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**WHEN THE LONG-TERM PASTOR LEAVES:  
THE LOCAL CHURCH PROCESS OF PASTORAL TRANSITION IN THE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA**

**By**

**Lawrence A. Gilpin**

**A PROJECT/DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

**ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI  
2006**

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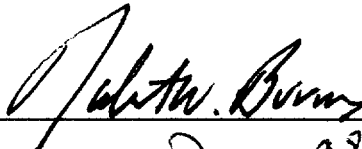
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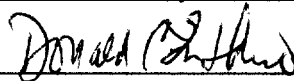
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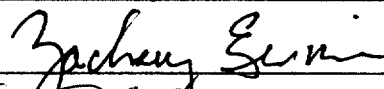
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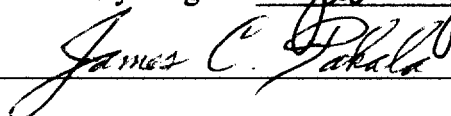
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## ABSTRACT

for

### WHEN THE LONG-TERM PASTOR LEAVES: THE LOCAL CHURCH PROCESS OF PASTORAL TRANSITION IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

by

LAWRENCE A. GILPIN

The time of transition following the tenure of a long-term pastor is a significant period in the life of a local congregation. Because of the uniqueness of a transition following a long-term pastor, there are great responsibilities placed upon those in positions of leadership in the church. Their task is not only to prevent a problematic transition, but also to promote one that is healthy.

Churches go through transition after a long-term pastor in three basic ways. The first is where the congregation thrives during and after the transition. The second is when the transition does not go well at all. The third way is a mixture between the other two and has mingled successes and failures.

Yet while congregations go through transitions in these three ways, research regarding these changes is lacking. This problem necessitated study of the experience of those who have been actively involved in the process of transition following the long-term pastor. By researching congregations that have undergone each type of transition scenario, one can gain a more adequate understanding of the process.

The purpose of this study was to examine how elders and pastoral search committees in Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) congregations approached the pastoral transition process when their previous pastor served for ten or more years. Qualitative case studies were utilized to investigate the transition process. Elders and committee members from three congregations were interviewed.

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How did elders prepare for transition prior to the long-term pastor's leaving?
2. What did elders and pastoral search committees do once the long-term pastor left the congregation?
3. What insights do elders and pastoral search committees offer regarding the ministry of the new pastor?
4. What evaluation do elders and pastoral search committees offer in light of their experience?

Pastoral changes in the congregations studied worked best when there was a specific transition plan or transition committee in place well before the long-term pastor resigned. Communication and prayer among the departing pastor and his elders and congregation also made the transitions more effective.

Though transitions after a long-term pastor are difficult, the ultimate results of these changes can be quite positive. Initial difficulties for the new pastor do not necessarily mean that the process has been ineffective. When all parties involved fulfill their unique responsibilities, they help to facilitate a successful transition process when a long-term pastor leaves a local church.

**Dedicated to the Glory of God**

**With Deep Gratitude to My Wife, Corley,  
My Daughters, Emily and Lauren,  
and My Mother, Betty Gilpin**

**For Their Love, Prayers and Encouragement  
Which Have Seen Me Through This Project**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	ix
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	7
Statement of the Purpose .....	8
Primary Research Questions .....	8
Significance of the Study .....	9
Definition of Terms .....	10
2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	12
Biblical Examples of Leadership Transition .....	12
Literature Related to the Long-Term Pastorate .....	19
Literature Related to Change or Transition .....	26
Literature Addressing Pastoral Transition .....	35
Additional Helps in Transition .....	59
Previous Studies Specifically Related to Following a Long-Term Pastor .....	66
Summary and Conclusion .....	68
3 PROJECT METHODOLOGY .....	69
Design of the Study .....	69
Interview Design .....	71
Limitations of the Study .....	76

Biases of the Study .....	77
Conclusion .....	79
4 FINDINGS .....	80
Immanuel Presbyterian Church .....	80
Forest Hills Presbyterian Church .....	104
Northside Presbyterian Church .....	129
5 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	152
Conclusions and Discussion of Findings .....	153
Recommendations .....	162
Recommendations Drawn From Personal Reflection .....	187
Recommendations for Further Research .....	187
Final Words .....	188
APPENDIX: Interview Guide .....	189
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	192



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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The pastoral transition after a long-term pastor is a challenging experience in the life of a local church. As congregations face these transitions, a variety of scenarios may unfold. The following stories illustrate how different congregations go through the process of transition following a long-tenured pastor.

Michael Clifton served as pastor of Eastside Presbyterian Church for almost fifteen years. His tenure was the longest ever at the church and was marked by consistent, though not spectacular, growth in numbers. His congregation appreciated his preaching, pastoral skills, and the steadiness he provided. He and his elders occasionally disagreed on issues facing the congregation. However, this did not hinder his faithfulness in ministry to the church, nor the mutual love he and his elders had for one another. He resigned to accept a call to a congregation in another state that had been through a time of deep conflict, believing his pastoral skills were needed there. He was replaced by Robert Foster, who was fourteen years younger than his predecessor and is now in his ninth year of ministry at Eastside. Previously, Foster was an assistant pastor for four years at a much larger congregation. Eastside is his first solo pastorate. Due to needs and available funds as a result of increased numerical growth over the past four years, Eastside has built a new fellowship hall and educational wing. Though he was young when he came to the church, even the older members have related well to him and have enjoyed their

interaction with him, his wife, and his young children. Although the congregation has a quiet apprehension that Robert will one day be called to a larger church, for the moment its members are enjoying his ministry and hope it continues.

Al Simpson was the senior pastor of Rivermont Presbyterian Church for just over ten years. During his tenure, the church grew in members and staff and financial giving was consistently high. He was loved deeply by his congregation and highly respected in his community. He could state his understanding of Scripture on the most controversial topics in a very personable way. Even those in the church who sometimes disagreed with him still were supportive of his ministry and enjoyed being around him. He was in many ways the quintessential pastor-teacher.

His congregation was heartbroken when he announced he was resigning to become pastor of a different church in another part of the country. One observer said “everyone cried” on his last Sunday. After he was gone, a pastoral search committee was formed, and its members began to look for Al’s replacement. The committee did not take a long time to complete its work. Six months later it recommended Dave Robertson, a man slightly younger than Al. Dave was called as Rivermont’s pastor. Though he had strengths, he was not the easiest person to get to know. In addition, other staff members found it difficult to work with him. During the first six months of his tenure, two key staff persons began looking for other positions. In addition, in the terms of one elder, he “ran off” a third staff member. Relational problems with staff, officers, and other members of the congregation continued throughout his tenure. After two years he was asked by his Session to begin seeking another place of ministry. He resigned about a month after this request.

Raymond Parker was fifty-four years old when he was called as pastor of Springdale Presbyterian Church and stayed until his retirement eleven years later. He came to the church after the founding pastor left. He had a tenure marked by relative peace in the church, though not by high levels of numerical growth. His members thought he balanced his teaching-preaching and “people” responsibilities well. He was succeeded by Jeff Harrison, a forty-year-old man with about fourteen years of ministry experience. He has been at Springdale now for two years. Many people feel the transition went well and that the change was mostly positive. Jeff has made some changes which have annoyed some elders but which have been well received by others. Some members of the congregation have left the church, unhappy with the “new direction” under Jeff. Yet, others feel they have grown spiritually in ways they have never grown before, and they give credit for this to Jeff’s sound teaching. Those who support him - actually a solid majority of the congregation - are very strong in their support and would be disappointed if he were to leave. Yet, a small minority of members would not be terribly disappointed if he were to move on.

The three preceding scenarios, while not direct accounts of specific pastoral transitions, nevertheless are representative of typical events that occur when a long-term pastor leaves his congregation. Sometimes that transition goes well; sometimes it goes quite poorly; at other times the results are mixed. In such scenarios, what causes the difference in the results of the transitions? Do the results happen with little explanation, or are there particular factors or dynamics in a transition scenario that contribute to the success or lack of success of a pastoral transition after a long-term pastorate? Specifically, can a *congregation*, through its elders and pastoral search committee,

engage in a specific course of action to safeguard against a poor transition and to promote one that is successful?

Certainly the time of transition following the tenure of a long-term pastor is a significant period in the life of a local congregation. Philip Collins, professor of applied theology and director of field education at Regent College, describes pastoral placement itself as “matchmaking” and states that “matchmaking, in pastoral placement, can be an ecstasy of opportunity or an agony of decision.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet while any pastoral transition and placement can be momentous, the departure and subsequent succession of a pastor who has had a relatively long tenure constitutes a particularly important time for the church and especially for its leadership. This is the case whether the pastor leaves amid amicable conditions or in the midst of circumstances that have been more tumultuous. Because of the uniqueness of a transition following a long-term pastor, there are great responsibilities placed upon those in positions of leadership in the church to not only prevent a problematic transition, but also to promote one that is healthy.

Church consultants Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree refer to pastoral transition as “the most important event that can happen” in a church.<sup>2</sup> Yet, according to these authors, churches are hesitant to address this critical issue. Weese and Crabtree refer to transitions as “the elephant in the boardroom” - something big and threatening - which people pretend isn’t there or don’t want to talk about.<sup>3</sup> Yet, if the issue is as momentous as these authors suggest, it is one churches need to address. With regard to

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Collins, “Make Me a Perfect Match,” *Cruix* 23, no. 3 (1987): 18.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004), 3

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

transition after a long-term pastor, church leaders need to be able to deal with the issue in an informed manner. This may be difficult because of their lack of experience with pastoral transitions or because not much practical information exists to help them with their task.

A long-tenured pastor is not the norm in contemporary American churches, in which pastoral transitions occur frequently. Douglas Tilley, who has studied these transitions from the pastor's point of view, notes that "the average pastor has served in his pastorate for five years."<sup>4</sup> In my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), "the average pastoral stay as a solo or senior pastor is seven and one-third years."<sup>5</sup>

The definition of a "lengthy" or "long-term" pastorate is somewhat arbitrary. In his study of the impact of the long-term pastorate, Dale Welden defines "long-term" as "twenty years or more in the same church," though he acknowledges that "this is an arbitrary figure" and that "no one length of tenure that would be considered 'long-term' is universally agreed upon."<sup>6</sup> Richard Danielson, who studied the succession of long-term pastors in his United Methodist Church conference, utilizes ten years as the benchmark which defines a long-term pastor. He arrives at this length of tenure based on studies conducted by other individuals. These studies related both to the amount of time it takes pastors to develop strong ties with a congregation and also to the upper limit of periods of stability that normally characterize a man's life - ten years being considered the

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Tilley, "What Are the Factors That Lead Pastors to Change Pastorates?" (D.Min. diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2003), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Dale Welden, "The Impact of the Long-Term Pastorate" (D.Min. diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2001), 13.

maximum.<sup>7</sup> The figure of ten years, though admittedly arbitrary, is a realistic figure for defining a long-term pastorate in the PCA, since the average pastoral tenure in the denomination is just over seven years.

Since a long-term pastorate is not common, the transition from a long-term pastor to his successor provides a more unique field for study than do pastoral transitions in general. Of those churches that have had a pastor of long tenure, few have experience in how to go about the transition. John Vonhoff, a church elder who has served on pastoral search teams, has written a step-by-step guide through the key elements of the pastoral search process. He addresses a practical concern about transitions when a long-term pastor leaves - it has been a long time since that congregation has had to search for a pastor. He notes that these "churches have not had to manage a pastoral search process for ten, fifteen, or even twenty years. Search committee members, from board members to the actively involved lay member, do not understand the multitude of tasks that make up the search process."<sup>8</sup> Thus, in replacing a long-term pastor, the process is new and not one with which the congregation is familiar. This makes the transition after a long-term pastor potentially a more difficult process.

In the church's process of pastoral transition after a relatively long pastorate, the following variables are in play: the personalities, spiritual gifts, and leadership styles of the former pastor and the successor pastor; the expectations or desires of the leadership of the congregation regarding the successor pastor; the grounds for congregational "acceptance" of the successor pastor; the quality of relationships the former pastor had

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<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Danielson, "Beating The Odds: Successfully Following A Long-Term Pastor" (D.Min. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2003), 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> John Vonhoff, *Pastoral Search: The Alban Guide to Managing the Pastoral Search Process* (Washington D.C.: The Alban Institute), vii.-viii.

with members of the congregation; and the goals of the successor pastor for the congregation and the manner in which he pursues them. Certainly these factors can be present in any pastoral transition, but their weight may be increased when a pastor has had a relatively long tenure and is being succeeded by someone new.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Personal reflection on the experience of churches indicates that they go through transition after a long-term pastor in three basic ways. One is where the congregation thrives. There are churches where the ministry following a long-term pastor has remained effective amid the transition and flourished following the transition.

A second way churches go through transition is one that does not go well at all. A successor pastor may be an “unintentional interim” with a “short, turbulent ministry that works through transition issues.”<sup>9</sup> For a variety of reasons the transition does not work and the initial successor pastor precedes someone else who will serve the church in the future.

A third way of transition fits between the other two. It is less smooth than some, but it does not result in a pastor having a tumultuous, short tenure following a long-term pastor. Once initial difficulties have been worked through, the new pastor stays and the church stabilizes.

Yet while congregations experience transitions in these three ways, research regarding this experience is lacking. This problem necessitates study of the experiences of those who have been actively involved in the process of transition following the long-term pastor. Only by researching congregations that have undergone each type of

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<sup>9</sup> Anne E. Fisher, “A Study Of Pastors Who Follow Long-Term Pastorates” (D.Min. diss., Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2003), 2.



transition experience can one gain an adequate understanding of the transition process. This understanding then can be used to assist local churches as they face the challenge of pastoral transition when a long-tenured pastor leaves.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

Elders and pastoral search committees face a challenging scenario when a transition is being made from a long-term pastor to his successor. Examining how these persons in key positions have approached the transition process can help one to identify particular elements that contributed to the success or failure of the process in local churches. In addition, an understanding of these elements then can serve to guide churches as they seek the best possible process of pastoral transition when a long-term pastor leaves. The purpose of this study was to examine how elders and pastoral search committees in PCA congregations have approached the pastoral transition process when their previous pastor served for ten or more years.

### **Primary Research Questions**

This study focused on the perspective of the congregation, particularly its elders and pastoral search committees, as they experienced a transition following the departure of a long-term pastor. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How did elders prepare for transition prior to the long-term pastor's leaving?
2. What did elders and pastoral search committees do once the long-term pastor left the congregation?
3. What insights do elders and pastoral search committees offer regarding the ministry of the new pastor?

4. What evaluation do elders and pastoral search committees offer in light of their experience?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for several reasons. First, there is very little that has been written regarding the process of transition following a long-term pastor. Specifically, in my research of literature, nothing has been written regarding the process of pastoral transition in PCA congregations from the perspective of the congregation, particularly its elders and pastoral search committees. Studies have been made of the benefits of a long-term pastorate in PCA churches<sup>11</sup> as well as the factors that lead pastors to change churches in the PCA.<sup>12</sup> In addition, a PCA teaching elder has written a guide for systematically choosing a new pastor.<sup>13</sup> The PCA's *Book of Church Order* (BCO) sets forth basic requirements for calling a new pastor.<sup>14</sup> However, these studies and guidelines do not address the perspective of elders or search committees in the transition process, or in the succession of a long-term pastor.

In addition, this study should benefit PCA congregations by identifying inadequate as well as successful transition processes. Though all congregations need not follow the same exact process in the transition of pastors, there are general principles and effective procedures useful for implementation in PCA congregations. I would like this study eventually to become a resource to congregations in the PCA, as congregations

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<sup>11</sup> Welden, "The Impact of the Long-Term Pastorate" (D.Min. diss. Covenant Theological Seminary, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Tilley, "What Are the Factors That Lead Pastors to Change Pastorates?"

<sup>13</sup> D.J. MacNair, *A Systematic Way to Choose a Pastor* (Decatur, Georgia: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 6th ed. (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2003), chapter 20.

become more purposeful in going about the process of transition. My desire is to assist the church in its ministry, and I believe this study could be a tool to that end.

Finally, this study has potential to benefit PCA teaching elders by protecting them from being called to pastoral relationships with congregations for which they are not well-suited. While this study addresses the transition process from the perspective of the congregation, there is a potential advantage to ministers if congregations utilize processes that have proved effective elsewhere.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following key terms will be used throughout this study:

**Elder:** One holding the office to which the government, teaching, spiritual oversight, and discipline of a PCA congregation is entrusted.

**Teaching Elder:** A pastor of a PCA congregation, whose vocation is the ministry of the word of God. In the PCA, he is not a member of the congregation, but of a Presbytery.

**Ruling Elder:** An elder who is a member of the congregation and whose status and authority are equal to that of a teaching elder, but whose vocation is something other than the ministry of the word of God.

**Session:** The collective body of elders. Elders meet together as a Session, and the Session is the governing body of the local PCA congregation.

**Deacon:** An officer in a PCA congregation whose responsibilities focus on ministry to the needy and on the care of the physical property of the congregation. Deacons function together as a Diaconate.

**PCA:** The Presbyterian Church in America.

**Presbytery:** A regional body of the PCA consisting of all teaching elders and churches within its bounds.

**Pastoral Search Committee:** A group of members of the congregation who function under the oversight of the Session for the purpose of locating and recommending to the congregation the man they believe should be the successor pastor of the congregation.

**Call:** The invitation of the congregation to a man to serve as their pastor; the term also can refer to the tenure of a pastor.

**Pastor:** For the purpose of this study, the pastor will refer to one who is a senior pastor or solo pastor of a PCA congregation.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study was to examine how elders and pastoral search committees in PCA congregations approached the pastoral transition process when their previous pastor served for ten or more years. The purpose of understanding the experiences of those who have gone through that process was to obtain guidance to facilitate successful transitions following a long-term pastor. There is very little literature specifically addressing the transition after a long-term pastor. However, there is a large body of literature that addresses the long-term pastorate, change or transition in general, and pastoral transition in general. This larger body of literature sheds important light on the purpose of this study.

#### **Biblical Examples of Leadership Transition**

Before looking at other literature dealing with the topic of this study, it is important to note that the Bible itself addresses the topic to some extent. While it does not set forth a fully developed theology of ministerial transition, nor a clear model for transition following a spiritual leader of long tenure, the Bible does provide several examples in which one spiritual leader succeeded another. In some cases, the previous leader had served for many years. These transitions resulted in different outcomes, with the succeeding leader attaining varying levels of success and acceptance by God's people.

### *Moses and Joshua*

Deuteronomy 31 records Moses' preparation for the transition of Israel's leadership from himself to Joshua, following Moses' leadership of the Israelites for forty years. He affirms what God would do for His people so that they could take possession of the land of Canaan, and he charges Joshua with responsibilities of leadership of the people (vs. 1-8). Whether we have in these passages complete accounts or summary statements, preparation for leadership transition was made and the transition apparently went smoothly, based on the material we find in the book of Joshua.<sup>15</sup> God Himself affirms Joshua's succession of Moses in leadership,<sup>16</sup> the conclusion of a process that had begun as God instructed Moses to select Joshua as his successor years earlier.<sup>17</sup>

Richard Danielson, who studied the succession of long-term pastors in his United Methodist Church conference, addresses the example of Moses and Joshua as one in which a successful transition occurred. He notes what he views as the reasons for that success: "Keys to Joshua's success seem to lie in his extensive preparation for the task, Moses' commendation of Joshua to the people, Joshua's deep commitment to obeying and relying upon God, and God's choice to raise up Joshua as a leader."<sup>18</sup> The element of Moses' commendation as a key to Joshua's success is echoed by Anne Fisher in her survey of biblical examples of leadership succession amid her study of Presbyterian Church (USA) pastors who followed long pastorates. She says "Moses' blessing on

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<sup>15</sup> Joshua 4-6.

<sup>16</sup> Joshua 1:1-9.

<sup>17</sup> Numbers 27:18-23.

<sup>18</sup> Richard A. Danielson, "Beating The Odds: Successfully Following A Long-Term Pastor" (D.Min. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2003), 12.

Joshua allows the people to trust their new leaders. The people affirm the choice as the Scripture states, ‘and the Israelites obeyed him’ (Deuteronomy 34:9b).”<sup>19</sup>

### *David and Solomon*

Another key leadership transition in Scripture occurred as David was succeeded as king by his son Solomon. Just as Moses made preparation for someone to succeed him in leadership of the Israelites, David also is recorded as making preparation for his son Solomon to succeed him as king.<sup>20</sup> He charges Solomon to “observe what the LORD your God requires: walk in His ways and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go, and that the LORD may keep His promise to me: ‘If your descendants watch how they live and if they walk faithfully before Me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.’”<sup>21</sup> There was an attempt to keep Solomon from the position of king in Israel,<sup>22</sup> and he later put potential rivals to death.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the transition resulted in a long-term reign for Solomon. Yet, the succession following Solomon’s reign demonstrates that the transition of spiritual leadership does not always end with good results, as is evident in the eventual division of the Israelite kingdom into two separate kingdoms, Israel and Judah.<sup>24</sup>

Kings who succeeded David are compared to him in several instances.<sup>25</sup> Also, the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel often are compared to Jereboam in terms of their

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<sup>19</sup> Anne E. Fisher, “A Study Of Pastors Who Follow Long-Term Pastorates” (D.Min. diss., Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2003), 23.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Kings 1:28-48.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Kings 2:3-4.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Kings 1:1-53.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Kings 2:13-46.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Kings 12:1-24.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Kings 11:6; 1 Kings 14:8; 1 Kings 15:3; 1 Kings 15:11; 2 Kings 14:3; 2 Kings 16:2; 2 Kings 18:3; 2 Kings 22:2.

wicked practices.<sup>26</sup> As will be seen below, several writers point out the dangers of comparing a successor leader to the previous leader in the church context. Yet, the biblical comparison of one king to another is presented in Scripture in a straightforward, objective way. The biblical comparisons of successor leaders to past leaders do not appear to be presented as inappropriate in themselves, and it may be that they are set forth in Scripture because they are to some degree a legitimate measure of a transition's effectiveness.

