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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Incoming Pastors: Building Smoother Transition Bridges

Thad did not have an opportunity to communicate with Harold, the outgoing pastor. Thus, some of Thad's information was patchy and secondhand—as people occasionally said, “That’s how Harold did it.”

Incoming and outgoing clergy communicate sparsely for three primary reasons:

- Departing pastors want to avoid giving advice—and arriving pastors want to avoid fending off suggestions.
- Incoming pastors are highly self-confident—so they don’t think they need information.
- Outgoing pastors want to avoid prejudicing incoming pastors regarding parishioners with whom they had less-than-positive relationships—and new pastors know that they may get on quite well with those individuals.

But this communication, plus five other information opportunities outlined below, can help incoming pastors build smoother transition bridges.

Talk with the Outgoing Pastor

The fruitfulness of such a discussion depends on asking the right questions in the right way. The following wording excavates valuable information:

1. If you were making a list of this congregation’s greatest strengths—what we are good at—what would you put at the top of that list?
2. If you were making a list of things in which this congregation is not as strong as you wish it were—what we are not good at—what would be the first one or two items on that list?
3. If you were making a list of this congregation’s most cherished values—what we think we ought to be doing if we are at our best—what would be the first one or two items on that list?
4. When people talk about the best pastor this congregation ever had, what did he or she do best?
5. When people talk about pastors who were not very effective, what did they do poorly?
6. When this congregation considers a major decision, what one or two highly respected people (whether they hold an office or do not hold an office) usually exert a strong influence in that discussion?
7. In your experience, is there a group that must affirm a new idea before it can become reality? In other words, what group can veto a new idea if it is not included in the discussion at an early stage?

Note to incoming pastor: In small churches with fewer than 100 in worship attendance, such an invisible power group may number only one or two people. In midsize congregations of 100 to 300 in worship attendance, such a power group might be the choir, an adult Sunday school class, the women’s organization, or the trustees. In larger churches, the power group may be the executive committee, the governing board, or the senior pastor.

Outgoing pastors never have a perfect take on reality. But hearing their responses to these questions can save time, reduce stress, and improve results.

Talk with Three Highly Respected Laypersons

Conduct these conversations one at a time, not as a group. Ask these questions:

1. Looking back over the years, when was our congregation’s effectiveness at its highest peak, and what was happening during that period? (*These answers picture an ideal time to which a few older people will keep hoping the church can return.*)



After some jolting surprises, the new pastor thinks more historical information regarding this church might have been helpful.

2. Looking back over the years, what pastors were exceptionally capable, and what did they do best? (*These answers predict how several people will unconsciously measure the incoming pastor's skills.*)

3. During the past five years, what are some of the best things that have happened in our church? (*These answers illustrate values and experiences that were meaningful to numerous people.*)

4. No organization is perfect. Thinking back across the last five years, what are some things that seem less than positive? (*These answers identify why some people criticized the outgoing pastor.*)

5. Looking down the road at the next five years, if you were asked to list some of the challenges our congregation is facing, what would you put on that list? (*These answers reveal many of the church's cherished values.*)

Some of these answers inevitably surface (a) weaknesses in the present program and staff, (b) points at which the church has insufficient staff, and (c) major criticisms of the last pastor.

Talk with the Personnel Committee

Meet with the personnel committee (called staff-parish relations committee in some denominations) during your first week on the scene. Say to them that your effectiveness depends on their willingness to communicate with you honestly, especially in personnel committee meetings. Begin that communication by asking *everyone* in the room to take turns answering three questions:

First, ask, "In your opinion, what one or two good things are happening in our church right now?" Listen carefully. Take notes. (*They are telling you what the congregation highly values.*)

After everyone shares, ask the second question, insisting that everyone give an answer: "In your opinion, what one or two issues should we be concerned about as we work together to build the best possible ministry for future years?" Listen carefully. Take notes. (*They are giving you some of the congregation's dreams.*)

Finish with a third question. Again, insist that everyone express an opinion: "Which of the several issues we just mentioned should we put on the agenda for review at our next meeting?" (*They are giving you some of the congregation's priorities.*)

Thank them for sharing. Say that you want to meet with them quarterly throughout your tenure (bimonthly is better). Urge them to save their comments for the personnel committee meetings, "where we can think about them together"—rather than coming to you one at a time with their concerns.

At each meeting, repeat the three questions. Listen carefully. Take notes. This procedure prevents domination by the committee members who are the most comfortable with vocalizing.

By listening to one another, the committee gains a sense of unity and desire to work together as a team with the new pastor.

Talk with the Congregation

Schedule a series of home gatherings to which you invite twelve and not more than sixteen people (in a larger group some people will not express their views). Ask the following questions:

1. What factors drew you to our congregation?

2. What is one of the most important things that happened in our congregation since you began attending?

3. What are some of the best things you see happening in our congregation right now?

4. As we look down the road at the next five years, what are some of your hopes and dreams for our church's future?

Ask a reporter to take notes. After all groups have met, publishing the results in summary form can create unity and begin to build momentum.

Talk with the Staff

Meet with each staff member during the first three weeks after you arrive. State that you want to get acquainted with "how we do things around here."

In preparation for their meeting with you, ask staff members to write a detailed description of what they do, their schedule, and to whom they report.

At the meetings, review those role descriptions and ask clarification questions.

Then, ask these questions:

• What one or two ministry tasks occupy 70 percent of your time?

• What one or two skills do you feel are most important for someone in your type of ministry?

• What one or two things do you find yourself doing that make you wonder whether they are a waste of time?

• What can I do to help you succeed in your ministry?

Staff members know some things that no one else in this congregation knows. Help them feel that they are on your team and you are on their team.

Talk with Everyone

Involve the governing board, committees, and ministry teams in selecting priorities and acting on them. One such process is the *How to Accomplish Effective Congregational Planning*, downloadable free of charge from the www.TheParishPaper.com Internet site.

The Bottom Line

A poster featuring a cute kitten quips, "Things are always at their best in the beginning." To make your first year better—plus your later years—learn as much as possible from people who've been around for awhile.