When the Pastor Leaves...

Preparing your church for a new pastor-- a how-to guide to pastoral transition for members of PCA churches.

By Ed Eubanks, Jr.

“I'm Leaving.”

When the announcement comes, it is usually a surprise—sometimes a welcome one, and sometimes a surprise met with tears. But when the pastor declares his intentions to go, he forces a season of change on his congregation.

How the church deals with that change can be what makes the next pastor’s work thrive successfully. Or it can be devastating to his future. How should a church prepare for a new pastor?

Preparing for a new pastor-- fundamental principles

Above all else, it is important to understand how much God is in the process. When a church is in transition, it is not by mistake; God has called their former pastor away, and God is in the process of calling a new pastor to them. This seems obvious, but it can be easy to miss; churches often think that the reason things have gone awry is because their pastor left. But God is in the transition.

That is not to say that every pastor stays through the “completion,” as it were, of his calling. Thom Rainer’s 1996 research revealed at one point that the average length of a pastor’s tenure in protestant churches is 2.3 years.¹ Many of those pastors, certainly, have served the full term of their calling in those ministries. But I am convinced that many of those leave before they have fulfilled their calling—sometimes long before. I think one of the big reasons for this is pastoral burn-out (and the research by Rainer and others confirms this).²

Churches shouldn't expect their current pastor to stay forever, of course. When he leaves and they are looking for a new pastor, they shouldn't go looking for one who will stay forever, either. But they should hope that he will be able to serve out the full term of his calling to their church. If they hold this as their aim, they may benefit from reflecting on how they might prepare for their new pastor. Doing so will protect him from pastoral burn-out, incline their hearts toward his ministry, and set a course for successful and healthy ministry throughout the term of his time among them.

¹ Thom Rainer, Effective Evangelistic Churches (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), pp. 43-44.

² For more on pastoral burn-out, see Gary L. McIntosh & Robert L. Edumondson’s It Only Hurts on Monday: Why Pastors Quit and What You Can Do about It (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998).
There are four things that a church must understand to prepare for a new pastor:

1. The pastor's calling
2. The pastor's work
3. The congregation's calling
4. The congregation's work

The Pastor's Calling

The first step in preparing for a new pastor is to gain an understanding of his calling. This is a recognition of the significance of all that has happened in the process of the new pastor getting to where he is, if he is about to begin a ministry as the pastor of your church.

To be a pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a man goes through an extensive process before he may be ordained for ministry. The PCA's Book of Church Order outlines this process in detail; the steps are essentially three, though they are not completely exclusive of one another.

First, a man must submit himself to the oversight of the church, both locally and regionally, to be overseen as a candidate for Gospel ministry. He is then said to be “under care” of a presbytery. To come under care means:

• That he has demonstrated his faithfulness to God and His church before others (the “others” being, first, the Elders of his local church, then the presbytery of which his church is a member);
• That he has given testimony of his faith and Christ and of both his inward and outward call to ministry;
• That he is then to be shepherded by presbyters (and presbytery as a whole) for the duration of his training for Gospel ministry.

The next step in the process is the candidate's testing as an intern (for a minimum of 1 year). This step, though distinct from being under care, can be done concurrently with the first step. In addition to all of the oversight offered as a candidate, this step requires of him that he demonstrate the practical use of the training he has received. Thus, an intern is held accountable for faithfulness and diligent pursuit of training, and called on to demonstrate extensively his abilities and the usefulness of his training; this is done across the spectrum of pastoral ministry, including the areas of:

• Teaching and teaching
• Counseling and care
• Theological soundness and application
• Understanding and exercise of church government
• Discernment and wisdom in applying Scripture

This step is truly a comprehensive testing of the intern's calling. Interns are presented with a checklist that covers all of these areas of testing, and they must fulfill the requirements of the list to the satisfaction of the presbytery. The list is made up of things like “preach at least 12 sermons” or “teach at least 30 separate times.” Though the requirements are that this step last a year, an intern hoping to complete it in only a year would have their work cut out for them.
The final step is that the candidate/intern is examined as an ordinand— that is, they are being considered for ordination. This examination includes some very basic aspects, but also some complex and, frankly, grueling. The examination includes:

1. That he has fulfilled his training—including both a Bachelor’s degree and a Master of Divinity
2. That he express a continued affirmation of his testimony of faith
3. That he undergo a continued examination of his call to ministry
4. That he is tested extensively on his knowledge, both in theory and practice, both written and orally, in all of the following areas:
   - Use of original Bible languages
   - Intimate familiarity with the English Bible
   - Historical, biblical, systematic, and practical theology
   - Meaning and mode of sacraments
   - General church history
   - Specific history of the PCA
   - Rules and application of church government
   - Ability to preach and teach
5. That he be interviewed by an examining committee and by the whole presbytery
6. That he be approved for ordination by no less than a ¾ vote of the entire presbytery

By this point, in addition to the implicit oversight that is innate to the Master of Divinity degree (assuming the professors were concerned about the training of future pastors), a pastor—even recently ordained—has been overseen, cared for, mentored, and approved for ministry by a substantial body of other ordained leadership, over a substantial period of time. They have approved him and trust him as a minister of the Gospel.