### *Elijah and Elisha*

The story of Elijah and Elisha, recorded in 2 Kings 2:1-18, in which the literal mantle of leadership was passed from Elijah to Elisha, provides another primary biblical example of leadership transition. Ronald Taylor addresses this incident in his study of transition in Southern Baptist churches following the retirement of a long-tenured pastor. However, his material is somewhat contradictory in discussing this example.

Though he says that "the Elijah/Elisha model is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive as a model of transition,"<sup>27</sup> he nevertheless draws four specific theological implications from this transition of spiritual leadership:

1. God is the one who prepares leaders for their task.
2. God chooses those He will use to lead in His work. The hand of God guides the transference of all Christian leadership.
3. God does not always operate by democratic guidelines. God does not look to a vote from human beings to determine His will.
4. In Scripture God sometimes calls leaders by impressing on the departing leader the identity of his successor. God made very clear to Elijah that the person who

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Kings 15:34; 1 Kings 16:2; 1 Kings 16:19; 1 Kings 16:26; 1 Kings 22:52; 2 Kings 3:3; 2 Kings 10:29, 31; 2 Kings 13:2; 2 Kings 13:11; 2 Kings 14:24; 2 Kings 15:9; 2 Kings 15:18; 2 Kings 15:24; 2 Kings 15:28.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald B. Taylor, "Models for Church Transition Following the Retirement of a Long-tenured Pastor" (D.Min. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000), 6.



would next carry the mantle would be Elisha. Elijah did not have to consult with a body of people or follow any man-made rules of leadership succession.<sup>28</sup>

While the examples of Elijah and Elisha, David and Solomon, and Moses and Joshua may not actually be set forth as biblical norms for leadership transition, they certainly provide examples of how transitions took place among God's people. In addition, the New Testament says that "everything that was written in the past (i.e., in the Old Testament) was written to teach us,"<sup>29</sup> so it should in some measure inform our understanding of the transition of leaders among God's people. While the transitions from one king to another occurred *primarily* through family descent, they are instructive as well, particularly with regard to preparation for and evaluation of transitions.

#### *Jesus and His Disciples*

The New Testament also contains several examples of ministry transition. While Jesus' position is a unique, non-repeatable one, He nevertheless made preparation for His own transition from His earthly ministry to His ascension into heaven. He told His disciples, "I will be with you only a little longer"<sup>30</sup> and emphasized that He was telling them ahead of time that He would be leaving the earth.<sup>31</sup> He also reminded the disciples that though He was going away, He would send the Holy Spirit to be with them.<sup>32</sup> He instructed them as to what their responsibilities would be once He had returned to heaven.<sup>33</sup> Taylor affirms Jesus' preparation of His disciples for his departure as a model

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> Romans 15:4

<sup>30</sup> John 13:33.

<sup>31</sup> John 14:29.

<sup>32</sup> John 14:16, 18; John 16:7.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-11.

for pastors saying, “Jesus continually prepared His followers for His departure just as a pastor should prepare his flock for his inevitable departure.”<sup>34</sup>

### *Paul and Timothy*

Taylor also highlights Paul’s preparation of Timothy for future ministry. He points out that

one of the ways Paul trained Timothy for future leadership was by allowing Timothy to spend significant amounts of time with him in training. Acts 16:1-5 indicates that Timothy traveled from town to town with Paul. . . . Paul wrote two letters to Timothy with the purpose of teaching him to continue the work to which Paul had committed his life. Paul invested his wisdom and time with his young protégé.<sup>35</sup>

### *Theological Implications and Principles*

From the New Testament examples of Jesus and Paul, Taylor derives a number of theological implications for transition, two of which are relevant for this study:

1. An effective leader will prepare his followers for his departure.
2. If true success in leadership transition occurs, it must be Spirit driven.<sup>36</sup>

Scripture also affirms the differing roles of particular leaders who have succeeded one another in the ministry of the church. In 1 Corinthians 3:6, the apostle Paul affirms “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” In the transition from Paul to Apollos in the ministry of the church at Corinth, there was a change in ministry role from starting to sustaining a church. Yet each role was important in God’s economy, and each was dependent upon God’s blessing for effectiveness.

Paul also cautions the church against focusing upon individual leaders rather than on Christ Himself.<sup>37</sup> In addition, he affirms the fact of ministerial transition, proclaiming,

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<sup>34</sup> Taylor, “Models for Church Transition,” 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:4.

“I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it,” adding that the successor leader should be careful how he builds upon the spiritual foundation that has been laid.<sup>38</sup>

The qualifications for church officers set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-8 along with the instructions to elders in 1 Peter 5:1-4 are also applicable to leadership transition in the local church. The instructions in 1 Timothy and Titus were written so that the early church would know whom to select as its officers. However, they also provide guidance to established congregations as they seek to identify potential new leaders and to determine whether men are spiritually suited for leadership. The 1 Peter passage was written to Christians in more established church situations. It serves as a reminder of how a leader in the church should function and thus implicitly sets forth the qualities a church should seek in its leadership.

In addition to specific Scripture references to ministerial transition or ministerial qualifications, there are two key theological principles Scripture sets forth that guide the church’s approach to the issue. The first principle is God’s sovereignty over all things. Ephesians 1:11 affirms that God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will,” while Romans 8:28 declares that “in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” Thus, from a biblical perspective, pastoral transitions occur under God’s sovereign purpose and government. This would include transitions that work out well and those that do not. Even a poor transition, with the many difficulties it may bring a church, does not happen at random and can be utilized for the good of God’s people.

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<sup>38</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:10.

A second, related principle is that God's people grow through the trial of their faith.<sup>39</sup> This principle is particularly applicable when transitions go poorly. The fact that a pastoral transition does not end well does not mean it cannot be used of God for the ultimate spiritual well-being and growth of faith in His people.

In addition to Biblical passages, there are three primary areas of literature related to the topic of this study: the first deals with the long-term pastorate; the second deals with change or transition in general; and the third deals with pastoral transition in general. Within this third area there is a small body of literature that has come from studies of transition after a long-tenured pastor.

### **Literature Related to the Long-Term Pastorate**

The long-term pastorate itself is a focus of many writings related to the process of pastoral transition. Some literature addresses potential problems that can exist because of a long pastoral tenure. However, most literature deals with specific positive contributions that a pastor can make in various settings because of a long tenure.

#### **Advantages of the Long-Term Pastorate**

Literature which addresses the long-term pastorate focuses on several areas in which a positive effect by the pastor is facilitated by a long tenure. Specific areas addressed are the impact he can have upon his congregation, his broader church affiliation, his community, and his successor.

#### *Advantages for the Congregation*

Several authors have written of the many advantages connected with having a pastor serve a congregation for a long period of time. Geoffrey Thomas, a Baptist minister in Wales and Associate Editor of *Banner of Truth* magazine, refers to these

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<sup>39</sup> Romans 5:1-4; James 1:2-4.

advantages as a pastor's "working capital."<sup>40</sup> The capital that accrues for pastors is primarily "the confidence and love of his congregation."<sup>41</sup>

Material dealing with the long-term pastorate often focuses on how the long-term pastor can establish a sense of credibility with his flock over an extended period of time. Dale Welden, a PCA minister who has studied the impact of long-term pastorates in his denomination, affirms the unique value of a long-term pastorate for the pastor in regard to his relationship to his congregation. Quoting Dr. Robert S. Rayburn, a fellow PCA pastor, Welden says: "There is a kind of relationship between minister and congregation, a most sacred and fruitful relationship, a relationship of love, trust, and confidence, that is created only when the relationship is longstanding."<sup>42</sup> Welden also notes that "Credibility in ministry is established over time . . . as a pastor shares his life and his life is observed by those in the church."<sup>43</sup> This is also seen in the reflections of Chevis Horne, a Southern Baptist pastor who served forty years with one congregation. He affirms,

The overriding advantage of a long pastorate is the opportunity to make deep, trusting, and caring relationships. . . . When many pastors are on the threshold of significant relationships with their people, they move on. As a result, pastors do not get to know the people on a deep level of trust and acceptance. In some cases pastors can be like masked persons...pastors must convince the people that they are loved and cared for.<sup>44</sup>

The process of convincing parishioners that the pastor loves and cares for them may take time, but the long-term pastorate affords the opportunity for these qualities to be

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<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Thomas, "Accepting or Rejecting a Call," *Banner of Truth* 328 (January 1991), 8.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Dale Welden, "The Impact of the Long-Term Pastorate" (D.Min. diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2001), 18, quoting Robert Rayburn, unpublished sermon delivered on the occasion of Rev. Paul Alexander's fortieth anniversary of serving Westminster Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Alabama, June 12, 1998, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Welden, "The Impact of the Long-Term Pastorate," 49.

<sup>44</sup> Chevis F. Horne, *Forty Years in the Same Pulpit* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1995), 1.

conveyed. In addition, according to Horne, the long-term pastor can contribute to the congregation's sense of stability "in a world of high mobility. There is a deep longing for continuity, stability, and permanence. A long pastorate can help speak to this need."<sup>45</sup>

According to Thomas, the benefit of this "working capital" for a congregation can be substantial. Though it is built up slowly, once acquired this capital allows the pastor to have significant influence on his congregation through his ministry. In addition, pastors develop knowledge of their congregations through intimate contact over a number of years. As a result, the long-term pastor is able to use this knowledge to adapt wisely his ministerial work to their character and needs.<sup>46</sup>

The element of trust that accrues to a pastor who has acquired the "working capital" of ministry is described by some writers as "paying the rent." Tilley quotes church consultant Lyle Schaller saying, "In order to gain the following of the congregation, the pastor can follow his highly visionary agenda only after he 'pays the rent' on a weekly, regular basis. The pastor 'pays the rent' through preaching and worship, teaching and pastoral care, organization and administration."<sup>47</sup> In his brief work written as a guide for pastors making the transition from one pastorate to the next, United Methodist bishop Michael J. Coyner relates "rent paying" to the level of power or authority a pastor has in his congregation.<sup>48</sup> His particular categories of "rent-paying" are fewer than those of Schaller, namely "preaching, pastoral care, and administration."<sup>49</sup> These authors seem to suggest that the long-term pastor has the potential for significant

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, "Accepting or Rejecting a Call," 8.

<sup>47</sup> Tilley, "Factors that Lead Pastors to Change Pastorates," 50, quoting Lyle Schaller, *44 Steps Off the Plateau* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 68; See also Danielson, "Beating The Odds," 84.

<sup>48</sup> Michael J. Coyner, *Making A Good Move: Opening the Door to a Successful Pastorate* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 80.

ministry because of the length of time he has spent with his congregation, if he pays attention to the categories they delineate. Doing so can help serve as a catalyst for a pastor's development of a loving, trusting relationship with those under his care.

While most of the literature dealing with the long-term ministry addresses the positive *impact* of long-term ministry on a congregation, Robert Kemper, a United Church of Christ minister, addresses the long-term pastorate from the standpoint of what it normally *demonstrates*: the spiritual health of a congregation. Kemper says that "long pastorates usually signal that a congregation is stable and has a strong sense of identity. It also shows that a congregation has the ability to remain faithful over the long run."<sup>50</sup> Thus, according to Kemper, the long-term pastorate may reflect a positive situation in a local church congregation while at the same time helping to foster that situation.

#### *Advantages for the Broader Church*

The vast majority of literature related to the advantages of a long-term pastorate for the church deals with the advantages for a local congregation where one serves as pastor. This may be because the local congregation is where a pastor conducts most of his ministry. It may also be related to the fact that many congregations are independent or have little connection with a broader church body. However, a Presbyterian form of government is one in which there is a connection or union between three "courts" of the church: the local Session, the regional Presbytery, and the General Assembly (the annual meeting of the entire denomination). Writing from the standpoint of a PCA pastor, Welden discovered that the long-term pastorate affects the pastor's ministry at broader levels of the church beyond the local congregation. While he does not address the impact

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Kemper, "The Shadow of Your Predecessor," in Ed Bratcher, Robert Kemper, and Douglas Scott, *Mastering Transitions* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1991), 99.

of a long-term pastorate at the denomination-wide, General Assembly level, Welden did find that the pastor's ministry at the regional, Presbytery level was impacted in a positive way when he remained with the same congregation for a long period of time. With regard to the twelve pastors he interviewed in his study he found that "in terms of the stability of a long-term pastorate being a factor on a Presbytery, half of those interviewed spoke of the ministry that took place on the Presbytery level they believed was directly related to their being there for a long period of time."<sup>51</sup> One pastor noted that his long-term ministry provided stability at the Presbytery level and afforded him and his congregation greater influence in his Presbytery than other congregations possessed.<sup>52</sup>

#### *Advantages for the Community*

There is also a small body of literature dealing with the opportunity the long-term pastorate affords a pastor to have a positive impact upon the broader society in which the church exists. Elders in the church are required by Scripture to "have a good reputation with those outside the church."<sup>53</sup> While this requirement applies to a prospective pastor, it applies in a continuing way to those already in vocational ministry. Thomas relates a long-term pastorate to the opportunity a minister has to develop this reputation in his community. He says that "ministers who do not stay long in an area are an unknown quantity. Confidence in them as men of high moral purpose, whose words concerning local ethical issues carry weight, depends upon their being a permanent force in the community's life rather than transients."<sup>54</sup> While Thomas focuses more upon the *reputation* a long-tenured pastor can develop in his community, Horne emphasizes how a

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<sup>51</sup> Welden, "The Impact of the Long-Term Pastorate," 83.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Timothy 3:7.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas, "Accepting or Rejecting a Call," 9.



long tenure provides a pastor the potential for *influence* upon a community that might not exist otherwise. According to Horne, this influence is acquired quite slowly, and thus a long tenure can be of great benefit:

Long pastorates also help pastors extend their ministry beyond the limits of their churches into the life of the community. If it takes churches time to know and trust pastors, it takes communities even longer. Pastors must build trusting relationships with the community if they are to serve it in an effective way.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, there is “working capital” in the pastor’s community as well as in his congregation and Presbytery. While a long tenure is not a guarantee that the potential benefits related to church ministry and community interaction will be realized, it does provide a context in which these things can occur.

#### *Advantages for the Successor*

One additional benefit of the long-term pastorate is noted by Coyner as he addresses pastors making a transition to a new congregation. He affirms the previous, long-term pastorate as something that can benefit the successor pastor, holding that the long pastorate can serve to empower the successor for ministry. According to Coyner the successor’s situation as he begins his ministry can be compared to an initial stake of chips in a poker game:

This stake may be large or small depending upon such variables as: was the preceding pastor competent and well liked? Was the preceding pastor there for a long tenure? Was the preceding pastor one who built confidence in the pastoral ministry? . . . If the answer to these types of questions is “yes” then the incoming pastor may well receive a relatively large initial stack of chips with which to lead and serve the congregation.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Horne, *Forty Years in the Same Pulpit*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Coyner, *Making A Good Move*, 26-27.

Thus, the long tenure, if it is one characterized by pastoral competence and a quality relationship between pastor and congregation, is set forth as something that has potential for a positive impact upon a congregation after the long-term pastor leaves.

#### Potential Problems Resulting from Long Pastorates

As will be noted below, several authors have identified specific elements related to the transition process itself. These elements can contribute to the difficulty of transition following a long-term pastor. Yet some also have noted that there are elements more basic that could be labeled as “negatives,” in contrast to the many positive benefits of a long pastoral tenure. One of these relates to the fact that congregations sometime imitate their pastors. Horne notes that “pastors with long tenure build not only personal strengths into a church but also weaknesses into a church. They can unintentionally shape and form a church. Lazy pastors generally have lazy churches. Reserved ministers may have more formal congregations. Legalistic pastors grow rigid and judgmental churches.”<sup>57</sup>

Church consultant Roy M. Oswald and retired teachers James M. Heath and Ann W. Heath (the former of whom is a “transition companion” in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania), address an additional concern: a degree of spiritual or ministerial inertia can develop in a congregation over a long pastoral tenure. They state that “a long pastorate offers stability and the potential to develop and realize long-term goals, but stability can develop into a resistance to change and a leadership group committed to the

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<sup>57</sup> Horne, *Forty Years in the Same Pulpit*, 3.

status quo.”<sup>58</sup> Horne addresses the aspect of inertia as it relates to the long-tenured pastor. He says that

in long pastorates, ministers can easily become complacent, grow stale, rest on the laurels of victories of other years, and dry up spiritually and intellectually. They may no longer read stimulating books, get away for conferences and continuing education, and write sermons that are fresh and stimulating. . . . Such pastors continue to use pastoral capital earned and deposited in earlier years. . . . Burnouts (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual exhaustion) are more likely to occur during long pastorates.<sup>59</sup>

Clearly the body of literature related to the long-term pastorate affirms more potential advantages of a long-term pastorate than potential disadvantages. Yet, the literature reminds one that while the benefits should be appreciated and maximized by a pastor and a congregation, the disadvantages should not be ignored.

### **Literature Related to Change or Transition**

In addition to literature that addresses the fact that there are unique, inherent advantages and disadvantages of a long-term pastorate, there is a body of literature that addresses the unique *process* of transition. Though this literature is not distinctively Christian in outlook or approach, it nevertheless addresses the process that ensues when a successor replaces a long-term pastor. It primarily addresses the difference between change and transition, and the stages of change or transition, including how to plan for those stages.

#### ***The Distinction Between Change and Transition***

William Bridges, a business consultant in the field of transitional management, distinguishes between change and transition and their relative impact by saying, “It isn’t

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<sup>58</sup> Roy M. Oswald, James M. Heath, and Ann W. Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together: The Alban Handbook for Clergy Transitions* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 2003), 83.

<sup>59</sup> Horne, *Forty Years in the Same Pulpit*, 4.

the changes that do you in, it's the transitions."<sup>60</sup> Bridges does not minimize change, but he cautions against thinking that change itself is equivalent to transition. He says, "Important differences between change and transition are overlooked when people think of transition as simply gradual or unfinished change or when they use change and transition interchangeably."<sup>61</sup>

Bridges provides the following distinctions between change and transition:

"Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy.

Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal."<sup>62</sup> He particularly highlights the psychological aspect of transition - the impact of change upon people and the importance of helping people to let go of an old situation to which they have become accustomed.

In Bridges' view,

The starting point for dealing with the transition is not the outcome but the ending that you'll have to make to leave the old situation behind. . . . psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place. Organizations overlook that letting-go process completely, however, and do nothing about the feelings of loss that it generates.<sup>63</sup>

Bridges holds that for change to be effective, a transition must occur. He says,

"Getting people through the transition is essential if the change is actually to work as planned. When the change happens without people going through the transition, it is just a rearrangement of the chairs."<sup>64</sup> He notes that the failure to think in terms of transition

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<sup>60</sup> William Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 2003), 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

results in unsuccessful changes: “The single biggest reason organizational changes fail is that no one has thought about endings or planned to manage their impact on people.”<sup>65</sup>

Bridges places responsibility upon individuals to deal with transition personally saying, “Psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place.”<sup>66</sup> He also emphasizes the need to lead others to that point of psychological transition. Again distinguishing change and transition, he addresses a manager’s responsibility, saying, “The first task of change management is to understand the desired outcome and how to get there. The first task of transition management is to convince people to leave home.”<sup>67</sup> Applied to the church context, his distinction does not mean merely a change in pastors. Rather, it encompasses something deeper, something more psychological and internal, and something through which leadership must guide congregations.

Though he utilizes different terms than Bridges, John P. Kotter, a professor at Harvard Business School, also affirms the importance of helping people through the transition process. He says, “Successful transformation is seventy to ninety percent leadership and only ten to thirty percent management. Yet for historical reasons many organizations today don’t have much leadership and almost everyone thinks about the problem . . . of managing change.”<sup>68</sup> His distinction of leadership from management would seem to parallel guiding people through the elements of transition, in contrast with merely implementing a change without regard to the psychological elements involved.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>68</sup> John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 26-27.

Leadership involves more extensive guidance of those who are facing elements of change than does simply managing the change process.

