

An Overview of Transitional Ministry

Rev. David J. Phillips & Rev. Daniel R. Wetzel

This monograph briefly reviews the customary processes of transitional ministry. Special attention is given to the dynamics in Alliance congregations and unique issues related to the polity of the C&MA.

Alliance pastors are placed in ministry only with the agreement of three parties. First, the pastor himself must give testimony to his sense of God's call to serve the church. The governance authority of the church must also sense that this is God's will and extend a call to the pastoral candidate. Finally, the district superintendent must appoint the pastor to serve the church. Unless all three of these parties agree, no candidate can assume the responsibilities of pastor.

The Alliance process is unique. Pastors who are unfamiliar with Alliance polity frequently misunderstand the role each party in the process plays. Church leaders with experience in congregational denominations or independent churches fail to appreciate the role of the district superintendent. Leaders with backgrounds in more hierarchical denominations expect the district superintendent to be more involved. And, lay leaders are often uninformed concerning the process as well. That is especially true if the previous pastor had a long tenure. It is important for a transitional pastor to be proactive but careful in guiding the church transition team and the search committee each step of the way to work in cooperation with the district office.

S tage 1: Connecting

The purpose of the first stage of transitional ministry is to establish trust in the pastoral leadership and to gather essential information relating to the congregation's wellbeing. Surveys can be used to determine some aspects for church health and vitality, but personal interviews are important to build relationships and discern underlying spiritual dynamics not revealed by statistical reports. Even when teams have been assembled to assess local church vitality, the transitional pastor must build personal relationships and gain information.

David Phillips is an "interventionist" pastor. He has been used by the Lord to bring health and vitality to severely conflicted churches.

After serving Alliance churches in both the United States and Canada, and as district superintendent of the Northeastern District for the C&MA in the U.S., David followed God's call to transitional ministry as a member of Interim Pastor Ministries team. For the last several years, he has been coaching other transitional pastors with Interim Pastor Ministries.

The process he outlines in this monograph is based on the IPM Roadmap. It is informed by years of experience and godly wisdom as well as a thorough understanding of the unique approach Alliance churches take to secure pastoral leadership.

An effort should be made to interview as many of the congregation's leaders as possible. In most circumstances, pastors will have had an opportunity to talk to the district superintendent or another member of the district staff before beginning the ministry. The transitional pastors' personal interviews should include the following:

- The former pastor (if possible).
- Members of the Board of Elders, including past members who may remain in the church
- Members of the Church Governing Board or Board of Ministries if it is distinct from the elders.
- Members of the staff, including past staff persons when possible.
- Other lay leaders and key influencers in the congregation.
- If it is possible, interview influential people who have left the church.
- People whose names are mentioned repeatedly by others you have interviewed.

Once the interviews have been completed, take the time to write a report that can be shared with the district superintendent and key lay leaders. In the process of writing, you will also have a chance to evaluate the information you have learned. Remember, one of the primary purposes of this first stage is to establish trust in pastoral leadership so confidential information should be guarded properly.

When assessment teams have been used to evaluate the congregation's wellbeing, the chairperson will customarily write a report and present a summary to the congregation following the assessment. A full report should be given to the district superintendent as well as the elders and other key church leaders.

Transition Teams

Transition Teams are often formed to work alongside the transitional pastor. In some cases, this team may also serve as a Search Committee. That decision should be made by the congregation's elders in consultation with the district superintendent. Local church bylaws may differ, but in most circumstances the elders are empowered to appoint members to the Transition Team. Of course, the size of the team depends upon the church's inclusive membership. The transitional pastor serves as a member of the Transition Team and, with the approval of the district superintendent, he also serves as a coach for the Search Committee once a pastor search has begun. If the Transition Team and the Search Committee are separate, it is wise to have at least one lay member of the church who serves on both of them.

S tage 2: Assessment

As IPM defines the second phase of transitional ministry, assessment of the church's ministries is a function of the Transition Team. It should also include an honest evaluation of the former pastor's strengths and weaknesses as well as the status of current church programs and functions. Of course, in circumstances when the previous pastor left under less than desirable conditions, it will be important for the

transitional pastor to guide these discussions. Every effort should be made to deal with both honestly and with grace. Remember, no matter what the circumstances, God uses flawed servants to advance His purposes (otherwise, he would not use us).

The Transition Team should also consider the church's mission, vision and values as well as the bylaws and other policy documents related to church governance. It is important for all of these documents to support one another and to reflect the ministry goals and objectives of the church and our Lord Jesus.

Remember, all accredited Alliance churches share the same Uniform Constitution. Local church bylaws and policies may not be in conflict with the Uniform Constitution. When conflicts are discovered, the bylaws will need to be revised. However, there is often a more important reason for revising local church bylaws. The structure of the church is intended to enable ministry and to empower God's people for the work of ministry. When structures hinder rather than help, they need to be changed to advance the mission, vision and values.

The members of the Transition Team should receive copies of the reports that summarize the church assessment. If church surveys such as NCD, CHAT, or other online assessments have been completed, the results should also be considered and evaluated. In some cases, when the assessment has been done using teams from outside the congregation, the results may have been already shared with the congregation. The Transition Team should review the complete report.

