

Guide to pastoral transitions (Part 1 - The First 30 Days)

By Eric Seiberling

When pastors receive a new appointment, they have 90 days to prove themselves, gain credibility and start to establish positive momentum. That's according to organizational research by Michael Watkins, outlined in his book "The First 90 Days." Watkins says that a leader's success or failure is largely determined in the first few months of their tenure. This is part one of a two-part series on how to get off to a quick start at your new appointment.

The quality of the transition will either set the stage for success or sow the seeds of trouble and potential failure. Transitions are also periods of acute vulnerability, because new pastors lack established working relationships and a detailed understanding of the issues facing the church. Opinions of your effectiveness begin to form quickly. Once formed, they are surprisingly hard to change.

The key to success is not to jump immediately into the day-to-day grind of the church, but to stop, observe and learn about the new congregation in order to build a plan to create quick wins and positive momentum for change.

Break from the past (the date of the introduction until the first day at the new appointment)

Leaders need to prepare themselves prior to the transition. Your transition starts the day the introduction is made. This may be months before the transition date or just weeks. Establish a clear transition. Take the time to assess your own strengths and vulnerabilities by scheduling an "exit interview" with people whom you trust.

Also, take the time to set the stage for your successor. Talk positively about the change and encourage church leaders to follow your example. This can dispel the fear, uncertainty and doubt individuals may have about the transition and set up your successor for success.

Accelerate the learning (The First 30 Days)

In your first 30 days, focus on taking a structured learning approach to understand the specific opportunities and challenges of the congregation and the personalities and abilities of the people you have come to serve. Learn about the culture, politics, financial situation, condition of the building and many other factors inside the church, as well as the community it serves.

Here are some suggestions to get you started even before your first day:

Understand your community's needs. To get a free demographic report for the community, send your contact information, church name and street address to Chuck Niedringhaus, Director of Product Marketing and Research at United Methodist Communications. Start listening to your community's digital conversation and spend time with people outside the four walls of the church. Skip church one Sunday and go where the people who are not in church on Sunday morning go — whether it is the local diner or the soccer fields. Observe and learn.

"Google" your church. Search your church's name and city. Read the results. What is the digital appearance of your church? What is the impression it makes? Outdated? Non-existent? Internally focused? Connected to the community? Repeat on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest and other social media sites.

Conduct “cottage meetings.” Set up meetings with small groups from the congregation in people’s homes. Try to keep the groups in between 12 and 16 people to facilitate conversation. Have everyone introduce themselves and then ask four questions:

- What do we as a church do well?
- What is the greatest challenge/opportunity facing this church in the next 12-24 months?
- If you had a magic wand that could perform mid-sized miracles, what miracle would you perform for our church?
- How has this church, specifically, helped you grow spiritually?

Discuss the findings with church leaders, develop a summary and share it with the congregation on a Sunday morning.

Gather data via surveys. Surveys provide a structured method to gather the attitudes and views on “hot button” issues and ensure everyone’s opinion is heard. Surveys, better than hearing individual opinions and generalized statements, help provide unbiased data to inform the discussions of your church leadership team.

Gather all of your communication materials. Gather every bulletin, brochure and communication tool the church uses. Take pictures of the outside of the building and the church sign. Print out pages from the website, Facebook page or any other place the church exists online. Place all of the elements on a single wall or table and then look at them as a whole. What message or feeling do they convey about the church? Does it all look like it comes from the same church?

Assess the church’s financial health. Take the time to dig into the financials and determine the church’s fiscal health. Diagnose the giving trends of the church and even ask for an outside audit to ensure the financial records are in order. Assess the financial condition of the church and where resources are being spent.

Understand the buildings. Inspect the facilities and find out when items like the heating system, roof, parking lot, lighting, technology and others were last replaced. Ask if there is a long-range plan for the trustees for building maintenance. Look for opportunities to save money with energy efficient measures.

Assess the church’s existing programs. Churches rarely take the time to assess their existing programs and determine which ones are no longer effective. Assess the programs of the church and their effectiveness. This needs to be done with sensitivity and care as this can evoke some strong emotions. Hold off on making drastic changes except where there is broad agreement to prune programs to free up resources for new priorities. Gathering the data is the key priority.

Take the time to understand thoroughly the situation and encourage the entire leadership to participate in this learning process. Meet weekly to share what everyone has learned and discuss your findings. Set up a room at the church to post all of the findings on the walls so people can see across different functional areas and can start to see the “big picture” of what is going on.

The key outcome of the first 30 days = A clear picture of the real situation

The key output from the first 30 days needs to be a summary of the current situation of the church and identifying the key priorities for the church for the short-, mid- and long-term. Many churches operate under a set of assumptions and viewpoints that may not reflect reality. By embracing the current reality of the church and the community it serves, it is possible to move forward.