Clinical psychologists Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe also address the issue of change as it relates to transition. In particular they recognize the psychological elements that genuine transition entails. They distinguish change and transition, though not as clearly as Bridges. Yet they do echo Bridges in their emphasis on the “letting go” aspect of transition: “Change occurs when something ends and something new or different starts. Usually it means moving from the familiar to the unknown. The period between these two points is transition in which people have to learn to let go of the old and embrace the new.”<sup>69</sup>

Lee Bowman and Terrence Deal, leadership consultants to a variety of types of organizations, also touch upon the psychological aspect of transition when they affirm that “some try to produce major change by redesigning formal structures only to find people unable or unwilling to carry out new responsibilities.”<sup>70</sup> In such a scenario, structural change has occurred without transition, and no psychological “letting go” has occurred.

Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, who serve on the faculty of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, emphasize a similar theme in their volume, which addresses different types of organizational change and challenges.

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<sup>69</sup> Cynthia D. Scott and Dennis T. Jaffe, *Managing Change at Work: Leading People Through Organizational Transitions*, 3d ed. (Boston: Course Technology, 2004), 29.

<sup>70</sup> Lee G. Bowman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 2003), 370.

They hold that “People do not resist change per se. People resist loss.”<sup>71</sup> They affirm the difficulty of inwardly yielding to change (and thus having genuine transition) in saying,

when you are trying to create significant change, to move a community, the people in your own faction in that community will have to compromise along the way. Often, the toughest part of your job is managing *their* disappointed expectations. They may well support change, but they also want you to ensure that the change will come with minimal sacrifice on their part.<sup>72</sup>

While other authors distinguish between change and transition, Heifetz and Linsky utilize different terms that nevertheless reflect this distinction between change and transition. They refer to problems and change which are *technical* and problems and change which are *adaptive*. They say,

Every day, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures. We call these technical problems. But there is a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high. We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the community. Without learning new ways - changing attitudes, values, and behaviors - people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.<sup>73</sup>

They further distinguish that which is technical and that which is adaptive by saying, “What makes a problem technical is not that it is trivial; but simply that its solution already lies within the organization’s repertoire. In contrast, adaptive pressures force the organization to change, lest it decline.”<sup>74</sup> They also relate the role of a leader to dealing with change and challenges which are adaptive in nature. The leader must be careful not to approach these changes and challenges as if they were merely technical:

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<sup>71</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 45-46, emphasis theirs.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 18.

The single most common source of leadership failure we've been able to identify - in politics, community life, business, or the nonprofit sector - is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems. . . . In mobilizing adaptive work, you have to engage people in adjusting their unrealistic expectations, rather than try to satisfy them as if the situation were amenable primarily to a technical remedy.<sup>75</sup>

Heifetz and Linsky advise leaders how they can determine if the challenge being faced is primarily technical or adaptive. They say,

First, you know you're dealing with something more than a technical issue when people's hearts and minds need to change, and not just their preferences or routine behaviors. In an adaptive challenge, people have to learn new ways and choose between what appear to be contradictory values. . . .Second, . . . if . . . you throw all the technical fixes you can imagine at the problem and the problem persists, it's a pretty clear signal that an underlying adaptive challenge still needs to be addressed. Third, the persistence of conflict usually indicates that people have not yet made the adjustments and accepted the losses that accompany adaptive change. Fourth, crisis is a good indicator of adaptive issues that have festered.<sup>76</sup>

The key issue again, though stated in different terms, relates to a psychological "letting go," not just, as Bridges says, rearranging the chairs in an organization.

### *Phases of Transition*

Bridges describes three specific phases of transition, again emphasizing the importance of not merely implementing change, but of helping people with the psychological processes they go through as changes are implemented. He says that managing transition involves helping people through three phases:

1. Letting go of the old ways and the old identity people had. This first phase of transition is an ending and the time you need to help people to deal with their losses.
2. Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational. We call this time the "neutral zone": it's when the critical psychological realignments and repatternings take place.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 60-61.



3. Coming out of the transition and making a new beginning. This is when people develop the new identity, experience the new energy and discover the new sense of purpose that make the change begin to work.<sup>77</sup>

In highlighting the phase of transition in which people deal with loss, Bridges touches upon a key element other authors have identified as a key aspect of transition in churches: the element of grief. As will be noted below, congregational grief is addressed by several writers as a normal element of pastoral transition to which those involved in the process must be sensitive. While Bridges is not addressing church transition explicitly, he is consistent with writers who focus on the church context in identifying the sense of loss people feel amid change.

Scott and Jaffe provide a more specific model for transition than Bridges, though they, as he, are not addressing *church* transition. They refer to five phases of planning for what they refer to as “change,” though the process referred to is more akin to transition, as described by the material of Bridges and others. Scott and Jaffe identify the five phases as:

Aligning - Identifying the purpose for the change and a vision of what it will be like when it is completed successfully;

Planning - Getting people together to understand the environment in which the change is taking place and to map out strategy and implementation;

Designing - Defining the new structures, roles, decision making, and leadership.

Implementing - Going live with the change - learning and adjusting. . . . Help people let go of the “old.” Prepare to help those having special difficulty making the adjustment.

Rewarding - Acknowledging the people who have made (the change) work.<sup>78</sup>

As with Bridges, the theme of a sense of loss is touched upon in Scott and Jaffe’s focus on “helping people let go of the ‘old.’”

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<sup>77</sup> Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 4-5.

<sup>78</sup> Scott and Jaffe, *Managing Change at Work*, 21-26.

Bridges' approach to the phases of transition is applied by church consultants Thomas Sweetser and Mary Benet McKinney to the church context. In their volume dealing with pastoral transitions in Roman Catholic congregations, they place the transitional grid of Bridges upon the transition from one pastor to another in a local congregation:

First comes the ending stage. This is the period before a change takes place. . . . In a given parish, a pastor may begin thinking about a change more than a year in advance of his move. . . . This stage of ending is filled with many conflicting emotions and behaviors including disorganization, disengagement, letting go, and withdrawal. . . . Parishioners struggle to put closure to the pastor's leadership while trying to come to grips with the fact that the pastor is indeed leaving.

The second stage is the neutral zone or the in-between time. This period overlaps with the first because both pastor and people, in preparation for the transition, feel as if they are in limbo. They are uncertain, anxious, confused, unbelieving, at a loss. . . .

The in-between stage blends into the third stage of new beginnings. As the new pastor begins leadership, uncertainty gives way to a new way of being parish. People make comparisons of how he differs from the previous pastor. The transition comes to an end as the period of new beginnings becomes familiar to the pastor, the leaders, and the people. . . . Everyone settles into "this is way we do things around here."<sup>79</sup>

Bolman and Deal take an even more distinctive approach to planning for change or transition than Bridges or Sweetser and McKinney in their application of Bridges' material. While the approach of Bowman and Deal is not more specific than that of Scott and Jaffe, it could be described as more unique. Bridges and Scott and Jaffe focus on *phases* of transition, In contrast, Bowman and Deal focus on how one *views* the transition process. They also focus on the *categories* under which one organizes one's thinking about an organization, referring to these categories as "frames." "A frame is a set of ideas or assumptions you carry in your head. It helps you negotiate and undertake

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas P. Sweetser and Mary Benet McKinney, *Changing Pastors: A Resource for Pastoral Transitions* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1998), 8-10.

a particular territory. . . . Frames are windows on the world of leadership and management. . . . A frame makes it easier to know what you are up against and what you can do about it.”<sup>80</sup> Bolman and Deal describe four types of frames:

The structural frame focuses on the architecture of organization - the design of units and subunits, rules and roles, goals and policies - that shape and channel decisions and activities. The human resource frame emphasizes an understanding of people, with their strengths and foibles, reason and emotion, desires and fears. The political frame sees organizations as competitive arenas characterized by scarce resources, competing interests, and struggles for power and advantage. Finally, the symbolic frame focuses on issues of meaning and faith. It puts rituals, ceremony, stories, play, and culture at the heart of organizational life.<sup>81</sup>

How do “frames” relate to change and transition? They are “maps that aid navigation and tools for solving problems and getting things done.”<sup>82</sup> They provide a more comprehensive and categorized way of looking at organizations. “Frames constitute a comprehensive checklist of issues that change agents must recognize and respond to. . . . Change agents fail when they rely almost entirely on reason and structure and neglect human political and symbolic elements.”<sup>83</sup>

For example, regarding the symbolic frame, Bolman and Deal note that “the meaning of an object or event can be far more powerful than the reality. . . . Symbols create meaning, and when a symbol is destroyed or vanishes people experience emotions akin to those at the passing of a spouse, child, old friend, or pet.”<sup>84</sup> This line of thinking is consistent with other statements made by these two authors as well as statements by Bridges, Kotter, and Scott and Jaffe, who identify the psychological, “letting go” aspect of transition. It is also consistent with Bridges’ demarcation between mere change and

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<sup>80</sup> Bowman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 12-13.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

transition. The “framing” espoused by Bolman and Deal encourages a focus on specific issues that are part of the transition process, a focus which may assist in taking mere change to the level of genuine transition.

### **Literature Addressing Pastoral Transition**

The third major section of literature related to the process of transition following a long-term pastor is that which deals with pastoral transition itself. While most of this literature does not address, specifically, transition after a long-term pastor leaves, it does provide guidance which may be helpful to churches as they seek to ensure the best transition possible.

#### *The Costs of a Poor Transition*

Several writers have noted the various costs of a poor pastoral succession; they have examined the costs from the standpoint of the congregation, the new pastor, and the pastor’s relationships with particular members of his congregation. Church consultants Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree ask a basic question of a congregation: “Has your governing board calculated all the various costs that would be associated with a poorly managed pastoral transition?”<sup>85</sup> They elaborate on the specifics to which they are referring by saying that “if the transition is handled poorly, the new pastor may become an unintentional interim and stay only a few years and the whole search process and expense occurs again. That’s a cost!”<sup>86</sup> They particularly delineate financial and emotional costs and the negative impact upon other staff members from a brief pastoral tenure.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004), 2.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Another “cost” of a poor transition which is addressed in relevant literature is incurred when the new pastor becomes an “unintentional interim” pastor. Ralph Macy, who served as a self-conscious interim pastor in Episcopal churches, does not challenge the positive role an interim pastor can play in a congregation. Nevertheless he says “There were interim pastors who never intended to be such.”<sup>88</sup> Paul N. Svingen, program director of the Interim Ministry Network, makes a similar affirmation when he notes an observation by Loren Mead: “Mead . . . realized that many congregations undergo an interim after a pastor leaves. He discovered a pattern regarding the length of pastoral calls: long-term calls were often followed by short-term calls.”<sup>89</sup> Svingen is not saying that the short-term calls were intentional; rather, the pastors were “unintentional interim” pastors following a transition process that did not go particularly well.

Mead, founder of the Alban Institute, which provides consulting services to congregations as well as literature related to the pastoral search process, notes a cost of a poor transition not addressed by the aforementioned authors. This cost is a relational one, occurring when those who formerly were supportive of the successor pastor turn against him when the transition ultimately does not go well. Regarding his research he writes,

We have found a number of cases in which several members of the search committee moved rapidly into opposition of the new pastor, sometimes leading a coup. The only way I’ve been able to understand this is to see it as their being unable to get out of role. Such members continue to “feel” responsible for having brought this new pastor, feeling that anything this pastor does that is less than the best reflects on them as members who “chose” him.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ralph Macy, *The Interim Pastor* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1978), 2.

<sup>89</sup> Paul N. Svingen, “The Interim Minister: A Special Calling,” in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, ed. Roger S. Nicholson (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1998), 54.

<sup>90</sup> Loren B. Mead, *Critical Moment of Ministry: A Change of Pastors* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1998), 46.

Thus, relationships which at one time may have been very positive are impacted negatively by a process of pastoral transition in which problems ultimately develop.

### *Poor Matchmaking*

In his epilogue to a volume dealing with pastoral transitions, James D. Berkley, contributing editor of *Leadership Journal*, assesses the importance of the transition process: "Transitions, in the final analysis, are the couplings between the cars of ministry. The engine may pull the cars and the cars can carry the freight, but only if everything is firmly coupled."<sup>91</sup> Thus, according to Berkley, pastors and churches need to make wise transitions, and "successful transitions . . . are a matter of attention to detail."<sup>92</sup>

There are many details noted by a variety of authors who address the pastoral transition process. Collins focuses on the "match" of pastor and congregation. His case study of one church's pastoral transition, which he views as typical of the many transitions he has witnessed, leads him to attribute "mismanaged placement" as the cause of the "death" of many ministries.<sup>93</sup> In his view, understanding the "matchmaking" process in pastoral transition would "reduce the number of unhappy settlements" in the relationship of a church to its new pastor.<sup>94</sup>

It will be noted below that authors address a variety of issues related to an "unhappy settlement" in church-pastor relationships. However, some authors concur with Collins regarding the basic issue of "matchmaking." Tilley's study of the factors that lead PCA pastors to change pastorates led him to say that "(an) issue that I saw over and over again was the matter of a pastor feeling mismatched with his congregation.

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<sup>91</sup> James D. Berkley, Epilogue to Ed Bratcher, Robert Kemper, and Douglass Scott, *Mastering Transitions* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1991), 139.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 20.

Next to conflict, this factor was the most prominent one reported to me by pastors (in causing them to leave for another church).”<sup>95</sup>

Tilley elaborates on specific aspects of the mismatch, as he quotes Lyle Schaller, who says that mismatches occur over matters like “culture, values, and style of congregational life of that parish and the value system, goals, definition of the nature of the worshiping community and the perspective of that particular minister.”<sup>96</sup> Tilley adds an element of his own when he says “closely related to this is the matter of the pastor who is impatient when the new congregation does not follow him as quickly and completely as he would wish.”<sup>97</sup>

Horne adds an additional aspect of the mismatch between pastor and congregation as he focuses on a clash of the personalities of the church and its new pastor. He says that when there is mismatch, “a church has a personality as distinct as that of the pastor. The two personalities may clash from the very beginning.”<sup>98</sup>

#### *Reacting to the Predecessor*

Relevant literature addresses several reasons why the “mismatch” occurs between pastor and congregation. In her counsel for making the right “match” between a new pastor and a congregation, Elizabeth Achtemeier, professor of Bible and homiletics at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, gives a basic instruction: “Do not try to find someone who is just like your beloved former pastor or, for that matter, who is the opposite of the preacher you had before.” She then adds the injunction to “forget the

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<sup>95</sup> Tilley, “Factors that Lead Pastors to Change Pastorates,” 174.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 50, quoting Schaller, *44 Steps Off the Plateau*, 66.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Horne, *Forty Years in the Same Pulpit*, 7.

former minister when you are looking for a new one.”<sup>99</sup> Yet, according to other authors, this rarely is done. Loren Mead notes that “if the previous pastor was beloved, a search is on to find a carbon copy a few years younger.”<sup>100</sup> However, he adds, “for every congregation looking for a carbon copy of the previous pastor, there is one looking for the exact opposite.”<sup>101</sup> Mead refers to these approaches as a “leap to decision”<sup>102</sup> in which a future decision is based on reaction to the past. Yet, according to Mead, finding a carbon copy of the former pastor in fact may not be what a congregation needs amid its present ministry situation. He says, “The experience with the former pastor is determining what they do, not a sense of what they are called to be and do in the new stage of ministry opening up now.”<sup>103</sup>

Pastor Kenneth Quick, writing in *Leadership* journal, also affirms this concern. He says, “Many search committees react to the previous administration thinking they want to swing the ministry in a new direction. If the former pastor was weak in the pulpit but strong in administration the committee often looks for a powerful preacher whose administrative skills need not be so virile.”<sup>104</sup> Again, a reaction to the past is affirmed as the real rationale for a decision that relates to the present and future ministry situation of a church.

Fisher also sees this type of decision-making process as one made on an assumption that may be false. She says that congregations sometimes think that if they “find a pastor who compensates for the weaknesses of the former pastor, then things will

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<sup>99</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *So You're Looking for a New Preacher* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 16.

<sup>100</sup> Mead, *Critical Moment of Ministry*, 40.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>104</sup> Kenneth B. Quick, “Candid Candidating: Asking the Right Questions of the Right People Minimizes the Surprises,” *Leadership* 11, no. 4 (1990): 72.



be fine. The problem is this idea assumes that the new pastor also possesses the strengths of the former pastor as well as the skills to compensate for the former pastor's weaknesses."<sup>105</sup>

Anthony Plathe notes that this approach causes congregations to fail to see the abilities that the new pastor *does* possess and that it is harmful to the transition process. He says, "Comparing makes it more difficult to recognize and affirm the special talents of the new person. The transition . . . will proceed well only if a number people are willing to take the responsibility for seeing that it happens."<sup>106</sup>

According to some authors, the problematic comparisons of a new pastor with a former pastor are based in memories that are fixed in the minds of parishioners - whether those memories are accurate or not. Mead asks, "How many of us know congregations in which the memory of old Dr. So and So is called up every time something new is proposed: 'Oh we never did things like that under old Dr. So and So' is the refrain."<sup>107</sup> Robert Dingman, a recruiter of executives who has assisted CEO searches for several Christian organizations, agrees, saying that "Nostalgia weaves its wonderful spell in Christian circles."<sup>108</sup> However, according to Kemper, this memory may or may not be quite accurate. He says that

Congregational memory is selective. . . . We know our predecessors only as they are now in the memory of the congregation, not as they were then in the presence of the congregation. Churches tend to forget thorns and remember blossoms. So parishioners often revere only part of what was - the good part. . . . It's good to realize we live with second-hand images of the past. We mustn't take them too literally.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Fisher, "A Study Of Pastors Who Follow Long-Term Pastorates," 4-5.

<sup>106</sup> Anthony H. Plathe, "The Pastor Says Goodbye: How to Move through Good Friday to Easter," in *Saying Goodbye*, ed. Edward White (Washington D.C.: The Alban Institute), 54.

<sup>107</sup> Mead, *Critical Moment of Ministry*, 38.

<sup>108</sup> Robert W. Dingman, *In Search of a Leader* (Westlake Village, California: Lakeside Books, 1989), 22.

<sup>109</sup> Robert Kemper, "The Shadow of Your Predecessor," 99.

Danielson agrees and makes application of this line of thought to the new pastor as he deals with the “ghost” of his predecessor: “New pastors should be aware that congregational memories tend to be selective. Not only is trying to compete with the ghost of a predecessor a futile exercise, but the competition is often waged against a person who never existed.”<sup>110</sup>

### *The Predecessor's Failure to Let Go*

Several authors discuss an additional problem related to the previous pastor, namely the former pastor not appropriately letting go of his role. In his study of pastors who succeeded long-term pastors, Danielson noted the problem of “boundary ambiguity” - in which the former pastor was physically absent but still psychologically present in the minds of his former congregation.<sup>111</sup> While this ambiguity occurred primarily on the part of the congregation, the former pastor had a prominent role in removing the ambiguity. Danielson found that “the most successful transitions took place when predecessors were able to step away from the role of pastor.”<sup>112</sup>

In his study of transition after the retirement of long-term pastors, Taylor found interference of the former pastor with the ministry of the succeeding pastor through returning to conduct weddings or funerals or through giving unsolicited advice to be a common problem.<sup>113</sup> Kemper also affirms the problems related to interference from the former pastor,<sup>114</sup> as does Ed Gouedy, a Presbyterian pastor. Gouedy says,

When a pastor keeps the old ties after moving bad things happen no matter what the intent. . . . The authority of the next minister is undermined. If the former

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<sup>110</sup> Danielson, “Beating The Odds,” 26.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>113</sup> Taylor, “Models for Church Transition,” 21.

<sup>114</sup> Kemper, 98.

pastor comes back for weddings or funerals, it leads the new pastor to the almost inescapable conclusion of being unworthy to handle the “important” pastoral duties. It also confuses everyone: the new pastor about his . . . role, the people of the church about who to turn to.<sup>115</sup>

Suggestions that are offered both for the successor pastor and the governing board of a church will be addressed below.

*Wrong Expectations on the Part of the Congregation*

Relevant literature not only addresses how the congregation looks back upon its previous pastor, but how it looks at its new pastor as well. The issue of congregational expectations of the new pastor is addressed by several authors. Plathe says that “much misunderstanding and hurt results when expectations - not clear to begin with - are not met” and advises that “preparing a well defined job description for the pastor is a good step in the right direction.”<sup>116</sup> Dingman connects the deterioration of pastor-parishioner relationships to expectations as well - particularly expectations that were not clearly set forth beforehand. He says,

Most relationships between a leader and his followers that go sour do so because of expectations that went unfulfilled and the tragedy is that in most cases those expectations were never clearly expressed by the parties involved. Careful exploration before the hiring takes place can usually avoid the disastrous results of a failed relationship.<sup>117</sup>

Vonhof, in his volume related to managing the pastoral search process, agrees regarding the importance of communicating expectations. He counsels congregations,

You need to plan time to talk about the pastor’s and your expectations of each other through your analysis, self-study, and identification of issues done earlier in the search process. . . . These expectations could be about ministry styles, leadership style or involvement, vision and worship styles to name a few areas.

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<sup>115</sup> Ed Gouedy, “The Ghost Of Pastors Past,” *Leadership* 4, no. 4 (1983): 23.

<sup>116</sup> Plathe, “The Pastor Says Goodbye,” 54.