It is often beneficial to conduct a series of forums to allow church members to speak into the transitional process. Church renewal cannot be accomplished without the support of the congregation. It is essential for the transitional pastor and the team to communicate clearly and frequently.

Consideration should also be given to a congregational assembly designed to lead the church to repentance and renewal. When sin is uncovered, it must be confessed. Corporate sin requires corporate repentance. It may also be important for the church leaders to contact people who have been offended or sinned against in order to seek forgiveness on behalf of the congregation. At times, that will include the former pastor and/or his family. Restitution may be called for in some circumstances.

S tage 3: Acting on the Assessment

Transitional pastors guide the Transition Team through a process designed to evaluate the results of interviews, reports, surveys and forums. Those reports should be made available to the elders as well. Once the review is completed, recommendations to revise policies and implement needed changes may be presented to the elders, the governance authority and/or the congregation for approval. In turn, the elders may make recommendations to the Transition Team. The Transition Pastor should report to the elders and the district superintendent regularly.

Elders are Part of the Team

While Transition Teams may be empowered to make recommendations for changes, care must be taken to include the congregation's elders in decision making and if it is a different body, the governance authority of the church. Unless the church has been placed in Developing Church status by the district, change cannot be introduced successfully without the endorsement of the congregation's elected leaders. Even when the church is considered developing, forced change is seldom long lasting. The Transition Team should include at least one elder who can also serve as a liaison between the elders and the Transition Team.

Elders are ultimately responsible for shepherding (leading) the church. Without their support and involvement, efforts to introduce change will be resisted and may actually prevent the changes needed to renew the congregation's life. Some change such as bylaw revisions, matters relating to property, the election of officers, etc. cannot be made without congregational vote. Care should be taken to keep the elders well informed. In a similar way, the elders must also take responsibility to maintain good communication with the Transition Team.

Stage 4: Direction

Once proposed changes have been agreed upon, the Transitional Pastor guides the church staff in implementing the plan. The goal of transitional ministry is to prepare the church for the arrival of its next pastor, so it is important to identify the changes needed to complete those preparations. Not all of the changes will be completed before the new pastor arrives, but systems should be in place to maximize the opportunity for him to be successful.

At this point it is important for all of the committees and teams working on the transition to be united, not only regarding Alliance doctrine and mission, but also united on matters relating to the ministry and direction of the church. Trust is important. The church's committees, staff and the congregation as a whole must cooperate together with respect for each other's thoughts and opinions. Gossip is out of order.

The district superintendent should have been kept informed of progress throughout the transition period. His approval of the proposed changes to the church's structures and ministries is both important and necessary, especially if the church is in Developing Church status. Most districts have bylaws that require changes in the local church documents to be approved by the district.

Stage 5: Pastoral Search

There is some danger in forming a Pastoral Search Committee too early in the transitional process. The Committee should not begin until significant progress has been made in refashioning the mission. Vision and values of the church and until conflict (if present) has been resolved. Remember, the purpose of the transitional

period is to prepare the church for its next pastor and not simply to secure a candidate for ministry. The Search Committee may be appointed by the elders or the church governance authority. In some cases, the committee members are chosen by the congregation. That will be dependent upon local church bylaws and custom. If the church is considered to be developing, the district superintendent may also be directly involved in appointing or approving the committee members. The Transitional Pastor will ordinarily be asked to provide guidance on the formation of the Search Committee and to coach the committee through the search process. The committee will also need to work closely with the Transition Team and the elders.

Most districts provide church leaders with information related to the pastoral search process. General guidelines are much the same, but many districts have preferred tools to assist the congregation in its search for a new pastor. The role of the transitional Pastor in the search process may also vary with the district. In some circumstances the district superintendent will invite the Transitional Pastor to play an active role in the search process and evaluating candidates. In others, that role may be more passive.

The Transitional Pastor

Transitional ministry is a calling. While many competent pastors are able to fill the pulpit and provide pastoral care for churches while they are searching for new permanent pastor, transitional pastors are called to be change agents. Transitional ministry is often stressful as the pastor deals with conflict and resistance to change. The task requires discernment, good communication skills, and demonstrated leadership abilities. Successful transitional pastors need to be problem solvers. The ministry demands,

1. Coaching and listening skills.
2. Proven administrative/organizational ability.
3. Thoughtful decision-making.
4. Expertise in peacemaking and mediation
5. The ability to form and work with a team.
6. Relational wisdom.
7. The ability to introduce, implement and manage change.

Transitional pastors are called to restore health, vitality and wellbeing to troubled congregations. It is often a difficult but satisfying ministry that requires a love for the local church and a deep commitment to the gospel. Congregational unity is necessary for renewal. The goal can only be reached through prayer and mutual submission, first to the Lord and then to one another within the congregation. As Dave Miles, the executive director for Vital Church has said, there is only one thing the church really needs to do. Listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and then do what the Spirit of God tells it to do.

Stage 6: The Handoff

The goal of transitional ministry is reached when the congregation extends a call to a candidate and that call is accepted. At that point the role of the transitional pastor changes. While it is important to care for final matters, the most important one is to make certain there is a clear transfer of authority and leadership to the incoming pastor. For the most part, this will not be difficult. Nevertheless, it is important for the transitional pastor to be as intentional about handing the reins of leadership to the new pastor as he was about other aspects of the interim ministry.