Why is this important for preparing for a new pastor? Because too often we reserve our trust for those whom we know; we won’t serve alongside those we feel are strangers. But when a new pastor comes to our church, we must trust him—even before we know him; we must serve alongside him—even though we’ve never even seen him serve. We can do so, because we know that his abilities, his trustworthiness, and his commitment to service in the Kingdom—in other words, his calling—have been tested and verified by representatives of the collective leadership of the Church.

The Pastor’s Work

The next step in preparing for a new pastor is to understand his work. That is, if we know with confidence that he is called to be a pastor, what does that mean he is called to do, practically speaking?

Pastors, the Scripture tells us, are “Elders” and “Overseers” of the church. As such, they have duties distinct from other roles of leadership. For example, in Acts 6 we read of the apostles—the original Elders—appointing seven others (who we have come to call Deacons) to fulfill the role of ministering to the physical needs of the flock. This is because no one person, or even a group of people, can do all of the ministry of the church; they early Elders wisely knew this.

In the PCA, we further distinguish pastors as “Teaching Elders” as an extension of the idea of Elder; we have other Elders (that we call Ruling Elders) in the church who share many of the functional duties that the pastor has, yet who are not called and trained to be pastors. Teaching Elders
are full Elders, however, and therefore have all of the duties of the Ruling Elder, plus the additional roles they are charged with as Teaching Elders.

The duties of any Elder are:
- The oversight of the flock
- To give prudent example of godly living to the flock
- To govern the house and Kingdom of Christ
- The visitation of the flock
- To instruct, comfort, encourage, and nurture the children of God
- Prayer for and with the people of God
- To seek the fruit of the Word among the flock

All Elders have these duties. Pastors, as Teaching Elders, have additional duties. As a Teaching Elder, a pastor must:
- Feed the flock by reading, expounding, and teaching Scripture
- Serve as an ambassador for Christ
- Function as an evangelist of the Gospel
- Steward the mysteries of God by dispensing grace and the ordinances

These are a lot of duties! In fact, it should not be hard to see that, even in the smallest church, no one pastor (or even a staff of pastors) can fulfill all of these adequately. This is one of the reasons that Ruling Elders and Deacons are so important: these men bear some of the pastoral burdens, sharing in the work of ministry with the pastor. So, an essential way that we can prepare for a new pastor is to realize the scope of his work, both in its extent (therefore acknowledging the need for good, committed leadership alongside our pastor) and in its limit (thereby not placing expectations on him that are not appropriate to his calling).

Reflecting further on Acts 6, it is important to recognize that some of the most significant pastoral duties are the teaching of the Word and prayer. Among other things, then, in preparing for a new pastor we should realize that these are important priorities, and help the pastor to protect the time and focus he needs to devote to them. Some will ask, why is preaching so significant? Why do pastors need to take so much time to prepare their sermons? The Westminster Larger Catechism identifies the preaching of the Word of God as, somehow, actually being the Word of God; given this, we must regard preaching as a high calling, indeed. To presume to fulfill this calling with only cursory attention given to the study and consideration of the content of Scripture is a severe mistake. Preparing a sermon takes time; give your pastor the time he needs.

[To that I might add this: any church that hires a new seminary graduate ought to give especially careful attention to this. I mentioned before that presbyteries will require a certain number of sermons to be preached for the fulfillment of the Internship requirements—for example, 12 sermons is the requirement of the presbytery where I am an intern. It is quite possible (in fact, regularly the case) that these 12 sermons are the only sermons that has prepared and preached—ever. Though opportunities exist for preaching while in seminary, I have found that most of my class-

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**An aside: technology and preaching**

When discussing this topic with a PCA church in search of a new pastor, one of the members (a Ruling Elder, no less), asked: aren't there computer programs for Bible study that make the work a lot easier? In other words, with the tools of computer software available, shouldn't we expect our pastor's preparation time to be reduced?

There is merit to what this man pointed out; the introduction of software into the equation does make the work of good, careful exegetical study easier and faster. Most of the programs available (and there are several

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mates do not take advantage of these opportunities. Reducing the amount of time required for preparation of sermons demands a depth of knowledge of the Word and experience in developing Word-knowledge into a sermon. It would be quite difficult for the average new graduate to prepare a sermon adequately in less than 10-15 hours. But too often, expectations, either directly or indirectly, are placed on them to get it done in much less time. These expectations may be one of the big reasons that plagiarism of sermons is so common in our day.]

As important as understanding a pastor's calling and work is, that is not the whole story. If we do not also recognize the importance of our own calling and work as members, we have not really prepared for our new pastor.