<sup>117</sup> Dingman, *In Search of a Leader*, 120.

. . . Your willingness to be candid with candidates can avoid problems that could later lead to pastor-church conflicts.<sup>118</sup>

Oswald, Heath, and Heath address the *ongoing* need for a pastor to learn the expectations of his congregation beyond the stage in which he is considering going to a particular church. They say,

When members are upset with either the congregation or the pastor it is usually because the unspoken, often unconscious psychological contract has been broken. This creates a particular challenge for a new pastor who may have inherited the contracts the members had with the predecessor. Clergy should realize that much of this contract will surface in their first substantial meeting with a member. Gaining information about different members' psychological contracts will help the pastor become a better spiritual guide to each one. It will help the pastor identify the type of relationship each member expects, negotiate a set of expectations that both can accept, and help empower members to perform the ministries to which they are called.<sup>119</sup>

Dingman warns against the dangers of inappropriately high expectations of a pastor on the part of a congregation, saying, "Expecting too much leads inevitably to disappointment and disillusion. . . . The letdown resulting from excessive expectations is inevitable and very difficult to recover from."<sup>120</sup> However, Oswald, Heath, and Heath reject the notion that unreasonable expectations must of necessity end in a negative situation. With regard to congregations and pastors losing their illusions about each other, they say,

disillusionment can have two results. Exceptionally, pastor and congregation can turn negative and magnify the others' faults instead of virtues, creating a crisis. Normally, however, the congregation and pastor decide to accept themselves and each other with all their faults and limitations as well as their real virtues and build a relationship on the basis of this acceptance. . . . both pastor and congregation fall off the metaphorical pedestal they have created for themselves and each other; but in doing so they discover real strengths on which a productive relationship can be based.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Vonhoff, *Pastoral Search: The Alban Guide*, 82.

<sup>119</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 124.

<sup>120</sup> Dingman, *In Search of a Leader*, 92.

<sup>121</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 128

Here, these authors affirm the difficulties of illusory expectations amid pastoral transition, but they do not take the more extreme position that those expectations cannot be recovered from without great difficulty.

*The Congregational Grief Process*

Yet, others affirm that there are deeper, more psychological issues at work when a transition goes poorly. By far the most prominent theme in the literature related to the transition of pastors is the grief that is experienced by a congregation when a pastor leaves. Bonnie Bardot, who serves in interim ministry roles in the United Church of Christ, affirms that “if there is one unifying characteristic experienced by every congregation during the interim time it is grief.”<sup>122</sup> Danielson also affirms that grief is particularly an inherent characteristic of the congregation dealing with the loss of a long-term pastor. He counsels successor pastors, saying that “wise pastors following a long-term predecessor understand that the congregation’s experience with their former pastor is a part of their world and life.”<sup>123</sup> In his interviews with members of congregations whose long-term pastor had left, he found that this world and life contained grief following their pastor’s departure. He says that “persons interviewed quickly picked up on the theme of grief and recognized the impact of loss in the transition process.”<sup>124</sup>

Mead deals with grief at the loss of a pastor as part of a larger package of feelings that church members deal with when the pastor departs, affirming grief as more significant depending upon the length of a pastor’s tenure and the closeness of his relationships to his members. He says,

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<sup>122</sup> Bonnie Bardot, “Coming to Terms with History,” in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, ed. Roger S. Nicholson (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1998), 70.

<sup>123</sup> Danielson, “Beating The Odds,” 16.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

Pastors trigger important, often quite deep feelings in the congregation, both positive and negative. When a pastor leaves, many members of the congregation feel as if a member of the family is leaving. The longer a pastor has been on site, the closer he . . . has been to particular persons, the more likely those persons are to have significant feelings of grief when going through the departure and loss.<sup>125</sup>

Ralph Macy, who served as a self-conscious intentional interim pastor at various times, relates the aspect of congregational grief to the unique responsibility placed upon an interim pastor. He says, "Members are working through the emotions that accompany separation - grief, anxiety about the future, uncertainty about themselves. . . . The interim calls for appropriate measures for celebrating and affirming past and present, and trying out new ways that enable a healthy vision of the future."<sup>126</sup>

Feelings related to loss or grief in the midst of one's own physical illness were explored by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who recorded her observations in her book *On Death and Dying*. Kübler-Ross conducted a research project in which she and four theology students observed terminally ill patients, seeking to "study their responses and needs, evaluate the reactions of the people around them, and get as close to the dying as they would allow."<sup>127</sup> Multiple authors draw parallels between Kübler-Ross's stages of death and the process many churches go through when they learn that their pastor is leaving and after he leaves.<sup>128</sup> Kübler-Ross noted five particular stages patients generally went through as they confronted terminal illness. These stages are summarized by Kübler-Ross as follows:

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<sup>125</sup> Mead, *Critical Moment of Ministry*, 39.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>127</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 35.

<sup>128</sup> Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 28-30; Coyner, *Making a Good Move*, 18; Danielson, "Beating The Odds," 26; Dingman, *In Search of a Leader*, 35; William J. Harbin, *After the Pastor Leaves... When Another Comes* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 5-7; Celia Hahn, *The Minister Is Leaving* (New York: Seabury Press, n.d.), 5; Ralph Macy, *The Interim Pastor* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1978), 6; Mead, *Critical Moment of Ministry*, 39-41; Plathe, "The Pastor Says Goodbye," 50-54; Vonhoff, *Pastoral Search: The Alban Guide*, 18.

1. Denial and Isolation. Most reacted to the awareness of terminal illness at first with the statement, "No, not me, it cannot be true." . . . Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news. . . . Denial is usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance.
2. Anger. When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment. The logical next question becomes "why me?" . . . This anger is displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random.
3. Bargaining. (The dying person thinks) maybe we can succeed into entering in some sort of an agreement (with God) which may postpone the inevitable happening. . . . The bargaining is really an attempt to postpone.
4. Depression. Numbness or stoicism . . . will soon be replaced with a sense of great loss.
5. Acceptance. (This is) not a resigned or hopeless "giving up." (In addition), acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over and there comes a time for "the final rest before the long journey."<sup>129</sup>

Among authors who address the subject of pastoral transition, J. William Harbin, a former Southern Baptist Pastor, provides a representative and perhaps the most detailed comparison between the stages set forth by Kübler-Ross and the stages through which congregations pass when a pastor leaves. He discusses the parallels:

When a pastor resigns or retires, a local church may experience a feeling of frustration and numbness, especially if the pastor has served for a lengthy period or has become deeply entrenched in the lives of many people. A feeling on the part of some people may be a grief experience almost like death. Some members may actually experience some or all the stages of grief Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross discusses in her book, *On Death and Dying*. This physician lists five stages: Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Just like a person with a terminal illness reacts at first with the statement "No, not me, it cannot be true," some church members will protest, "No, it cannot be true that our pastor is leaving. I just don't believe it. He just can't leave." . . . A church member may get angry, envious, and resentful about the pastor leaving. . . . The third stage, bargaining, is certainly experienced by church members. "Please don't leave us. We really love you and just don't see how we can get along without you." . . . It's like the dying patient feels if God does not respond to his angry pleas. "He may be more favorable if I ask nicely." . . . Depression is a natural stage to follow the bargaining. . . . "What will happen to our church now? We have been so united and so happy. Will we get another pastor to visit us and have a caring spirit like this pastor?" Acceptance, the last stage, is often almost void of feelings. It's just accepting the fact that an era is ending - as if the pain had gone. Some members

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<sup>129</sup> Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 51-148.

may not be happy about the pastor leaving, but they accept it, just as the dying patient accepts his impending death.<sup>130</sup>

As they reflect upon the grief process of congregations, Harbin and other authors provide specific counsel as to how to deal with congregational grief in order to make the pastoral transition process more effective. Harbin focuses upon what he perceives as the mistake of calling a new pastor before the congregation has been able to grieve properly for the departing pastor. He says,

Calling a pastor before these church members have been able to express their grief or get over the shock could well be tragic for the next pastor. He could have a difficult time because he might be compared too often to the former pastor before they have had time to change their affection from the former to the new pastor. Or if too many members have not gotten over their hostilities of losing their former pastor the new undershepherd could unconsciously become a victim of such feelings.<sup>131</sup>

Danielson's study found this to be the case as well. Of the churches he studied he says, "Congregations who properly grieved the loss of a beloved pastor seemed more ready to start the process of building trust (with the new pastor)."<sup>132</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath agree saying, "Congregations that do not acknowledge the loss they feel with the departure of their pastor will have trouble bonding with the new pastor."<sup>133</sup>

In his discussion of his case study in pastoral transition, Philip Collins asserts that it is especially important for the incoming pastor to understand the dynamics of this congregational grief process. He says,

Unfortunately, many pastors seem unable to avoid feeling threatened by all the positive comments about the previous pastors and they view the praise of the former pastor as a sign of their being rejected by their parishioners. This is a wrong interpretation of what is taking place. Rather, if the pastor could just

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<sup>130</sup> Harbin, *After the Pastor Leaves*, 6-7.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>132</sup> Danielson, "Beating The Odds," 94.

<sup>133</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 76.



emotionally assimilate the references to the former leader, it would help facilitate the grief process and provide full acceptance for the new pastor.<sup>134</sup>

His view of the congregation thus will impact the congregation's view of him.

Danielson also highlights two additional things about the grief process, one of which relates to the long-term pastorate. He affirms, "A congregation and pastor can go through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, resignation, and acceptance just as a person facing death" then adds, "The depth and length of grief is likely to be proportional to the length of that (former) pastor's tenure."<sup>135</sup> He also provides a finding that serves as a caution to churches who are in the midst of the grief process: "The practice of pastors returning to visit parishioners or to participate in weddings seemed to disrupt the grief process."<sup>136</sup> Literature that deals with the ongoing relationship of the former pastor to a congregation will be addressed in greater detail below. Danielson's study is significant in that it provides a link between the stages identified by Kübler-Ross and the *long-term* pastorate.

Discussion of the aspect of grief amid change is not limited to literature dealing with church or pastoral transitions. Writing primarily for the business sector, Scott and Jaffe affirm the role of emotions such as sadness in the transition process saying, "People are not weak . . . if they experience loss caused by change. This is a normal part of transition."<sup>137</sup> The previous reference to the discussion of Bowman and Deal regarding the importance of symbols echoes this line of thinking.<sup>138</sup> While they are not discussing church transition per se, they also are sympathetic with regard to the grief process.

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<sup>134</sup> Collins, "Make Me a Perfect Match," 22.

<sup>135</sup> Danielson, "Beating The Odds," 26.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>137</sup> Scott and Jaffe, *Managing Change at Work*, 29.

<sup>138</sup> Bowman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations* 380.

A strong dissent to the grief-understanding model to pastoral transition is provided by Weese and Crabtree. They view such an approach as an “illness-based” model that, while the prevailing model today, is neither effective nor biblical.<sup>139</sup> They lament the fact that pastoral departures today are

treated like a terminal diagnosis; just as no one plans for cancer, no one plans for a leadership transition either. Once the leader has moved, grief sets in. Organic change has taken place. A death has taken place. The congregation is wounded in all the ways an individual is wounded by a personal loss, and it responds in a similar pattern. Denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and finally acceptance are the stages of grief played out in the congregation as the members experience loss. An entire body of literature has grown up around this illness-based approach to leadership transition.<sup>140</sup>

Weese and Crabtree later acknowledge the reality of grief, saying “Yes, tend to wounds, but don’t focus entirely on grief.”<sup>141</sup> Clearly though, they view the typical approach to pastoral transition, both on the part of congregations and those who analyze them, to be deficient.

Regarding an “illness-based” approach, Weese and Crabtree say,

An illness-based model assumes that the successes of the church are so inextricably linked to the departing pastor than many of the most effective ministries of the church either have to be intentionally dismantled or allowed to weaken in preparation for a new pastor who will come and resurrect them using a new style, methodology, or allocation of resources. However, this requires that the church experience a double grief simultaneously: loss of the previous pastor and loss of vital ministries as well. We assume churches must lose their vitality, so we design transitional schemes to heal them from the loss of their vitality.<sup>142</sup>

The assessment of Weese and Crabtree that this tends to be the typical approach to pastoral transition appears accurate, given the aforementioned references to the grief process and the comparisons with the observations of Kübler-Ross. Note also the

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<sup>139</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, 19-20.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

following statements that are typical of the “illness-based” approach that Weese and Crabtree oppose:

- “Any pastoral transition *inevitably* plunges a church into a period of instability.”<sup>143</sup>
- “At the onset of pastoral transition congregations will become destabilized. The anxiety level will increase. The congregation will lose sight of its focus, mission, and purpose. Many members will focus on the loss.”<sup>144</sup>
- “Move with brisk caution to get God’s man. The longer a church is without a pastor the greater the dangers grow.”<sup>145</sup>

Weese and Crabtree challenge this approach to transition. This challenge seems to emerge not simply out of denial or because they ignore issues of grief or sense of loss entirely. Rather, they desire churches to plan well for transition and to anticipate that the transition can go well. In opposition to an “illness-based” model for transition, they believe

a health-based model of leadership transition seems a better possibility. . . . It also expects that it is possible to plan for that inevitable day (when the pastor leaves). Since planning for a pastoral transition requires a coordinated effort among several key players, a health-based model assumes that each player is sufficiently healthy and committed to execute a successful transition.<sup>146</sup>

They define a healthy transition as “one that enables a church to move forward into the next phase of its external and internal development with a new leader appropriate to those developmental tasks and with a minimum of spiritual, programmatic, and material and

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<sup>143</sup> Danielson, “Beating The Odds,” 4, emphasis mine.

<sup>144</sup> Andrew E. Carlsson, “Leadership Changes during an Interim,” in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, ed. Roger S. Nicholson, (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1998), 96.

<sup>145</sup> Brent D. Earles, “Changing Pastors and Pastorates,” *Fundamentalist Journal* 6, no. 3 (1987): 52.

<sup>146</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, 44-45.

people losses during the transition.”<sup>147</sup> The assumptions that the health-based model makes are based in the preparations for transition that Weese and Crabtree encourage. Some of the preparations they suggest will be examined below.

Kotter takes a similar approach to Weese and Crabtree when he compares the old and new cultures that exist before and after transition: “In many transformation efforts the core of the old culture is not incompatible with the new vision although some specific norms will be. In that case, the challenge is to graft the new practices into the old roots while killing off the inconsistent pieces.”<sup>148</sup> Here, he is consistent with Weese and Crabtree, who, as noted, hold that church ministries do not have to be dismantled or weakened simply because a change in pastors has occurred. Kotter may lean more toward some distinction between the “before” and “after” pictures of transition, but he is in agreement that a totally new start is not necessary when a transition has occurred.

### *The Importance of Self-Evaluation*

Several authors provide a variety of suggestions for making pastoral transitions more successful. In some cases the suggestions are addressed specifically to groups or to individuals in church leadership positions with regard to their responsibilities amid the transition process. In other cases authors offer more general suggestions not related to the specific conduct or responsibilities of a group or individual.

Weese and Crabtree set forth questions for the church’s governing body to consider even prior to the transition process. They ask,

Does your governing board have a clear, biblically based shared understanding of the spiritual principles that should form a pastoral transition process and do you have a pastoral transition plan in place that describes in detail how your church will maintain excellence at the point when the current pastor leaves and a new

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>148</sup> Kotter, *Leading Change*, 151.

pastor is called? . . . Have you identified in advance the consultant resources you will need in order to make a successful pastoral transition?<sup>149</sup>

They later affirm the specific role of church boards in pastoral transition: “The role of the board in a health-based transition revolves around planning and execution. The board should have a strategic plan that includes a pastoral transition component.”<sup>150</sup> Thus, the board’s role is not limited to the actual time of transition, but begins possibly long before the transition occurs. Among the elements that could be included in an actual transition plan, Weese and Crabtree note things such as an interim pastor, members of the congregation who would be willing to preach on occasion, assessment of the components of a church’s mission, methods of exchange of important information from former pastor to successor pastor, and the selection of a transition consultant.<sup>151</sup>

Other authors offer additional suggestions for the transition period. While most of these would require implementation by a church’s governing body, the authors are not addressing the governing body specifically in every case. Some of the suggestions may involve the congregation more generally. Achtmier affirms the value of *self-studies* both to the congregation and the prospective pastor. She says

Make sure you know your congregation’s needs and character. . . . Self-studies are helpful not only to the PNC (Pulpit Nominating Committee) but also to the candidate whom you choose. There is a ‘fit’ that must obtain between a minister and a congregation if the minister is truly to lead the congregation. . . . some candidates will be more suited to your congregation than others and the only way you can know that is to analyze and know in detail where your congregation is on its spiritual journey and what type of congregation it is.<sup>152</sup>

Dingman also discusses the importance of a self-study, its specific elements, and the benefits it affords prospective pastors. He urges congregations to consider specific

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<sup>149</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, 1-2.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>152</sup> Achtemeier, *So You’re Looking for a New Preacher*, 8-9.

elements for evaluation such as church goal or mission, music preferences, leadership style preferences, and how specific leadership styles have succeeded in the past.<sup>153</sup> Roger S. Nicholson, a retired United Church of Christ minister who served as an intentional interim pastor for fifteen years, emphasizes the importance of self-study for a congregation to gain an accurate picture of itself in times of transition. He says, “The time between installed pastors begins a unique chance for a congregation to come to the new understanding of itself. A self-study process can help focus a congregation’s identity, resulting in a picture based on reality and not on fond remembrances of past experience.”<sup>154</sup>

William J. Allen, president of BRIDGE Associates, an organization that assists churches as they are seeking pastors, emphasizes development of a “church profile” in order for a congregation to ascertain the type of pastor it needs at a particular juncture in its life. He says that churches should ask things such as “what are our principles, our preferences, what about our prejudices, our priorities, our peculiarities, what can we say about our plusses, our problems. Our answers help determine the type of pastor we need at this stage in the life of the flock.”<sup>155</sup>

Other writers emphasize, with similar suggestions, the importance of congregational self-study.<sup>156</sup> Included among these writers is Philip Collins. However, Collins encourages a slightly different approach to congregational self-study, one which

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<sup>153</sup> Dingman, *In Search of a Leader*, 60-78.

<sup>154</sup> Roger S. Nicholson, “The Challenge of the Interim Time,” in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, ed. Roger S. Nicholson (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1998), 9.

<sup>155</sup> William J. Allen, “Enclosed is a Picture of Our Church,” *Fundamentalist Journal* 5, no. 9 (1986): 30.

<sup>156</sup> Vonhoff, *Pastoral Search: The Alban Guide*, 21-22; Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 17, 19; Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Questions for Congregational Self-Appraisal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1998), 34, 43.

goes beyond a church profile and focuses on the history of a church. He says regarding church profiles obtained in self-studies,

Many churches, appropriately, create good profiles of their parish and community, which include comprehensive sociological and statistical data. Such information is always helpful, but not enough. There is always a deeper story. There is sense in which the history of the congregation, rather than a current profile, will more accurately describe the church in its present.<sup>157</sup>

### *Interim Pastors*

At times congregations utilize interim pastors for at least some portion of the time in which their pastoral position is vacant. Several authors address the interim pastor as an aid to transition and offer relevant suggestions and cautions with regard to the ministry of the interim pastor and to his relationship with the congregation.

Macy provides a basic definition of the interim pastor:

The interim pastor is primarily a pastor with a defined and temporary contract brought into a congregation when, for any reason, the regular pastoral position has become vacant. . . .The interim pastor does things the usual parish pastor does, but within a different framework of time, goals, and planning. The role is specific, designed to fit the dynamics of a congregation in a limited period of its life.<sup>158</sup>

He notes some of the helpful characteristics of one in the interim role, emphasizing “a relative flexibility in moving through a variety of liturgical norms and congregational styles, ability to move about both geographically and sociologically, and a considerable amount of personal security and self-assurance.”<sup>159</sup>

A somewhat different role of the interim pastor is set forth by William O. Avery, a professor at Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary. He holds that “the three essential tasks of the intentional interim are (1) to reduce the level of conflict; (2) to assist

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<sup>157</sup> Collins, “Make Me a Perfect Match,” 20.

<sup>158</sup> Macy, *The Interim Pastor*, 3.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

the congregation with its self identity; (3) to help the church set goals for the future.”<sup>160</sup>

However, Avery does not ignore the aspect of congregational grief. He affirms that when a long-term pastor leaves, the first task of the interim pastor “is to give the members time to grieve the loss of their minister.”<sup>161</sup> This is deemed even more important than reducing the level of conflict in a congregation.

The very existence of literature regarding qualifications and duties of interim pastors suggests that particular authors believe the interim role is important to the congregation amid its transition period. However, other authors indicate less certainty regarding the value of an interim pastor. Oswald, Heath, and Heath, while affirming the value of a carefully selected interim pastor, hold that the church’s governing board plays a more important role amid the transition period.<sup>162</sup> In addition, Fisher’s interviews with pastors who successfully followed long-term pastors “did not indicate that the effectiveness of the interim pastor was a key in the continuing success of the church and its pastor. The evaluation of the interim pastor and the interim process that he led varied widely.”<sup>163</sup>

Authors addressing the interim pastor appear to be in agreement that the interim pastor should not be considered as a candidate for the permanent pastoral position.<sup>164</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath delineate specific reasons for this practice: the unfair advantage the interim would gain over other candidates; the fact that parishioners who are in opposition to the interim may not voice their opposition, assuming he will not be

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<sup>160</sup> William O. Avery, *Revitalizing Congregations* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 2002), 143.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>162</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 6.