Guide to pastoral transitions (Part 2 – Day 31 & beyond)

By Eric Seiberling

Pastors have 90 days to prove themselves and create momentum in ministry. Organizational research and interviews have shown new leaders can make or break their success in the first few months in their tenure. A previous article “A guide to pastoral transitions – The First 30 Days” outlines ideas from Michael Watkins, author of “The First 90 Days,” to break from a previous appointment, prepare a systematic way to learn about the congregation and community and develop a summary of the current situation.

During the next 60 days, the focus needs to be on translating those insights into action.

Align the organization and focus on what matters most (Day 31 to 60)

The second 30 days need to help drive alignment in the organization and rally the congregation to action. The congregation will not just act simply because the pastor says so. During this time, focus on sharing the results of the first 30 days, defining quick wins that address immediate opportunities and concerns, building the team to deliver the results and aligning the resources needed to succeed.

- **Present the findings.** Create a report to share the key findings from the first 30 days. These findings should be identified by the entire leadership team, not just the pastor. Share both the grim realities and the exciting opportunities for ministry. Include quotes from the cottage meetings, surveys and discussions to give a “human voice” to the findings. Present them in a way that both focuses on what must change for the church to thrive, and celebrates those aspects of the church which are going well.
- **Pray to discern God’s calling for your church.** The impact of prayer cannot be overestimated. The findings will evoke a number of emotions in individuals: fear, anger, relief, anxiety or maybe sadness. Prayer helps us center on God’s will versus our own preferences and desires. Provide some guiding thoughts for leaders to mediate or focus everyone on appropriate Scripture passages. Refocusing the congregation on God’s unique calling for their church can transform fear, uncertainty and doubt into passion, conviction and commitment.
- **Create conversation to facilitate convergence.** Many times, the data will lead to some obvious places for action. Facilitate conversation about the findings and ask different leaders and groups to brainstorm on potential actions for the short-, mid- and long term. Work as a team to group these ideas into core themes and then prioritize them. Next, create a list of short-, mid- and long-term actions. Create a set of goals, deliverables and milestones that create a clear plan to succeed.
- **Focus on quick wins.** Help the team define two or three quick wins for the next 30 days. Make sure these quick wins have high priority, high visibility and broad support. Part of a successful transition is making positive changes that are visible to the congregation to drive excitement and positive momentum.
- **Build the team.** Take the time to understand how well teams or committees are operating. Many times, you cannot build a team from scratch. Take time to observe people in action for yourself and help coach the team. Consider using personality assessments to help create balanced teams from a temperament standpoint and make sure you have the right gifts on the team to be successful. Remove any inactive members from a team as a signal that action and not “membership” is expected. This may take several months to complete.
- **Focus on the core; delegate when you can.** It is easy to become overwhelmed at the amount of work that needs to be done. Focus on the top priorities and delegate where you can. Delegating tasks to individuals can also provide an opportunity to assess their capabilities.

- **Listen to the “difficult people.”** Even though they complain and sometimes obstruct change, take time to listen to criticism, but do not be consumed by it. Understand what is driving their fear, share with them how you are addressing that underlying fear, adjust plans if needed, and then move on.

Deliver quick wins (Day 61 to 90)

To quote Nike, “Just do it.” Now is the time to translate plans into actions and actions into quick wins. It is critically important to deliver results within 90 days that are visible and clearly communicate the future direction of the church.

- **Involve as many people as possible.** While the team leading the “quick-win” initiative may be small, find ways to involve as many people from your congregation. If the church is looking to create a household goods pantry, ask the youth group to collect items door-to-door or ask Sunday school classes (from the nursery to the adult classes) to bring in items and compete against one another.
- **Look for evidence of success.** Based on your goals, think about what success looks like and then try to capture evidence that things are working. Take pictures of children at a Vacation Bible School. Create a short video of people working at the soup kitchen. Hold an open house after a church cleanup. Find ways to capture people in action and then share that with the congregation.
- **Communicate early and often.** Take the time to communicate to the congregation the results of efforts and the impact they can have. Connect with both the “unplugged” and the “digitally plugged-in.” Share pictures, videos, testimonies or anything else that can show results and generate excitement.
- **Celebrate at the end of 90 days.** Show off the congregation’s efforts at the end of the 90 days both during the worship service and a celebration reception afterwards. Achieving together creates community. Take the time to celebrate results and focus on what has been achieved in such a short period of time

The Power of Quick Wins (Beyond Day 90)

By the end of the 90 days, you want your congregation and your community to feel that something new and good is happening. Creating these quick wins can create a virtuous cycle. Otherwise you can get caught in a vicious one where fear, uncertainty and doubt can take hold or, worse yet, complacency.

Early wins excite and energize people, build your credibility and quickly create value for your organization. They can bring a congregation together and make a “kingdom difference” in your community. Make the first 90 days count and you can experience many fruitful years of ministry by all.