The Congregation’s Calling

Let’s look for help in understanding our calling as congregants. To begin with, it is the call of the Gospel; specifically, the call to be ingrafted into Christ's body, to become a member of God's family, to be a citizen of the Kingdom. When Scripture teaches about the results of our conversion, it is never strictly individualistic: there are many aspects that are personal, individual, and even private in a way, but there are as many that have to do with our community and world, our affiliation with the church (both local and universal), and our belonging in a corporate organism. Thus, the first aspect of our calling means that we care about the life of the church— not just about our own benefit and satisfaction from being a part of it.

Beyond that, how are we called to be a part of the church? All PCA churches have some kind of membership process; whatever this may look like, it implies that there is a level of commitment for members that is absent, or at least less prominent, for non-members. PCA churches receiving new members also must ask them to take a set of three vows. As PCA church members, you vow:

• To support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability. Do you, and do others in your church, recognize your participation in the work of the church? Or do you leave the work for the staff, or the Elders or Deacons? If you are a member of your church, you need to remember

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your participation as a part of the calling given to you as a member.

• **To submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church.** Decisions are going to be made and, believe it or not, they won’t consult you. How will you react? Your new pastor may teach or preach something that is challenging and convicting to you—or he may even articulate it personally to you. What will be your response? Defensiveness, frustration, or discord in reaction to the ordinary functioning of the government and discipline of the church belies how well you truly understand this vow, and this calling.

• **To promise to study its purity and peace.** In the PCA, it is far too easy to focus on the purity part and forget the peace. But our calling as congregants is to study both the purity of the church and her peace. And sometimes making peace requires the kind of humility and self-denial that is hard to muster. But it is what we are called to do.

There is one more aspect of the congregation’s call that is relevant to preparing for a new pastor. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul discusses the privilege and honor that those in leadership—especially pastors—have in the church. Specifically, he says that the pastors are worthy of “double honor” (vv. 17-18). That is, over and above the honor of authority, dignity, and esteem of character that is given to all of those called to be in leadership, the pastor is also worthy of another honor: the honor of having his material needs met by the church. In other words, Paul says that we, the congregation, are called to pay our pastors well enough to provide for their needs. Too few pastors, however, are paid in this way. Most find that their wives must work—often full-time—to pay all of the bills, even though they have children at home that need her care. Or they will simply do without for the sake of the choice to keep her at home. For example, I know of a pastor (at a large and prominent church) whose children receive Medicaid insurance, and they qualify for free food through the government’s WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program. Basically, this pastor’s family is on welfare. Is that the kind of honor Paul speaks of? Churches need to attend to this calling with graciousness, love, and careful attention.

**The Congregation’s Work**

Considering our work as church members is much easier; if we are heeding our calling, our work is fairly straightforward. There are just a few additional ideas I would like to put before you:

• **Be prepared for change.** God is at work in your transition. Therefore, the fact that He has moved one pastor on to another ministry, and is preparing another for his work here, means that God intends for there to be some change in the minis-

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**Technology and preaching, cont.**

apply the text specifically and personally to your congregation, the general stuff from the commentaries will do just fine. Basically, for the pastor with only 4-5 hours of preparation, the only non-negotiable aspects of sermon preparation are: bare explanation, quick illustrations (again, probably from another resource—there are dozens of books and websites that offer ready-made illustrations), and general applications. Sounds great, right? After all, why should we be concerned if our pastor doesn’t bother with the Greek and Hebrew? Should it matter if he rarely, if ever, considers the text himself, but instead relies almost entirely on commentaries? Can we live with applications of Scripture that are seldom practical or relevant to our current circumstances? And why worry over “good enough” illustrations that barely fit the sermon? In fact, these aspects are the very things that make sermons significant for our learning and understanding of the Bible. No pastor can teach what they themselves do not understand, and what they have not thought through; thus, pastors standing the Word of God—therefore pastors

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try here. Don't feel like you have to sell out your core convictions as a church—your search committee should have been careful enough to protect against that. But do be ready for the changes that will inevitably come, and study the peace when they do.

• **Trust in God’s calling.** When God leads a man, through both internal call (his personal conviction that he is called somewhere) and external call (the conviction of those that extend to him that call), He does so with a purpose and plan that we cannot always understand or see. Nevertheless, we must trust in His work to execute His plan, and trust that His plan is the best plan for His people (Jer. 29:11-13).

• **Exercise hospitality.** Use creative ways to welcome them to your community and church. Show them at least the same kind of love and acceptance you would show to visitors and new regular attenders. I heard about one church that handed out 3”x5” index cards to every family, then asked each family to write down two or three businesses or individuals they would recommend to the new pastor and his family. They presented these to the pastor, and then he knew what auto mechanic, realtor, dentist, or plumber to call based on the experiences of his flock. Another church created a three-ring binder “atlas” for their pastor, with directions and maps from the church office to all of the places he might want to go—the nursing home where many retirees in the church live, the main hospital in town, the other sister churches, etc. These are just a couple of creative ideas; you can think of other good ones, too.

Everyone wants their new pastor to succeed and thrive in his ministry. By preparing for this in advance, churches can take the steps needed to make this a possibility, and even a reality.