<sup>163</sup> Fisher, “A Study Of Pastors Who Follow Long-Term Pastorates,” 108.

<sup>164</sup> Avery, *Revitalizing Congregations*, 147; Dingman, *In Search of a Leader*, 34; Macy, *The Interim Pastor*, 3; Thomas A. Hughart, “Ethical Dimensions of the Interim Time,” in *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, ed. Roger S. Nicholson (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1998), 133.



serving for the long term; the fact that such a practice would do away with the very concept of interim ministry.<sup>165</sup>

Lyle Schaller describes a role within a congregation which could include an interim pastor, but which is not limited to one in that position. He labels this role as that of an “interventionist.” According to Schaller, the interventionist is basically a “change agent,”<sup>166</sup> whose role is to determine what paradigm the congregation is operating under, whether that paradigm presents contemporary reality, and what the implications are for a congregation once those things are discovered.<sup>167</sup> The interventionist is very forward thinking, even as the current state of the congregation is assessed. He asks, “What are the strengths, the resources and the assets of this congregation and what aspects of the life and ministry here can I authentically affirm? What are the strengths that can provide a foundation for building on in planning for tomorrow?”<sup>168</sup>

While the role of interventionist could be filled by an interim pastor, it could also be filled by denominational staff, a church consultant, a mentoring team from another church, or the actual pastor of the congregation who desires to prepare the church for the next chapter in its history.<sup>169</sup> The role of the interventionist Schaller envisions is geared to the long-range future of a congregation, in contrast to the role of the interim pastor described by Macy or Avery. It may or may not be filled amid the transition from one pastor to another. Even if not, it certainly relates to pastoral transition in a local congregation, in that it aims at preparing a congregation for the future in a manner consistent with Weese and Crabtree’s health-based model for church transition.

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<sup>165</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 22.

<sup>166</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *The Interventionist* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 21.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

### *Guidance for Search Committees*

Several authors also provide some guidelines for search committees. Oswald, Heath, and Heath recommend that the best size for a search committees is seven - plus or minus two, whose chairman “has good communication skills and the ability to lead a complex group.”<sup>170</sup> They then recommend that “before the search committee considers any applications, it must have a clear idea of the characteristics and skills the congregation needs in its new pastor.” Then the committee may want to “develop and prioritize a primary list of most desired characteristics and a secondary list of other desirable characteristics.”<sup>171</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath suggest developing a pool of candidates through denominational sources, word of mouth, and advertising, with the first method deemed primary in terms of importance and effectiveness.<sup>172</sup> They emphasize the importance of talking with candidates about their past experience, since

past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior; questions should, therefore, be focused on what candidates have done in the past rather than on what they would do in a hypothetical situation. . . . Candidates’ descriptions of their actual experiences can reveal not only information about the candidate’s work in areas of interest to the congregation, but also a great deal about such important characteristics as whether the candidate can organize and tell a story, whether the candidate is personable, how the candidate exercises leadership, and whether the candidate consistently views life from a spiritual perspective.<sup>173</sup>

Em Griffin, a Presbyterian elder, offers his own suggestions to search committees, based on his experience as a committee member. He focuses on the present ministry situation of the pastor, urging committees to see a pastor on his “home turf.” He believes this has the following advantages:

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<sup>170</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 23-24.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

1) You see the whole person, not a truncated version. He's interacting with real people. . . . 2) You get an idea of the type of people he attracts. . . . 3) It shows the pastor you are seriously interested. If he is a reluctant candidate, it provides a watershed where he has to decide if he is serious about relocating.<sup>174</sup>

### *Transition Teams*

In addition to literature which provides advice for pastor search committees, some literature also advises the utilization of a "transition team" in addition to the search committee. Oswald, Heath, and Heath suggest that in addition to the governing board, "a transition committee can also help coordinate the life of the congregation and give oversight to the many changes taking place as a called pastor leaves."<sup>175</sup> They describe a two-fold purpose of a transition committee, namely "becoming informed on any and all aspects of the transition, both those specific to the congregation and those that apply to most congregations of their size and type and advising those in authority in the congregation of actions they should take to facilitate the steps of the transition."<sup>176</sup>

In a study of Roman Catholic churches in transition, Sweetser and McKinney also addressed the functions of a transition team. While the churches did not utilize search committees, they did form transition teams. The responsibilities of the transition teams they studied included the following:

support the leave-taking of the pastor, help the parish say goodbye, and guide the parish in praying for the guidance of the Spirit. . . . shepherd the parish through the difficult period of letting go and waiting for the new pastor. . . . to hold things together, to prepare the welcome of the new pastor, to help with the welcoming ceremony and celebration, to act as a resource to the pastor and to be the eyes and ears of the parish, providing the pastor with feedback and insights about how people are responding to the new leadership.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Em Griffin, "Confessions of a Pulpit Committee," *Leadership* 4, no. 4 (1983): 110; see also D.J. MacNair, *A Systematic Way to Choose a Pastor* (Decatur, Georgia: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1998), and Vonhoff, *Pastoral Search: The Alban Guide*.

<sup>175</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 6.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>177</sup> Sweetser and McKinney, *Changing Pastors: A Resource for Pastoral Transitions*, 44

One method of providing a transition team without having to obtain a new body of people willing to serve on it is to have the pastoral search committee serve in such a capacity. Harbin says that “some churches are . . . asking the search committee to continue to serve for at least one year as a sort of ‘advisory committee’ to see that the agreements are carried out and to help the new pastor become orientated to the new church.”<sup>178</sup> Though he does not utilize the term “transition team,” Harbin seems to envision a body with similar responsibilities to those teams recommended or studied by other authors. In contrast to these authors, Weese and Crabtree recommend the use a transition *consultant* rather than the use of a transition *team*. This person’s role is to assist in a variety of elements of the pastoral transition, serve as a search consultant, assist in the exchange of information between the former and the new pastor, and to help in carrying out the transition plan that these authors urge all congregations to have in place.<sup>179</sup>

### **Additional Helps in Transition**

An additional body of literature briefly addresses a variety of topics. All of these topics relate to facilitating a good transition from one pastor to another. They focus on the responsibilities of pastors, the importance of beginning well in a congregation, and the importance of understanding the relationship of “church culture” to transition.

#### ***Roles of the Departing and Successor Pastors***

Literature related to pastoral transition not only addresses the congregation, its leadership, and the transition teams or individuals who assist it, but it also addresses the departing and successor pastors regarding how they can facilitate an effective transition.

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<sup>178</sup> Harbin, *After the Pastor Leaves*, 61.

<sup>179</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, 52-53.

Coyner challenges the departing pastor, saying “You are in a position to help the church plan to say ‘hello’ to your successor. Prepare the way for the new pastor. In fact as the departing pastor you are in the position to be a strong advocate for the incoming pastor.”<sup>180</sup> This is consistent with the findings of Danielson. In his study,

several former pastors were cited by successors for positive actions taken to assure the new pastor’s success. Each used the accumulated good-will of multiple years of ministry to benefit the pastor who would soon take the reigns and lead the congregation. Pastors who verbally built up their successors to the congregation helped prepare the people to transfer their affection and loyalty.<sup>181</sup>

According to Weese and Crabtree, the responsibility of the departing pastor to pave the way for the new pastor begins well before the old pastor leaves. They state that

an effective pastoral transition at the pastoral level may require two to three years to execute. Ideally, this requires that pastors be in the planning stage several years before they leave. . . . Because every pastor is a departing pastor, the day to begin thinking about a transition plan is the day the pastor arrives. . . . The pastor needs to be clear about how far in advance to announce to the board the intention to leave. . . . Is the pastor willing to overlap his . . . successor? Is he . . . willing to provide a short-term mentoring or information exchange with the successor?<sup>182</sup>

Their approach again is consistent with their model for a health-based transition.

Coyner also addresses the incoming pastor, providing ideas he believes will assist in the transition process. He suggests that the new pastor find out about previous pastors and their leadership styles and how effective those styles were in order “to discover how the church has prospered under a variety of leadership styles, endured and survived under others, and been most effectively led by certain styles that seem to be the ‘best match’ with that church.”<sup>183</sup> The goal is to determine which type of leadership style will work best with a particular congregation.

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<sup>180</sup> Coyner, *Making A Good Move: Opening the Door to a Successful Pastorate*, 19.

<sup>181</sup> Danielson, “Beating The Odds,” 59.

<sup>182</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, 48.

<sup>183</sup> Coyner, *Making A Good Move: Opening the Door to a Successful Pastorate*, 34.

Literature has been mentioned previously which elaborates on the problems that can occur if the former pastor continues to involve himself inappropriately with a congregation. Authors also address the new pastor's responsibility to his predecessor, particularly since the predecessor is still psychologically present even if he is physically absent. Douglas Scott, an Episcopal pastor, says regarding the former pastor: "Even if he's not physically present he's going to be present in the minds of the congregation and the life of the parish. Rather than chafe at his presence, better to learn to work with him."<sup>184</sup> He notes the benefit of "working with" the predecessor, saying "I always honor my predecessor, even if he left in absolute disgrace. Most people hold some measure of affection for their former pastor and appreciate an opportunity to share their feelings, especially if they see I am not threatened by their care for him."<sup>185</sup> Bridges' work on transition, though not addressed to the church context, nevertheless provides counsel that applies to the church and which he believes aids in facilitating genuine transition (not mere change):

Treat the past with respect. Never denigrate the past. Many managers . . . ridicule . . . the old way of doing things. In doing so, they consolidate the resistance against the transition because people identify with the way things used to be and thus feel that their self-worth is at stake whenever the past is attacked. . . . Honor the past for what it has accomplished. . . . Endings occur more easily if people can take a bit of the past with them. . . . You don't want to make people feel blamed for having been part of it.<sup>186</sup>

Weese and Crabtree reference the example of Jesus (in Matthew 11:11, 21:32, Luke 7:33, Mark 11:30) in urging leaders to simply talk about their predecessor.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Douglas Scott, "Harnessing Your Church's History," in Ed Bratcher, Robert Kemper, and Douglas Scott, *Mastering Transitions* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1991), 102.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>186</sup> Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 34-35.

<sup>187</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, 16.

### *Specific Guidelines Regarding the Former Pastor*

Yet, according to Oswald, Heath, and Heath, clear guidelines need to be in place regarding the role of the former pastor with his previous congregation. This particularly is the case if the departing pastor remains in town and as a part of the congregation:

The board and the departing pastor need to create clear guidelines for the departing pastor's participation as a member of the congregation. This agreement must be shared with the members of the congregation. . . . (Included should be things) such as statements from the departing pastor and new pastor that they will both affirm one another's ministries and not undermine those ministries in any way; that the departing pastor will be supportive of the new pastor's style of ministry and objectives, and that the new pastor will refrain from criticism of things that have been done in the past. . . . a commitment from the (former) pastor and spouse to absent themselves from the congregation for at least one year, from worship, fellowship occasions, official meetings, and the like. . . . (and that with regard to funerals and weddings), the former pastor will not officiate at such services. The former pastor may assist at the request of the family and at the invitation of the interim or the new pastor.<sup>188</sup>

Thus, the important role of the new pastor is affirmed, along with the role of the former pastor and the role of the governing board of a congregation as they pertain to the relationship of current and former pastors with each other and with the church.

### *The Importance of Good Beginnings*

In the literature that provides counsel for the new pastor, some authors emphasize that a positive beginning by the new pastor facilitates the transition process. These writers provide specific counsel for the pastor's first months of ministry in a congregation. Robert Kemper divides the first few months of a pastor's ministry from the rest of that ministry, in terms of actions, decisions, or impressions being correctable. He says, "In pastoral work, most mistakes can be corrected. Not so with beginnings. I

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<sup>188</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 88-89.

cannot begin at a congregation twice.”<sup>189</sup> Kennon Callahan agrees, saying “You can never make a first impression a second time. . . . How you begin shapes how you continue and where you end.”<sup>190</sup> Kemper addresses the early period of a pastor’s ministry in terms of the trust that needs to be developed. He says, “I’ve found that the essential factor in enduring, mutually satisfying pastor-parish relationships is trust. . . . Ministers and congregations are usually trustworthy. The problem is the new congregations and new pastors do not know each other. They have no experiences that solidify the commitment to each other. They have not met a crisis.”<sup>191</sup> To build that trust he recommends “a moratorium on change. . . . I try to make no changes in the church for one year. Instead, I use the first year to wait, listen, and learn. Only then do I lead.”<sup>192</sup>

Callahan, however, cautions against waiting too long to make changes. Instead, he urges that pastors choose carefully the changes they will seek to implement:

If you do not make any key change during a whole year and then try to make some change, they will be surprised, caught off guard. . . . Try not to make too many changes in your early months. You can overdo it. Your presence is in itself a change. . . . Try to choose a change that is not merely a matter of your own personal preference.<sup>193</sup>

His approach remains cautious as Kemper’s, but it is less restrictive regarding making changes. Oswald, Heath, and Heath suggest using care in which change to try to implement, saying, “Almost everyone will say ‘yes’ to a new pastor at least once; that moment of agreement should be saved for something that is really important to the

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<sup>189</sup> Robert Kemper, “The First Year,” in Ed Bratcher, Robert Kemper, and Douglas Scott, *Mastering Transitions*, 86.

<sup>190</sup> Kennon L. Callahan, *A New Beginning for Pastors and Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1999), 6-7.

<sup>191</sup> Robert Kemper, “The First Year,” 80.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>193</sup> Callahan, *A New Beginning for Pastors and Congregations*, 91-92.



congregation.”<sup>194</sup> Thus, the pastor is urged to exercise sensitivity to the congregation, which will in turn facilitate his accomplishing the goals he deems important to try to attain.

### *Church Culture in Relation to Transition*

Among the works cited thus far, one particular theme is addressed only by Weese and Crabtree. This is the relationship between “church culture” and pastoral transition. They ask, “Why do some churches seem more tolerant of pastoral transition than others? The answer lies in church culture.” They also note that “the impact of a pastoral transition upon a congregation is shaped by the church culture and expectations that members bring to their church experience.”<sup>195</sup> They identify four particular church cultures:

*A family culture* expects the pastor to maintain and guide the church as a parental figure who carries the family tradition and heartbeat. *An icon culture* expects the pastor to symbolize in his . . . public persona the character of the church and to be the face or voice through which the people enter the church. *An archival culture* expects a pastor to be an activist curator. It insists that the pastor be in touch with the great historical and universal institutions of the church so that they can be made available to the present. *A replication culture* expects the pastor to replicate ministry through multiplication of called, equipped, and deployed leaders and workers.<sup>196</sup>

Weese and Crabtree then provide particular transition strategies for each culture. Regarding “a family culture, results are not as important as the experience of continuity.”<sup>197</sup> They caution against three things: interrupting routines, introducing new things to a congregation without careful management, and reacting to the previous pastor

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<sup>194</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 129.

<sup>195</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, 58,60.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

by seeking someone who is either opposite him or just like him.<sup>198</sup> In their comments on family culture churches, they affirm the aspect of grief in a church body saying, “If the pastor in a family culture has become the central leader in a community, experience of loss can be profound, equivalent to that of a death or divorce. . . . There may be feelings of rejection along with the loss. . . . Members must have opportunities to mourn their loss.”<sup>199</sup> With regard to planning for transition, they hold that “generic transition planning for a family culture is possible. A generic transition plan outlines all the tasks required of the leadership in transition, without specific reference to a timetable for the pastor’s departure.”<sup>200</sup>

According to Weese and Crabtree, icon cultures, which focus on a leader with charismatic qualities who represents the entire ministry of a church, “cannot endure several months of substandard worship leadership while the church looks for a successor. Therefore it is important to plan for an overlap between the departing pastor and . . . successor.”<sup>201</sup>

Archival cultures (of which Roman Catholic congregations are an example), tend to have an appointed system for pastoral succession. In order for this type of system to work best, Weese and Crabtree suggest that congregations “Develop an annual process for assessing the state of the church, the state of the local community, and current pastoral and programmatic needs. . . . Conduct a pastor-to-pastor debrief after new

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 70-73.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 73,74.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 92.

appointments have been made. . . . Build on the strengths of the archival system to manage the transition.”<sup>202</sup>

Finally, with regard to a replication culture, Weese and Crabtree hold that congregations with this type of culture are driven by two ideas: “Leadership traits can be developed rather than simply inherited,” and “Effective leadership relies on a body of knowledge that can be transferred from one leader to another.”<sup>203</sup> While a replication culture can carry risks such as a lack of candidates with senior pastor experience and internal competition to become the pastoral successor, the transition normally occurs from within, with leadership having been developed through ongoing processes of the church.<sup>204</sup>

### **Previous Studies Specifically Related to Following a Long-Term Pastor**

A small number of previous doctoral studies focused on transitions from long-term pastors to their successors. Robert Taylor focused on following a long-tenured Southern Baptist pastor after the pastor’s retirement. His overall conclusions were as follows:

1. The biblical model of the leader choosing his successor is not typically followed by most denominations. . . . The influence of democracy in America may be one reason why this particular biblical model is not typically followed.
2. The type of transition that is best for a church will be greatly influenced by the personality and leadership style of the retiring pastor.
3. New models of transition should be developed and refined.<sup>205</sup>

Taylor’s primary focus was upon the pastor, not the congregation and its leaders.

Richard Danielson studied the succession of long-term pastors in his United Methodist Church conference. He concluded that though the transition process after a

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 117-120.

<sup>205</sup> Taylor, “Models for Church Transition,” 43-44.

long-tenured pastor is not the same as that associated with other pastoral transitions, this does not necessarily mean that the transition will prove unsuccessful:

all pastors entering into a new ministry will have to deal with start-up issues. The new relationship between pastor and people is not unlike a marriage; living together successfully requires adjustments for everyone. . . . Those who follow long-term pastors face challenges requiring special attention. Common wisdom suggests that such people will be sacrificial lambs of brief tenure; however, knowledge of the unique dynamics of such a transition coupled with extra sensitivity can increase the likelihood of not only surviving but thriving.<sup>206</sup>

According to Danielson's study, the key "stakeholders" in the transition process can help facilitate its success. He found that three people or groups of people have important roles in the process of transition following a long-term pastor: the predecessor, congregation, and successor, and all "must play their parts well if the transition is to be effective. . . . The most successful transitions occurred when all three players were fully committed to making the change work. The most disastrous changes occurred in situations where none of the three played their parts well."<sup>207</sup> Among the three major players, "the most critical factors in pastoral transitions appear to be the responsibility of the new pastor."<sup>208</sup>

Anne Fisher, who studied Presbyterian Church (USA) pastors who followed long pastorates, echoes this sentiment. She focuses on three qualities of leadership that are important for an incoming pastor who follows a long pastorate:

1. A strong sense of self and self-awareness, in which the pastor is not threatened by the former pastor or his larger-than-life memory, but embraces that part of the congregation's history.
2. Knowledge of the dynamics of church systems that allows them to present a strong and calm accessibility to the congregation. An ability to listen and to be patient with the reactions and dynamics of a congregation not accustomed to change in leadership.

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<sup>206</sup> Danielson, "Beating The Odds," 43.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 90.

3. An ability to articulate and act upon a vision that mobilizes and unites the people, and that may move them gracefully from the familiarity of the years with the former pastorate into new territory.<sup>209</sup>

Though these qualities were not necessarily the result of formal training, nevertheless the pastors studied possessed those qualities. In this study, the incoming pastor again is seen to be crucial to the transition process.

### Summary and Conclusion

This chapter addressed biblical examples of leadership transition as well as biblical principles which apply to changes in leadership among God's people. It also examined a large body of literature related to a long pastorate, to change and transition in general, and to pastoral transition in particular.

Yet, what of the *congregation*, as expressed through its elders and pastoral search committees, and its part in the process of transition? Though much has been written regarding the long-term pastorate, the process of transition, and the transition of pastors, little has been written regarding the transition of the congregation after the long-term pastor. In particular, even less has been written regarding the perspective of the congregation in transition following a long-term pastor. Thus, to have a more full understanding of such a transition, and to assist that transition, it is vital that we examine how elders and pastoral search committees in PCA congregations have approached the pastoral transition process when their previous pastors have served for ten or more years.

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<sup>209</sup> Fisher, "A Study Of Pastors," 103.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **PROJECT METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to examine how elders and pastoral search committees in PCA congregations have approached the pastoral transition process when their previous pastors have served for ten or more years. The study was composed of interviews of elders and pastoral search committee members from three PCA congregations. All of the interviews were conducted in person, in the cities where the churches are located. The congregations varied in size, though all three were larger than the majority of PCA congregations.<sup>210</sup> One congregation had just under three hundred members at the time of the pastoral transition; another had over one thousand members; the third congregation had over two thousand members. Each congregation was in a metropolitan area of the United States, and all were located in suburban areas. Two of the congregations have been in existence for more than fifty years. The third was started over forty years ago.

