastor will be helping the congregation to look at their history – the joys and the challenges that have brought them to this point and time. Every congregation needs to know where they have come from to help guide them to where they are going.

There will probably be some leadership changes in the congregation during the interim time. Some folks will feel their loyalties were to the past pastor and want/need to step aside. Others will see this in-between time as an opportunity for new ideas and leadership.

As the leadership changes and the congregation rebuilds their corporate history and begins to discern to where and what is God is calling them now, a new mission and vision for ministry will be developed to help guide the call process.

The interim time is also a good time to renew connections with the denominational/association offices and leadership. These people have a wealth of knowledge and experience that can be very helpful during the interim time.

And finally, when a new settled pastor is called the interim will help prepare the congregation to commit to new leadership and be open to new directions in congregational ministry.