#### **Design of the Study**

I utilized qualitative case studies in investigating the transition process. According to Sharan Merriam, there are five essential characteristics of qualitative research:<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> *The Yearbook of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2005), 330-617. According to these statistics, more than half of PCA churches have less than 125 members.

<sup>211</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 6-8.

- Researchers are interested in understanding how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.
- The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.
- It usually involves fieldwork.
- It primarily employs an inductive research strategy.
- The product of qualitative study is richly descriptive, utilizing words and pictures to convey what the researcher has learned.

Merriam defines case studies as “intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system such as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community.”<sup>212</sup> I utilized a qualitative approach with case studies in order to learn from the personal reflections of individuals and groups of people (from pastoral search committees) that had been involved in processes of pastoral transition. This type of study afforded me the best opportunity to address my research questions. A qualitative approach allowed me to interact personally with these individuals and gain a more thorough understanding of their experiences than a quantitative method would have allowed. A qualitative case study approach also allowed me to maintain some flexibility in the process of interviewing individuals and focus group members. I was able to pursue specific issues which arose during the course of our interviews and ask follow-up questions. Those I interviewed were able to describe in detail their experience, which I desired to convey as I reported my findings.

Conducting the interviews in the cities where the elders and search committee members resided (fieldwork) helped in a number of ways. It provided the participants a greater level of comfort than would have been afforded had we met elsewhere or had we discussed matters over the phone. Personal, face-to-face interaction allowed them to

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 19

become more comfortable with me as the interviews progressed and thus more open in sharing their experiences and evaluations.

The qualitative approach was also consistent with my own personal desires for this study. This approach is one in which the researcher “builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories” from specific case studies.<sup>213</sup> A primary objective of this study was my desire to assist the church in the process of pastoral transition by providing general principles that could be derived from the specifics of the transition experiences of other congregations. Thus, a qualitative research strategy, in which experiences of elders and pastoral search committees were explored in depth, was consistent with this desire. A quantitative sampling would not have provided the detailed, personal experience and reflection from which general observations and recommendations could be made in behalf of other congregations. Further, the detailed information qualitative interviews provided allowed me to attain my particular goals for this study much more effectively than would surveys, which would have been much more impersonal and far less descriptive.

### **Interview Design**

The interview questions were designed to discover basic facts about pastoral transitions and to elicit observations and insights from elders and search committee members who had been through a transition after a long-term pastor. I utilized a semi-structured format for the interviews. Merriam defines this format as one in which

either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a highly structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 7.



is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.<sup>214</sup>

This interview format allowed me to pursue other lines of questions which flowed from the answers and information provided by the participants. Groups or individuals sometimes made known elements and experiences of the transition process I had not considered previously. The flexibility of a semi-structured format allowed me to investigate areas I had not originally planned to pursue.

I did not give those I interviewed the questions beforehand. My desire was to have answers that were spontaneous and would provide direction for additional questions. I explained the topic of my study and the basic parameters we would be covering. I also told them how long I thought the interviews would take (one and a half to two hours). I prepared twelve questions to use with elders and nineteen questions for search committee members. However, I did not feel it was necessary to ask all the questions if our conversations were yielding helpful results using follow-up questions that were not prepared. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The congregations I studied made up what Merriam refers to as a unique sample - a sample "based on unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest."<sup>215</sup> As noted previously, pastoral transitions occur quite often, but transitions after a long-term pastor are not as common. Since the average PCA pastor stays in a congregation just over seven years, the replacement of a long-tenured pastor as occurred in the congregations studied is not a typical occurrence. Also, the likelihood of the persons I interviewed having served on two search committees amid the succession of

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 62.

two long-term pastors was relatively small. This factor also made at least a portion of the sample I studied more unique.

In determining the number of people to interview, I set a minimum of three persons and a maximum of five persons per church. I did this based on counsel from a seminary advisor and for reasons related to data and logistics. I needed to talk with at least three persons in order to get enough information to understand a specific situation and to have sufficient variety in experiences and evaluations of the transition process. However, interviewing more than five persons would have proven too complex in terms of gathering, transcribing, and reporting data. Also, scheduling people to interview in three different locations was difficult. Working with schedules of additional individuals would have made the task even more problematic. Finally, using more subjects would have expanded the interview phase and the amount of information beyond a manageable scope.

The process through which I chose specific congregations to study was not complicated. I was aware of several PCA churches which had completed a transition following the departure of a long-term pastor. The first church from which I obtained permission to interview a sufficient number of persons was large in size. I desired to have some degree of consistency in the size of the congregations studied. Therefore, I decided to focus my research on congregations which were larger in membership than the majority of churches in the PCA. I selected each church based on my observation and the testimony of people I knew in the congregations. One transition process appeared to have had positive results. In the second case the results were reported to be very negative. In a third case the results appeared to be mixed.

In two of the churches my selection of the particular people I chose to interview was based on referrals from within the congregation. I established initial contact with a pastor or a staff member whom I knew personally. This contact then provided a list of elders or search committee members whom he felt it would be beneficial to interview. The elders or committee members then identified others for me to contact and be interviewed.

Because I studied my own congregation, I was able to utilize sessional minutes to determine who served on the search committee and who was on the Session at the time of the transition. My method of selection was based partially upon my knowledge of these people. I also asked elders for suggestions whom to interview about the transition process. I sought what I thought would be a diversity of opinion, and I also pursued those I believed would be comfortable in speaking openly. In addition, I focused on those I thought would have the best knowledge of the information and experiences I was seeking in my interview questions.

In each of the churches I studied, I was dependent upon the willingness and availability of individuals to talk with me. In each congregation I also sought, when possible, to interview a woman who had served on the search committee. I felt this would provide a perspective distinct from that afforded by interviews of men. The female perspective was, of necessity, somewhat limited due to the polity of the PCA, which has only men serve as church officers.

All the people I interviewed were still in the church where they had served on the Session or on the search committee. Only one person had an initial hesitancy about sharing thoughts about the transition process. This hesitancy was, for the most part,

alleviated as I assured the person that no actual names of individuals or churches would be used. I also explained that appropriate safeguards would be taken to insure anonymity of the persons interviewed.

In some cases, committee members had died or had moved to another location. In one congregation, I was discouraged from pursuing one person because it was felt this individual had not been a major contributor to the work of the search committee. In another instance, a committee member was dealing with health considerations which prohibited an interview.

I interviewed two to three elders and two to three members of pastoral search committees in three different PCA congregations. In some cases, the elders also had served on the search committee. But I interviewed at least three persons in each congregation. I conducted all interviews in person and spent between one and a half to two hours with each individual or group I interviewed. I either interviewed individual elders or I interviewed two elders together. Similarly, in the case of non-elder search committee members, I utilized individual or group interviews.

I desired to have people speak as openly as possible and this especially impacted my interview format with search committee members in two of the congregations. In one congregation, I learned of a wide disparity that existed among some search committee members in their evaluation of their church's pastoral transition. I avoided potential confrontations by interviewing these search committee members separately. In another instance, I interviewed a search committee member individually in order that this person's evaluation would not be revealed to others.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited to congregations of the Presbyterian Church in America. Since denominations do not conduct the pastoral search process in the same manner, investigating pastoral transition in a variety of denominations in this study would have involved too many variables. In addition, this would have prevented the opportunity to compare how different PCA congregations have approached the transition process. Also, I have special concern for the process of pastoral transition in the PCA since it is the denomination in which I am a pastor.

Another limitation of this study was the size of the congregations studied. The experience of elders and pastoral search committees amid pastoral transitions in smaller congregations would be a beneficial study, since the majority of PCA congregations are relatively small in size. However, to have included smaller churches would have expanded the range of this study beyond manageable limits.

There was also the difficulty of finding contacts in specific churches to participate in the study. This was particularly the case in situations where the pastoral transition had gone poorly. In some cases, things had not settled down enough from the poor transition, and the congregation was still dealing with problems or “fallout” that resulted from the transition. In one specific case where a transition had not gone well, a former search committee chairman whom I contacted felt that conducting interviews would be a possibility. However, after thinking through the matter, he felt it would not be best for me to talk with former committee members at the time. The congregation was adjusting to a new pastor and still going through a time of healing from a very difficult transition time.

As I sought to arrange interviews, I knew there was a potential limitation that some individuals might not be available to meet with me. However, after difficulties with only one church, I soon was able to schedule interviews with the congregations referenced throughout this study. The contacts in the three congregations very readily agreed to talk with me. Yet, I was somewhat limited in my selection of interviewees because some search committee members had left their churches and some had moved to other cities. In one of the congregations a search committee member had died since the successor pastor was called.

Finally, this study had the inherent limitation of not conducting interviews with the successor pastor of the congregations. This might have provided a useful perspective - though one perhaps entirely different from that of the members of the congregation. Nevertheless, such an expansion of the study's scope would have broadened it beyond the study's purpose.

### **Biases of the Study**

This study had some inherent areas of bias which should be taken into consideration. The fact that I am a pastor is itself a bias. I have made every attempt to be candid and not distort information in favor of either a departing or successor pastor in relation to his congregation. In addition, I am also a PCA pastor, and this is another study bias. I believe I present the three transitions accurately from the perspective of the churches studied. However, my role in the PCA is not as a member of a congregation, but as a pastor. Thus, I do not have the same perspective as a ruling elder or search committee member regarding the issues studied.

Also, I knew some things about each church studied and thus I had established at least some mental concept of each one. I had a very close relationship with one of the congregations and had worshipped as a visitor in another. I knew staff members in all three congregations. One of the churches has a very high profile reputation in the PCA and is very active in denominational affairs.

A major area of bias in this study is that one of the congregations I studied is where I currently serve as pastor. I followed the long-term and successor pastors. Prior to my study, I knew the general history of the congregation and some of the specifics of the transition that was the focus of my study. I was aware of some of the weaknesses of the long-term pastor which were discussed during my research. In addition, through my own gathering of data about the congregation both prior to and after coming to be its pastor, I knew some of the opinions of the search committee. Also, through conversations with current staff members and elders, I knew of some problematic issues and conflicts that developed between the staff and the successor pastor and between the Session and the successor pastor. In addition, I had formulated some opinions - both positive and negative - about the long-term pastor and the successor pastor. However, I do not believe my knowledge or opinions hindered the thoroughness of my investigation and evaluation of the data related to this particular congregation. I had never spoken to any elder regarding their preparation for transition. Neither had I spoken in detail to any search committee member about the transition process or their experience of that process. The vast amount of what was reported to me was new information. While I came to the interviews aware of issues related to the transition, I believe I was able to look at the data honestly and objectively.

As I anticipated interviewing members of my own congregation, I was aware that there could be some bias on their part. It was possible that they would seek to guide my interpretation of events in our church based on their own interpretation of those events. To the best of my knowledge, this did not take place. However, there may have been biases on their part of which I was not aware as I conducted interviews with them.

### **Conclusion**

The methodology described in this chapter helped to facilitate the purpose of this study. That purpose was to examine how elders and pastoral search committees in PCA congregations approached the pastoral transition process when their previous pastor served for ten or more years. The study utilized qualitative case studies, a semi-structured interview design, and a step-by-step process of selection of congregations, individuals, and focus groups for study. While there were limitations and biases inherent in this study, sufficient information was gathered to accomplish its purpose and to answer the study's research questions. The findings which resulted from the use of the described methodology will now be discussed.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

This study utilized interviews with elders and pastoral search committee members from three PCA congregations. Each of the congregations had undergone a transition of pastors following a pastoral tenure of ten or more years. The elders and search committee members reflected on how they had approached the pastoral transition process. The interviews pursued answers to this study's specific research questions related to:

1. How elders prepared for transition prior to the long-term pastor's leaving.
2. What elders and pastoral search committees did once the long-term pastor left the congregation.
3. What insights elders and search committees offer regarding the ministry of the new pastor.
4. The evaluation elders and search committees offer in light of their experience.

The findings gleaned from the three sets of interviews will now be presented. No actual names of churches or individuals are used.

#### **Immanuel Presbyterian Church**

Glenn Mabry was the pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church (IPC) for thirty years. Shortly before his arrival, the church relocated to a new facility built at the present location. After the church's relocation in the 1960s, a pastor served for only two years before Glenn was called to IPC. Thus, because of the time at which he came to the

church, Glenn was considered to be almost a founding pastor of the church, though technically he was not. During Glenn's tenure, the church grew from around two hundred members to over one thousand members. Glenn resigned after being called to another ministry and was succeeded by Tom Evans, an experienced PCA pastor. Tom has been at Immanuel for almost eight years.

Ken, Sam, Brian, and Nolan all were very knowledgeable about the pastoral transition that took place in this particular congregation. Ken is a ruling elder at Immanuel who is in his early sixties. He has served as an elder at Immanuel for over ten years. He was on the Session during the last years of Glenn's tenure and has served through the years of Tom's pastorate. Sam is a ruling elder in his early seventies who has served on the Session at different times through many years at IPC. He came on to the Session soon after Tom came to the church. Brian and Nolan are both ruling elders and both served on the pastoral search committee. Brian was an elder at the time, while Nolan was a deacon. Brian, who is in his early fifties, served as chairman of the search committee. Nolan, who is in his mid-sixties, served as the committee's clerk. They developed a very close relationship during their work on the committee.

Glenn's tenure was characterized by a very close relationship with his congregation. Brian said, "Glenn was dearly, dearly loved by the congregation. Glenn was very pastoral in his style. I believe he knew every member by name. That sounds impossible, but I rarely saw him miss somebody's name." Ken echoed this sentiment by describing Glenn's relationship with the congregation as one of "warmth and closeness. He had a pastoral style. Glenn was a much loved person." In addition to the benefit of his personal warmth, Glenn had the advantage of coming to the congregation when it was

relatively small. He was able to develop relationships with people already in the congregation. Then, as new members joined, he was able to get to know them through his time with them in a new members' class, which he taught. He also taught every communicants' class, which allowed him to develop a special bond with the children of the church. Thus, even when the congregation became larger in size, his long tenure provided him a personal connection with the entire church body. Brian summarized Glenn's relationship with the congregation, saying "Glenn was sort of everybody's father or big brother."

Another ministry strength Glenn possessed was his teaching and preaching ability. Ken said that "Glenn's strength was his teaching, no question about it." Sam agreed, saying that "Glenn was very, very sound in his preaching. He had great Scriptural references, (and was) able to pull things together." Glenn also had a strong missions orientation and led the congregation toward strong support of missions organizations and individuals sent out to serve in various mission fields. In fact, his heart for missions eventually would bring about his departure from Immanuel.

Glenn's primary weakness was in the area of administration. According to Sam, "He was not an administrator or manager type. He was very quick to point that out and we were all very quick to agree!" In order to assist Glenn in this area of weakness, the Session hired a church administrator who served during much of the last half of Glenn's tenure. However, Nolan said that the administrator left the church "a couple of years before Glenn left, and I think that made the last couple of years very difficult for Glenn because he had been called on to be more administrative than he had in the past." The increasing size of the church seemed to overwhelm Glenn somewhat, according to Brian.

He said, "On the administrative side, I don't think he ever really adjusted to being the pastor of a thousand member church." He noted also that there were few administrative structures in place for a congregation the size of Immanuel. He said "That set us up coming into the search. We didn't really have the structure in place that really supported the size of the congregation, I felt."

Glenn's lack of administrative ability impacted his leadership of Session meetings. Sam said, "Sometimes the Session meetings would drag on and on because we were not real focused on some of the things." Yet, the quality of the relationship Glenn maintained with the Session was very good. Ken said,

I think he had a good working relationship with the Session while I was on it. He was cordial. There was freedom of discussion. The administrative aspects of sessions usually were anywhere from tightly run. But . . . I had no regrets about the Session. We had some long meetings, but they were worth it.

Ken described Glenn's leadership style as a "gentle," one which was carried out through his teaching, example, and interaction with people.

Ken served on the Session's administrative committee. Glenn and this committee became spiritual shepherds for each other, and they had a very close relationship together. This relationship was manifested especially in the preparation for Glenn's transition from Immanuel. In 1996, Glenn was approached by a mission organization and asked to consider becoming the organization's director. Glenn had a love for missions in general and for this organization in particular. He had served on its board and was close to several people in the organization. Almost from the start of his deliberations, he was very open with the administrative committee that he was considering the position. While he did not share this with the whole Session, he and the committee prayed together over a period of several months. Eventually, said Ken, "It looked like it was firming up. At that

point and time we said, 'It's time for the Session to know.'" The entire Session was informed that Glenn was considering the new position.

At this point, though he had not accepted a new position, Glenn wanted the congregation itself to know that he was considering such a step. Ken said, "Glenn and Jeannie (his wife) wanted the congregation to know so the congregation would be praying for him. So it was agreed that he would write a letter to the congregation and that there would be a cover letter from the Session, which he asked me personally to draft." Thus, when the congregation was notified in the fall of 1996 that Glenn had actually accepted the position, few were surprised he was leaving.

Reflecting on how things proceeded from that point, Ken said, "Then we went into a fairly normal transition process." However, while the process was relatively "normal" it was quite unknown to the congregation, since it had not searched for a senior pastor in thirty years. Sam was of the opinion that "We had no idea what to do! We knew we had to do something, but what were we going to do? We were starting all over from scratch and we had to try to explain to the congregation what a search committee was." He noted that while the church had searched for associate pastors and other personnel in the past, the process of seeking a senior pastor was much more momentous.

As an older member of the congregation and as one who had served on the Session for many years, Sam felt a responsibility to help prepare the Session for the transition. He related a speech he made to his fellow elders at a Session meeting when they knew Glenn was going to be leaving:

I said, "We are facing a time when we are going to change the senior pastor, the shepherd . . . and we are going to get somebody new in here and there will be people who will leave because Glenn is not here and there are going to be people

who come in here because we've got this new man in here. These are going to be completely new dynamics.”

In making this speech, he sought to help the Session recognize that the transition process would not be easy. He also sought to impress upon his fellow elders the importance of leading the congregation through the process.

The elders on the administrative committee played a major role in preparing for the transition through meetings with the three other teaching elders on the church staff. The purpose for these meetings was two-fold. First of all, the elders wanted to determine if any of the staff members had a desire to become the senior pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church. None of them indicated they wanted the position. Second, the committee sought to ensure that the ministries Glenn had been responsible for would continue without interruption once he left. It was determined which staff members would have the primary responsibilities for areas such as preaching, pastoral care, missions, and things such as new members' classes and communicants' classes. Ken said that the main issue “was who was going to be the day to day head of the staff.” It was agreed that that the gifts of one of the staff members were best suited for that position. Ken said, “We really tried to capitalize on and use the strengths and gifts of the three men.” The administrative committee thus functioned as a transition team by helping the church to become prepared for the pastoral transition.

The Session called a congregational meeting to elect a pastoral search committee in the fall of 1996. It actually took two meetings to fill out the slate of the committee. The Session set guidelines as far as the committee's membership, specifying how many elders, deacons, and members of the congregation at large were to be elected. Session members were selected by the Session, while Diaconate members were nominated by the

Diaconate and approved by the Session. The members from the congregation at large were taken from nominations that were made prior to the initial congregational meeting. After two meetings, all twelve positions on the committee were filled. Reflecting back on their experience on the search committee, Brian and Nolan both believe the committee was too large. Brian felt six to eight people would have been ideal, while Nolan felt nine would be the maximum number that should have been on the committee. He mentioned the simple matter of logistics in a meeting room and the inability to look at other committee members face to face as a negative aspect of a larger sized committee.

The committee began meeting in the late fall of 1996 and its search took around a year and a half. The committee had approximately fifty meetings during that time period. The initial meetings were characterized by significant conflict. Nolan and Brian were not prepared for this. Nolan said,

We were very surprised at the first meeting. A group of about four to five members of the committee thought that we should develop a paper as to what the church was and then they proceeded to write a description of what they wanted the church to be. And their definition was not the same as some of the others on the committee. So that (early) period of time was just spent hashing over things that were really the call of the Session in my opinion, not a search committee. So that was a very disconcerting thing and I think created some animosity as a group of us felt that this was not what we should be doing.

Brian connected the efforts of certain members of the committee to the fact that Glenn had been such a long-term pastor. He said,

There were three or four people who had a pretty clear vision of where they wanted the church to go. Glenn was here for thirty years and the church is what it is, and Glenn is so well ensconced that nobody really challenges what it is. And then all of a sudden there is a vacuum because he has left. I think several folks rushed in to fill that vacuum and wanted to take the church in a direction that it had not been, that was not clearly who Glenn was in his leadership.

Nolan added, "This group wanted to go almost exclusively to foreign missions as their major focus." While this had been a strong emphasis under Glenn, it was not his *only* emphasis as he led the church.

Brian also connected the committee's early frustrations to a lack of leadership on the part of the IPC Session. According to Brian, during Glenn's tenure, the Session did not normally go counter to the direction Glenn thought decisions should go. He said,

Glenn was an interesting leader. In one sense he was very casual about it and almost a non-leader, but in that casualness, he really was a pretty strong dictator. That wasn't his outward style. I don't think anyone from the outside would say Glenn was that, but everything went the way Glenn wanted it to go. The Session went that way. It was a very soft leadership style. It was almost chaotic at points, but my point in all that is that when he left, there was an extreme vacuum at the top. There was not a strong leadership within the church. We did not have a strong Session.

With that vacuum of leadership, some committee members sought to pursue their own agenda. Brian said,

I think the opportunity was right for folks who wanted to change the direction of the church. There was not a strong leadership in place to counter that so the Session gave very weak guidance to the committee. It was like "Yeah, ya'all get started and do it." And a couple meetings into it, we realized what a pickle we had. Frankly, it continued until the end.

Another problem dealt with by the committee early in its work related to the particular body to which it would make its recommendation. This also related to a lack of leadership on the part of the Session. One committee member interpreted the IPC bylaws to read that all the church's committees reported to the Session. However, the bylaws make an exception for a search committee, which reports directly to the congregation. This issue was submitted to the denomination's Stated Clerk, who agreed that the bylaws indicated that the search committee reported directly to the congregation. Nolan said, "I think if there had been clearer guidance (from the Session), that would not



have been an issue.” It was, however, and the committee member resigned because of it.

The committee struggled with unanimity in votes throughout its work (though its first and last votes - the election of Brian as chairman and the recommendation of Tom as pastor - were unanimous). An example of this lack of unity occurred early in the search process. Nolan authored a motion that the search for the senior pastor be limited to an ordained pastor from the Presbyterian Church in America, unless the committee had received a specific recommendation of someone else. Any initiative *of the committee* would be limited to PCA ordained pastors. Discussions of the motion “lasted about one month,” according to Nolan, who added in regard to seeking a PCA pastor, “That’s a pretty basic point, I think.” Brian said, “There were just points where (Nolan) and I would walk out of a meeting shaking our heads because things we couldn’t imagine would be issues, were. We’d walk out of the meeting and say ‘That’s unbelievable, we can’t even agree on that.’”

Eventually the initial conflicts of the committee subsided enough that its members were able to complete a pastoral profile setting forth the qualities the committee desired in its next pastor. The profile form was provided by the PCA’s denominational offices, and Nolan described it as “helpful.” At this point, the committee made a resource list of those Nolan termed “highly respected members of the denomination” such as individuals in the Stated Clerk’s office, prominent pastors, and committee contacts at seminaries. He said, “We contacted them and asked them for names of people we might consider,” adding, “It was interesting how many times the same names started repeating and Tom Evans’ name was really on everybody’s list.”

The committee began studying various candidates who had been referred to it or who had submitted themselves as candidates for the vacancy at Immanuel. A sub-committee made initial recommendations as to whether or not particular candidates should be investigated further. Brian said,

We had a hundred plus names. All these resumes came in and we would just sort through them and some you could go through pretty quickly. I forget, but we gave them a one through ten or something and if they got below a certain score, we threw them out and if they got above a certain score, we moved forward.

Through this process, the committee worked toward a “short list” of candidates.

The next step of the committee was to listen to sermon tapes of various candidates. Nolan said, “We had the sermon tapes when we really got serious” about a candidate. Often a next step of a committee is to have the entire committee go to hear a candidate preach at his own church. Sometimes if the search committee is large in size, subcommittees will be utilized for this task. However, the search committee of Immanuel did this on only a few occasions. Nolan said,

I think some of us were troubled with the process of “sneaking” into another church and listening to somebody preach, so we tried to keep that at a minimum. It happened at the point when we were ready to call somebody. We did not do a lot of that. Somehow this offended us a little bit.

Brian and one other committee member went on behalf of the committee to hear a candidate preach. One other member of the committee heard Tom preach in his own church while she was on vacation, but not as an “official” representative of the search committee.

There was another reason why the committee did not utilize subcommittees to hear candidates preach in their own churches: the distrust that existed among the committee members. Brian said, “We ended up working as a whole on these things . . .

Neither side trusted the other side to check out folks, so we ended up having to do everything as a committee of the whole.” He shared an incident which illustrated the lack of trust that existed among its members. This occurred when Kim, a member of the committee, wanted to go and visit a church to hear a candidate preach. Brian said,

Nolan and I had talked. We really didn’t want her to because we knew we didn’t trust her. If she didn’t think the guy was right, she would screw it up somehow, and very intentionally. In the meeting, it finally got brought up that Kim wanted to go, and I had done something to have somebody else go or to cut it off or something. She finally said, “Do you not trust me to go?” and I said “No” and you could have heard a pin hit the floor. And so that was pretty much the end of that meeting!

This conflict was significant, and the various committee members’ response to it reflected the division that existed on the committee. However, the incident ultimately helped the committee move forward with its work. The clerk of Session met with Brian and Kim and had them outline why each felt led of God to proceed in a particular direction. Brian said,

Talk about a meeting you don’t want to go into. He was a brave soul. He came in and met with us. I think he did a wonderful job in that meeting though. He did. That was probably a turning point in the committee in some ways because again, all that tension was there and came out. There was reconciliation to the point we could move forward.

The committee never achieved total harmony, but it was able to function with less internal conflict.

As it went about its search, the committee does not appear to have discussed pursuing someone distinctively different from Glenn or very similar to Glenn. Nolan said, “I don’t think we ever thought about that, but what we did do was try to find someone who would interrelate well with Glenn and that we felt would not feel threatened by Glenn.” He noted instances with which he was familiar in which former

pastors sought to “dominate” the new pastor or in which the new pastor was “afraid of the memory of the former pastor. We wanted to avoid that at all costs. . . . It wasn’t about getting a different personality or a similar personality.” The committee desired a relationship between the former and successor pastors in which the new pastor would not have a problem with the previous pastor returning to the church for special occasions in the life of the congregation.

The search committee’s contact with Tom occurred in two stages. Brian said, “We were interested in Tom very early in the process. His name came up from almost everybody we talked to and asked for recommendations.” The committee talked with Tom some, but eventually he withdrew his name from consideration because of difficult issues he was facing at the time in his own congregation. Brian added, “We were a bit disappointed because we were taken by him already.” However, Tom later contacted the committee and asked if he could become a candidate again, and the committee agreed to allow him to do so.

In addition to the many individuals within the PCA who recommended Tom to the committee, two other persons encouraged the committee regarding him. One was a minister from another denomination who was a relative of a committee member and who knew Tom. Another was a professor at the university from which Tom graduated who was a good friend of a committee member. Both individuals were high in their praise of Tom, especially with regard to his character. Committee members also were impressed with Tom’s personality as they talked with him over the phone. In addition, they appreciated the fact that he had endured a very lengthy time of conflict in his previous congregation. According to Nolan, this “showed his personal strength and how he could

stand up under fire - and we knew he was going to be under fire here because whenever you replace a pastor of thirty years, it's not going to be easy."

Nevertheless, the committee did not come to its unanimous recommendation of Tom easily. Some members on the committee wanted a pastor who was more "Reformed" as opposed to being more "broadly evangelical." Brian said, "There were two folks here (on the committee) and certainly a segment within the church that wanted us to become far more "Reformed." He gave examples of what this meant. He said, "There was a struggle (at IPC) over adding parking spaces at one time for the church. And (a church member) said, 'If God wants His people here, they will walk five miles.' That was her idea of Reformed theology." He related another discussion with a committee member:

At Tom's (former) church, they had their ten commitments about the church. One of the commitments was "to give a winsome presentation of the gospel" and she pointed that out to me and said "Aren't you troubled by this Arminian statement, a 'winsome' presentation?" And I said, "Would you like it to say, 'we want to present the gospel in such an ugly fashion that they couldn't possibly respond other than by the Holy Spirit.' Is that your idea?"

According to Brian, Tom met annually with a group of PCA pastors that were, in Brian's definition, "on the more sort of evangelical side of the PCA." This was the "camp" which Glenn had been in (though Glenn and Tom are solidly committed to Reformed theology, from the testimony of all four persons interviewed in the study of this church). The conflict over the type of pastor to be called related to a conflict over the desired direction of the church. Brian said,

Nolan and I, but I think a majority of the committee wanted . . . not somebody who was going to quickly whittle us down to 120 true believers. . . . There were some people that really wanted to move us way in that direction. . . . But they were the same folks that also made it a bloody mess once Tom got here. They had wanted us to go some place and we didn't go there.

Thus while Tom was recommended unanimously by the committee, there wasn't true unanimity. The committee started with twelve members. One member resigned and another moved during the search process. A possible six-four vote in favor of calling Tom was averted when two members, according to Brian, "saw where it was going." Then, the two other members voted in favor of Tom in the end because it was obvious he was going to be recommended.

The committee's actual search was completed in around one year. The committee informed the Session that it had located the man who they would most likely recommend as the new pastor at Immanuel. Tom and his wife, Rachel, were brought to the city and met at a local hotel with the chairmen of the Session's committees. He and his wife gave their testimonies. Ken, who was chairman of the administration committee, said, "Tom had done his homework, kind of researching. He came in and he ticked off to us seven points of his analysis of Immanuel Presbyterian Church. He nailed us." He had accurately assessed the needs of the congregation and where it was at this particular point in its history. Ken was unaware how Tom obtained such accurate information about the congregation, though he thought it may have been from conversations with Glenn Mabry, the previous pastor.

Tom came back to meet with the full Session a few weeks later. After a few more weeks elapsed, he was presented to the congregation. He preached at Immanuel's two Sunday morning services, and a congregational meeting was held immediately after the second service. The congregation voted to call Tom by a vote of 467 to 22. Ken said, "That's a significant call." Tom began serving at Immanuel in mid-1998, ending a period of one and a half years in which the congregation was without a pastor.

Ken's overall evaluation was that Tom initially was received "warmly" by both the Session and the congregation, and also "with anticipation of his leadership. Probably consciously and sub-consciously, 'you've got big shoes to fill,' particularly in preaching. That was probably the benchmark by which most of the congregation was going to be measuring." Sam's evaluation was less positive regarding how Tom was received. He said, "That was a mixed bag all the way around. Tom does not preach like Glenn Mabry. This is a matter of form rather than function. We wound up with the 'I am of Apollos, I am of Paul' type of things going on." The joint evaluation of Nolan and Brian in this matter found even more fault in some members' reception of Tom. As to how Tom was received initially Nolan said, "I would say rudely by some of the folks, not all. The majority of the folks were very gracious."

Among the issues that caused people not to receive Tom well initially was the fact that he did not know who they were. Nolan said, "There was a group of folks who were offended that he didn't remember who they were. Tom had just met them once along with fifty other people. They were sad cases." Glenn, on the other hand knew the entire congregation, since he had served at IPC thirty years and taught every new members' and communicants' class during that time.

In addition, some members of the congregation suffered what Nolan termed "sticker shock" at what Tom was being paid. He said that in fact, "We had been very miserly with Glenn's salary." The first time the congregation had heard Tom's salary figure was at the meeting when he was called as pastor. The search committee and Session had looked at comparative salaries for congregations the size of Immanuel. They also had looked at the expenses of someone living in the area where Immanuel was

located. Based on this, they offered Tom a salary package that was higher than Glenn's had been but which was consistent with what Glenn's should have been. Nolan and Brian had worked out the terms of Tom's call on behalf of the Session and search committee. There was minimal discussion with him about money and he did not negotiate a salary level. Yet, there were members who objected to what Tom would be paid.

Tom also faced a degree of difficulty relating to some of the members of the congregation because he was from a different region of the country. Nolan said, "I think that is another thing that people had trouble with - the regional differences." In sermon illustrations, Tom sometimes referred to activities he enjoyed which are popular in the region of the country where he lived for many years. A segment of the congregation was simply biased against people from that region, and this bias hindered their acceptance of Tom as their pastor. His references to the region only exasperated their frustrations.

The greatest initial difficulty for Tom in relation to the congregation came in the area of preaching. Nolan said,

There was a segment that I cannot believe that God would have been very pleased with. There was a group that would take every sermon that he gave and analyze it. They were of the belief that he was not Reformed. And Tom is as Reformed as any man can be.

Brian said, "They said he was heretical. They didn't pull any punches. It was awful. There was no basis for it." Though the group which opposed Tom was small, it was very vocal. It included some Session members, though they did not control the majority of the Session.

The group which charged Tom with being heretical also said that he did not hold to covenant theology. This accusation occurred because his initial sermons happened to



be from the New Testament. The various accusations led Tom to attempt to “prove” his theology. Brian said,

The majority of the congregation liked him and everything else stayed the same, but there was this element that made his life very unpleasant. As a result, his preaching was not as good as it had been previously because he was nervous. You know, how you would feel if there was somebody up there writing down every word? Tom would find himself making statements just to prove he was Reformed. Then he would say to me later, “why did I do that? I just felt I had to add that commercial for Reformed theology.”

Those who were dissatisfied with Tom’s preaching put together a list of grievances.

They sought to gather support to request the Session to have Tom take additional seminary classes in preaching. In addition, according to Sam,

They had a three page bibliography of various books on preaching (which they wanted the Session to require Tom to read). Those are not the preaching standards of the PCA. If you do this, this is insubordination any way you want to cut it. So I got cut out of that group. . . . They didn’t want to talk to me anymore, but had they persisted in it, I think I would have filed a complaint. . . . We had one lady in the church who wrote one of the nastiest letters I have ever seen. I was not even on Session at the time. But I got involved in the thing. (I) met with her and Tom and a couple of the other elders and she just unloaded something fierce on Tom. Tom underwent some real stress because of just a small handful of people in here.

Another issue related to preaching was less volatile but still affected the pastoral transition at IPC. Tom Evan’s preaching style was different from Glenn Mabry’s. Brian said, “Glenn rigidly gave a three point sermon and he joked about it, but there were three points to Glenn’s sermon every week.” Tom didn’t necessarily follow this pattern. In addition, according to Ken, “Glenn would go verse by verse and dissect it. That’s not Tom’s style. Tom does more pre-exegesis - he’ll slice it, dice it, ask ‘what’s the message?’ Then he wraps it in. Some people wanted Glenn’s style. So we lost people over this.” Tom also had a penchant for utilizing movies for illustrations in sermons, which offended some in the congregation. Glenn rarely had done this. Tom also was

much less demonstrative in the pulpit than Glenn had been, and rarely changed the inflection in his voice. All of these issues combined to create a degree of dissatisfaction on the part of the small segment in the congregation. Tom gradually made some changes in the area of sermon delivery. He now moves away from the pulpit more frequently and is less tied to his notes than he used to be.

Brian connected the conflict Tom faced early in his tenure at Immanuel with the fact that he was following Glenn, who had served as a long-term pastor. While some members of the congregation may not have agreed with Glenn on particular issues, no one was willing to mount any real challenge, due to his long tenure. Brian said,

People had either decided they were going to live with the way Glenn was or they had left. So even people who didn't agree with Glenn had this warm relationship with Glenn and loved him and they weren't going to challenge him. They were not going to try to move the church. When somebody new came in, they were ready to challenge because the new guy has no inherent power. He has a little bit, but not an established power base, if you will, that a long time, particularly a thirty year pastor (has). Glenn had been here longer than anybody else. That was the big difference.

When a new pastor came in, the time was ripe, in the eyes of the small minority, to seek changes they desired.

Brian's evaluation of the Session and its response to the opposition that came against Tom was that "the Session was spineless in their response." However, Tom did benefit from elders like Sam, Brian, and Ken (Nolan was a deacon at the time), who supported him during this time when he faced strong, minority opposition. Sam said,

There were three or four elders who came alongside him. I tried to come alongside. He was trying to please people. I urged Tom become his own person. "Don't try to be what somebody else wants you to be." I don't think he was as tempted to be somebody else, but there was a lot of pressure from some very vocal people.

The period of opposition lasted approximately two years. This was the length of time it

took until several elders had rotated on to the Session who were closer to Tom's theology and ministry philosophy. Nolan said, "There were six of us that came on the Session, who were new to the Session. Sam came back that year. Brian had been on sabbatical and he came back so that totally changed the way of the Session. When that happened, things changed." Most of the individuals who were accusatory in their relationship with Tom have since left the congregation. They were not able to gain a sufficient power base to accomplish their desire of having the church go in a particular direction or have Tom preach in the way they desired.

In addition to strong support he received from particular elders in the congregation, Tom also enjoyed a solid support network with other pastors in the PCA. He also had a close friendship with another area pastor whom God utilized to encourage him amid the early difficulties he faced. In addition, his wife is, in Nolan's terms, "his biggest supporter." She made their home a place of refuge for Tom amid the early struggles at IPC. Nolan also believes that the conflict Tom went through in his previous congregation equipped him for the opposition he faced at Immanuel.

While Tom provided a contrast with Glenn that some considered to be negative in nature, he did possess ministry strengths that Glenn had lacked. As Ken and Sam evaluated Tom in contrast to Glenn, their focus was on areas related to administration, which had been a weakness under Glenn. Ken said that Tom had a sense of "vision," and that he was "administratively stronger than Glenn." Sam affirmed that Tom's "management (and) administrative ability come out very often. He understands the finance things and he is very able to delegate and follow up on the delegation." Both men noted that Session meetings are now less lengthy than they were under Glenn.

While Tom was not able to know as many people immediately as Glenn had known at the end of his tenure, he nevertheless possesses relational skills similar to those Glenn possessed. Sam said,

He has the new members' class out to his home. He and Rachel are quite able to entertain and socially reach out, so he is trying to meet all the people so they at least know him. He is able to take a minute and speak with people in the narthex as they leave and so forth. He is able to speak with people and remember certain things about them. He has got some other personal touches.

Among these other "personal touches" are what Nolan termed "an incredible sense of humor. He can laugh at himself." He also mentioned the evenness of Tom's disposition, even in situations when he has been very deeply hurt. Nolan said, "Very rarely will you see him and say, 'I think he is angry at that person.' You might think he should be angry at that person, but Tom does not convey that." Brian focused on something that he thought could be a strength or, depending upon the circumstances, a weakness: Tom's being "set on where he is going," in which he takes the approach, "this might not work, I might be out of here, but here's where I'm going.'" According to Brian, Tom has a lack of fear of man and a reliance upon God and His plan for him and his ministry. This allowed him to continue amid the early trials that he faced at Immanuel.

One very positive aspect of the transition from Glenn Mabry to Tom Evans was the relationship which developed between the two men. The search committee had desired a relationship in which the successor pastor would be comfortable with Glenn being around the congregation at times. This has been the case. Ken said that

Tom and Glenn developed very quickly a warm and cordial relationship that continues this day. Tom turned to Glenn and said 'I seek your counsel.' Glenn was willing to do it. I don't know who approached whom, but there was an initiation of contact. I think he treasures Glenn Mabry's friendship.

For a while, Glenn was still in the area as he worked in his new position. Glenn also preached the sermon at Tom's installation service and has preached at other times since then. He also returned to perform weddings early in Tom's tenure at Immanuel.

Though there has been an excellent relationship between Glenn and Tom, the congregation clearly went through a process of grieving when Glenn left, and to some extent, it continues even to this day. Ken said that Immanuel saw "all the classic symptoms of the grieving process. People get loyal to the man. They (pastors) are loved and now they are gone." Brian gave an example of one individual who still wrestles with Glenn's departure, almost eight years later:

(a) dear sweet lady. She is one of the ones in my shepherding elder group. She still belongs to the church. She had just lost her husband, long term deacon, and I remember her saying to me, "First I lose my husband and then I lose my pastor." And it was just too much for her to handle and so she goes to worship services in the home where she lives. She is an elderly lady and she didn't even want to take the time to get to know somebody new. She just didn't have the energy for it.

In fact, for some in the congregation who had difficulty accepting Tom, the primary issue appears to be simply that he wasn't Glenn. Sam said, "That was a big thing. I would say that would be a bottom line thing." Anyone would have had difficulty being accepted by a segment of the congregation.

Ken believes that an extended period of vacancy between pastors can help a congregation deal with the process "letting go" of one man and preparing for another. He said,

That extended period of vacancy is the Lord's gift. It lets people disengage and let go of someone they've known for a long time. It lets people know that man wasn't in charge. The Lord was in charge. And it gives people the opportunity to step up, exercise the duties and the gifts they have to fill those voids, to pitch in, like they might not have had to do in a steady state. And it's a transition period for a church. And it's a time the Lord uses for the church to grow, and for people

to wean themselves of one man and to get ready for the next man of the Lord's choosing.

He felt the year and a half in which IPC was without a pastor helped the congregation through the grieving process, even though some members still are impacted today by losing the only pastor they had for thirty years.

Ken and Brian both described three "waves of exodus" of people from the congregation that they witnessed because of the transition from Glenn to Tom. Their paradigms were slightly different. Ken's focus was on the exodus of people before and after Tom came to IPC. He said,

There were people - when Glenn left, the people left. We went a year and a half, and we continued to see some people leave. And then Tom came in, started preaching, started leading, started re-defining, over time started looking at the IPC vision and began to shape it in a different way, and we saw some other people leave.

Brian's view of the waves of exodus focused on people who left after Tom arrived. First to leave were people who "had other agendas; they needed to leave; that was okay." A second wave of people with less specific reasons for leaving then departed over a period of several months. Then, he said,

There has still been a third wave of folks that, I think, the biggest common factor is that they don't like Tom's preaching. They are not accusing him of heresy, but they just don't like it. They are not inspired by it, and I think we've lost some very good people in that process that are, from my emotional side a significant loss to the church. A lot of the people who left probably didn't hurt us. They can either find likeminded folks or go try to screw up some other church, but I think we've lost a lot of people that were very committed to the church in a lot of ways . . . some of them very dear to me, so that is a painful thing in the whole thing.

The congregation at Immanuel has lost a significant number of members since Tom became pastor. However, only a relatively small minority of this congregation of over one thousand members was in strong opposition to him. The rest of the losses have

come through the “revolving door” nature of the community in which the church is located. Sam quoted a survey the church conducted a few years ago which reported the following statistics out of one thousand members: “There were about 150 who had been here ten years or more and maybe another two hundred who had been here five to ten years, and the rest had been here less than that. We have a revolving door here.” The congregation generally has a turnover of over fifty percent of its membership over a five year period. Thus, Tom ministers to a much different congregation today than he did when he began his ministry at IPC.

The ultimate *result* of the pastoral search committee’s work has been positive. As he reflected on the work of the committee, Brian, its chairman, wished their *experience* together had been more positive. He used a football analogy: “We got across the goal line, but we were not holding hands. We didn’t do an end zone dance together.” He added, “You know, you want to think that the body of Christ could pull that off. So the sad part of me looking back is that we didn’t.” Yet, he rated the ultimate outcome of the pastoral transition at Immanuel as an eight on a scale of one to ten. He pointed out the new outreach ministries that have started and the new facilities that that the church has completed. He also highlighted the fact that Tom has been at IPC for what Brian deems a significant period of time in view of the fact that he followed a long-term pastor.

Nolan stated the key thing he thought the search committee did well:

We called Tom Evans. To me, Tom has been everything that we thought he would be and I am still thrilled at what he is here as a pastor. I think he is a good preacher. He is a dear and wonderful friend. I have a very enthusiastic feeling about that. If you look at the other churches of our size that were filled at the same time, I think there were about five of them that were open at that same time and Tom is still here and in the other churches, that is not the case. So, I think it wasn’t perfect. We have been very candid about some of the things that didn’t go

well, but Tom is still here and Tom is going to be here for a long time if that is what he wants to do and if that is what the Lord wants him to do.

While the committee's work was difficult, neither Nolan nor Brian knew of significant changes that could have been made to make things work differently, other than to decrease the size of the committee.

Tom withstood the initial, very personal attacks upon him. He has done so, in the words of Ken, with "humility and total reliance on God's strength." He appears to have solid support from his Session and from most of the congregation. Today he also plays a major role of leadership in his Presbytery, as does the IPC congregation itself. The church is the largest in the Presbytery and serves as host for every stated meeting. Tom has helped lead a restructuring of the format of Presbytery meetings so that they include more worship time along with the regular business sessions.

In addition, under Tom's leadership, the Immanuel congregation has expanded its church facilities to add new classrooms and a fellowship hall. It also has provided strong financial backing for a church plant in an inner city area of the community, thus expanding the congregation's local outreach.

Ken believes the transition has gone well, that it is complete, and that the mantle of leadership is now firmly in Tom's hands. He said, "For thirty years it was Glenn's church. Now after (almost eight) years I think it's Tom's church - though we know whose church it is." Tom is solidified in his position to the point that he can remain at Immanuel for many years if he so desires, and this appears to be the desire of most of the members of his congregation.



### **Forest Hills Presbyterian Church**

John Rutledge served as senior pastor of Forest Hills Presbyterian Church for sixteen years. Forest Hills was his first pastorate, with John having come to this established congregation upon his graduation from seminary. The congregation grew steadily in numbers during his tenure. The membership peaked at around three hundred members. He led the church toward a strong emphasis on foreign missions. He also was very personally involved in the evangelistic ministry of the church. Though some members of the congregation were dissatisfied with aspects of his ministry, he was nevertheless appreciated and loved by the entire church body.

The circumstances under which John departed were kept somewhat quiet. The “official” explanation for John’s departure was that he had accepted a call from another church in another state. He was succeeded by Will Kessling. Forest Hills was also Will’s first pastorate, though he had served in an interim pastor position between completing seminary and accepting the call to Forest Hills. Will served at Forest Hills for four years, after which he resigned at the request of the Session. Most of his tenure was characterized by conflict, particularly with Session members and staff personnel.

Shirley, Art, Ben, and Ron all served on the search committee that recommended Will to the congregation. Shirley was in her mid-forties, as was Ben. Ron was in his early fifties. Each had been at Forest Hills for over ten years. Art was a retired gentleman in his mid-seventies and had been a member of Forest Hills for almost forty years. He had served several terms on the Session and was also very active in Presbytery affairs. He served on the Session during the time of John’s departure and after Will came to serve at the church. Ben and Ron both served on the Session after Will arrived. Ben

was still on the Session at the time Will resigned as pastor of Forest Hills. Ron served as chairman of the pastoral search committee. He voted in favor of calling Will, as did Ben, although Ben admits to some reluctance in giving his support to Will's call. Shirley and Art both voted against calling Will. The committee's search took approximately six months to complete, and there was a period of approximately nine months between John's departure and Will's arrival.

Recalling John's sixteen years at Forest Hills, Shirley described him as "tremendously popular." He was a "people person" and was very approachable on a personal level. According to Art, people were free to call and talk to John regarding any situation, and "they could be confident to get an audience if they had problems of whatever type." In fact, according to Ben, even those who were bothered by weaknesses they perceived in John's ministry "still loved him. I never met anyone who did not like and respect him as a man." In addition, according to Shirley the number of people who were very negative about John's ministry was small. These people were "influential" however, and their number included some Session members.

The committee members noted a number of strengths John possessed. Some of his *personal* strengths also provided him strength in ministry. The four committee members concurred with regard to the quality of John's personal integrity. Ben said that John had "a clear respect for God's word, for righteousness, godliness. His own life exemplified that, and he encouraged others toward that." Ron and Shirley noted particularly his strong personal prayer life. His emphasis on prayer was demonstrated publicly at times. Shirley said, "If you shared anything with him of concern, he would stop right there, and he would grab another elder right then. It didn't matter if there was

one hundred people (around). (And) if he called you on the phone, his prayer would be right then.”

The committee members also emphasized his love for people and the genuine concern he showed them. Art said, “You knew he was available, and he was, as far as visiting hospitals, being concerned about sick people, and even those who were having family problems, he was always there and that was a constant (source of) stability.” His ability to work with people and to involve them in ministry was also a strength. According to Shirley, “John was a connector. When someone new came in, he connected them immediately with somebody else. I think that was probably his biggest strength. He incorporated people immediately.” She also highlighted the role of John’s wife as a “co-minister” with him in the church. His wife was very involved in Forest Hills’ women’s ministry.

Shirley and Ron emphasized that John’s preaching was from the Bible, though they admitted that it tended to be somewhat repetitive from week to week and that some people were not pleased with the depth of his preaching. Also, some people did not think that John was “Reformed” enough in his preaching emphases.

Issues related to preaching were very prominent in an eventual effort to have him seek a different place of ministry. However, the two primary weaknesses of John which were highlighted by committee members were his inability to deal effectively with conflict in the church and his lack of leadership ability.

Ron saw John’s popularity as a possible symptom of his weakness in dealing with conflict, saying,

Sometimes if you don’t take a stand for something, then you don’t irritate other people. Because of that it would be hard for someone to say that they had a

problem with him over an issue, because sometimes he would not take a stand on an issue. He didn't want to get in the middle of conflicts.

John's lack of leadership and direction of the Session and the congregation was pointed out by Ben. Based on his interaction with men who were members of the Session at the time when John resigned, the Session as a whole perceived "a lack of leadership in the hard areas where we needed someone to help us focus or someone to referee or whatever. He had a little bit disorganized approach to things." Several elders, because of their business background, were goal-oriented and felt the church should be run in a businesslike way. For all of his godliness and pastoral ministry, John did not provide the style of leadership they desired. Ben said,

I think they appreciated John, the missions and hospital visits and that kind of thing, but they wanted someone that would drive the ship and make the hard decision and create some vision. I don't think there was a lot of vision that came from John, as far as direction for the church. These guys probably - no discredit to them - just had a business-oriented way of looking at life, and he wasn't meeting that view.

The failure on John's part to "drive the ship" and to confront issues led to gradual changes in the congregation, particularly in the area of worship. This was noticed especially by Art. While John did provide stability to the congregation because of his long tenure and good relational skills, he did not confront those changes. Art said,

There were those in the congregation that, in my opinion, were trying to change Forest Hills toward the Pentecostal type of worship, and John did not, in my opinion, show a force to counteract that. He was not standing up and saying, "We are Presbyterian and Reformed" and so those who were advocating this (Pentecostal style) sort of had a free run. The weakness I see there is in his leadership abilities.

The issue of changing worship style was in itself not a major factor in opposition that developed against John. However, John's failure to confront the style change was a

symptom of a larger issue in the eyes of some in the congregation, including those of influence who eventually encouraged John to seek another place of ministry.

The issue of preaching ability seemed to surface more clearly at the end of John's tenure at Forest Hills. Shirley said, "I think there was a small group, maybe four or five families, influential families, who were perhaps a little bit tired of his preaching style, and they were on the verge of leaving. I don't think they were out and out vocal about it, but it was known." The Session began to address these concerns, sending John to another church for training on preaching style. Ron said

They (the elders on the Session) were encouraging him to change, or to have more knowledge, or to prepare better. I think there was a possibility that because he was spending so much time in the week with telephone calls, with many individuals at length, that when it came down to time to prepare for the sermon, that it was lacking. So I know they were trying to help with time management. He had several small children at home, so he had family concerns too, being a husband and father.

This, coupled with the Session's desire to "compete" in numbers and programs with an even larger PCA church in the city (a desire which was unrealistic, according to Ron), resulted in John being asked by the Session to seek another place of ministry.

Most members of the congregation still are not aware that John was asked to leave (Shirley herself did not indicate that she was aware of this). However, Ben said, "Clearly I don't have any doubt in my own mind that this was directed by the Session and that he was asked. He was moved out." Ron echoed this by saying, "I would think it was more of being asked to leave than his looking for a place to leave. It got to the point where we tried all these avenues and it was not working, so the Session viewed it best that he look for another church." The Session allowed him to find another place of ministry before leaving Forest Hills. Thus, when he announced he would be leaving, he had accepted a

call to another church, and the congregation as a whole was not aware of the discussions with the Session that had led to his resignation.

The congregation responded in varied ways upon John's announcement that he was leaving. There was some disbelief, yet there was also a confidence that came from the knowledge that John had arrived at his decision after much prayer. Shirley said,

I think it was a shock to a lot of people when John did decide to leave (yet) when he announced that he was leaving, just knowing John, everybody immediately knew he had prayed about it and it was not a light decision, and so everybody was supportive but saddened. Even the families that were not quite so happy with him were very sad to see him go at the same time. . . . It was not an adversarial thing, or a personal thing. Even among these families he was still very much loved and embraced.

Art felt many members went through a definite grieving process upon John's departure. He also believed the Session failed to minister adequately to those who were grieving. He said, "It was sort of like, 'Well, he's been with us for a long time, he's gone, so goodbye.' There was no action by the Session to minister to those who might be in a grieving mode at that time." Art felt the Session could have been helped by meeting with the congregation informally. In such a setting, the Session could address where the congregation was in its corporate life, allow people in the congregation to voice the sadness they felt, and have a time of prayer with the congregation. He said the "Session's making it known that we are still a church and we love one another and (making) the congregation know that they are available for whatever the congregation needs" would have been beneficial in dealing with the grieving process.

Following John's departure, the Session called a congregational meeting at which the pastoral search committee was elected. The Session did not mandate a particular makeup of the committee, but instead gave, as Shirley described it, "a general charge."

The Session's desire was to insure some diversity on the committee with different groups of the church represented. It was determined by the congregation to elect two elders and two deacons to the search committee. All members were nominated from the floor. It also was determined to set the size of the committee at eleven persons. An odd number was chosen to help prevent ties in committee voting. Ben described the meeting "lengthy" and "very involved" with "a lot of input from the congregation. He described the overall structuring of the committee as "very congregational."

Once the committee was elected, Ron was selected by the committee as its chairman. The committee was quite diverse in its membership and reflected the diversity that existed in the Forest Hills congregation at the time. Art commented on this saying,

You had those that were relatively young in the Reformed faith. You had some that were what I would call transitioning from somewhere else to the Reformed perspective. And then you had two or three who were the rock-hard Reformed who would balance things out as far as opinions. There were those on the committee that had a tendency toward, I guess you would call it, Pentecostal, and of course you had a mixture in between. Most of this came from the fact that they were young in the Reformed type of worship and ministry. Most of Forest Hills has been made up of a mixture of denominations. When we say we are Presbyterian, it is mostly by the church's name, because when you look at the congregation, they are Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians that make up our congregation. During the end times of John's ministry here that Pentecostal flavor came in and attracted some folks from outside with that persuasion, and even on this committee, there was one there that sort of had these tendencies.

This diversity would be reflected as the committee determined the type of pastor it needed to pursue.

Overall, the Session provided little guidance to the committee. It was not involved with the committee to any great degree throughout the process. Art, who was a Session member, believed this was the best approach with regard to the mechanics of the search process. He said,

The Session should stay away from (the committee) and let them do their job. If there is something that committee needs then they might go to the Session and see if they could help, but otherwise, it is an independent congregational committee. So I think it should be left in that light.

Though the committee did not interact with the Session much throughout the process, the Session made it clear that it would have a role in the final recommendation of the candidate. This contrasted the “very congregational” way in which the committee was initially selected. Ron observed that the Session’s view was that the committee, while it was important, was not going to be “the sole deciding voice. Our job was to do the recommending. . . . It wasn’t like they were going to overrule us, but that they, then, would present it to the congregation with either their approval or disapproval.”

The committee began its work without a great deal of counsel from others, aside from some general directions provided by the PCA’s denominational offices. This included guidance as to the basic mechanics of the search process. In Ben’s words, “It was kind of a mechanical thing - ‘here’s the mechanics, here’s the places to go for lists of men who are available, we recommend that you meet this often.’” The denomination also emphasized the importance of formulating a church profile. Committee members answered survey questions about the congregation individually then also as a group. Questions related to things such as the emphasis the church placed on missions, the importance the church placed on financial giving, the congregation’s interests, the general life of the congregation, and the demographics of the congregation.

According to Shirley, the fact that the committee was replacing a long-term pastor and had not conducted a pastoral search in the recent past impacted the process. She said,

It was the first time the church had been through anything like that . . . it was new to everybody. We had had a positive experience with a former pastor, so in a way



it didn't seem like there were going to be a lot of problems in choosing. I don't think anyone on our committee had ever served on a search committee.

After assessing the congregation itself, the committee next began to build a profile for the next pastor. As noted above, the committee was quite diverse in denominational and theological background. This impacted the process of establishing the criteria for a pastor. Ron said the committee dealt with the issue as to whether the committee should necessarily search for a pastor from within the PCA - or even a Presbyterian denomination. He said, "We had various people from the congregation who questioned whether we should be limited to the PCA. I remember saying, 'Well, we are a Presbyterian church, and we would want a Presbyterian minister.'" Ultimately this is the direction in which the committee went.

Shirley felt the Session should have been involved in developing the pastoral profile. Then, the committee could seek a pastor who matched the profile as closely as possible. Instead, she said the development of the profile "was all the committee. And I think therein lies a huge problem. Because of course in the makeup of the committee there are varying personalities. When you're trying to make a decision on what style of preacher you want, there was huge diversity there."

The committee also had to determine what percentage of vote would be required for a candidate to be recommended by the committee to the congregation. Ron said the committee "came up with a seventy-five percent rule" - referring to the percentage of a favorable committee vote that would be required before a candidate would be recommended to the congregation (though Shirley disputed this, indicating that the committee had agreed that its recommendation had to be unanimous).

In regard to the type of pastor the committee pursued, Ben and Ron particularly felt the committee desired someone who contrasted the previous pastor. Ben said, “We were tired of John’s weaknesses, so therefore our priorities were the opposite of John.” Shirley also affirmed that the pastoral profile that was developed was in fact a reaction to John’s personality and ministry. She said,

I think it boiled down to whether or not you really liked John, or if you were one of the families, and there were several on the committee, that were ready for him to go. Because of course I think (for) the ones that did like him, the profile would not have been that much different from him. And the ones that did not, then it was drastically different because they were looking for something completely the opposite. I don’t think anyone was wanting a carbon copy, but I think the majority would have been happy with something similar, with a few tweaks here and there.

The stage of the life of the congregation also played an important role in determining the type of pastor the committee sought. Ron said, “We were somewhat like on a platform for the rocket to take off. We were in that stage. We were looking for someone who would grow us to the next level.” Ben related what he perceived as the desire of the elders of the church:

I think the leadership at this time was casting about, looking for one trick or another to get the church to grow. They felt like we had a lot of potential, the kindling and all was there, we just needed a good spark to set the thing off. They were casting about, looking for someone dynamic.

The committee also desired that the next pastor have some experience in pastoral ministry, rather than being right out of seminary. In addition, the committee focused on the preaching style of a candidate. Shirley also said that

one big thing was age. I think that was a huge factor for the majority. It wasn’t for me. But they were all very adamant that it not be a senior, actually not even anybody in their later forties. I think they thought this person would be here long-term. And I think they also wanted someone with children. And so some people were eliminated and not even asked for a (sermon) tape just on those criteria.

After developing the pastoral profile, the committee then turned to the congregation. Shirley said,

We invited the congregation . . . to submit any names of suggestions of candidates that they would like for us to request a tape from. Also, one of the main sources (of names of candidates) was from the PCA office. They have a list of men that are just out of seminary or in transition. That was a pretty overwhelming list. We got lots of tapes in from that list. I think those men were also notified that we were looking and so they were just able to send in tapes, or we could request if we recognized a name. Of course, the committee members were also asked to suggest names, which a lot of us did.

The committee then divided into groups, with each group looking at a set of data forms (the resume for PCA teaching elders). These were compared with the pastoral profile the committee had developed. The groups then reported to the whole committee on the candidates they had studied and individuals were either put on a "short list" or rejected. The short list included between four to six candidates. Though some sermon tapes had been received already, the committee requested tapes from the candidates on its short list and listened to the tapes together.

The process of narrowing down candidates reflected particular sentiments of committee members. Some candidates were rejected because they admitted to the use of alcohol or could not affirm that the use of alcohol was wrong. Ron said,

We would go through this candidate and get to the last page. You gave it initials (for) "alcohol, tobacco and firearms." This person could have great credentials, and then the last page was on life experience. So we were going through this, and it would take fifteen to twenty minutes, and we would get to the last page and see something that to certain individuals would disqualify them.

This actually changed the approach of the committee, as it began to start at the end of data forms to eliminate candidates earlier in the process.

The consideration of most of the candidates on the "short list" was interrupted when the committee came into contact with Will Kessling. Will was almost forty years

old and had left a high paying job as a stockbroker with a nationally known brokerage firm in order to pursue vocational ministry. His primary background was in Southern Baptist churches, though he had attended a PCA congregation in another city in recent years. His only pastoral experience was in an interim pastor position. He recently had graduated from seminary and was seeking a place of ministry. Thus, he lacked a key element the committee had set forth as part of its pastoral profile: pastoral experience.

During the time the church was without a pastor, various men preached on Sundays. One who preached quite often was a professor at the seminary Will had attended. The professor knew of Will and connected the church with Will in order for him to preach at Forest Hills, which he did twice. Initially, Will was not a candidate for the pastoral position. Soon however, Will submitted his resume to the search committee. Shirley described the process from that point:

He submitted his resume. We listened to some tapes. I don't feel like we listened to enough. After Will filled the pulpit a couple of times we invited him to come and preach on a Sunday morning, and the committee had lunch and met with him and his wife. I can only remember two men that we actually invited from the tapes that we listened to. Both of those were pretty much eliminated. There wasn't anyone we were interested in, so they were not invited back. I think we were unified on those.

Many on the committee were quite impressed with Will. Three particular things brought this about: his written resume, his preaching, and his apparent leadership abilities. Art said Will's resume ultimately persuaded the committee. Regarding the key element in the committee deciding to recommend Will, he said, "I think personally it was the impressiveness of his resume, and in that resume there was a book almost of information concerning this individual." Ron agreed, saying that "when we got in all the resumes, his was so much more professional than everyone else's. I don't think he even

called it a resume.” Indeed, he called it his “vitae.” Ben added, “He had a slick, more polished presentation.”

Will’s preaching ability also impressed the committee, particularly in comparison with John’s weakness in this area. Ben said,

First we heard the tapes. You knew where he stood. When you got to the end of the sermon, you knew what he had said. There were stands taken. And there was Scripture referred to. He was a good preacher. He wouldn’t suit my taste today, but he did then. We were thirsty people, and we rushed to the water.

A third factor in the committee’s recommendation of Will was the leadership ability he seemed to possess. Ron said, “We wanted someone mature who could come in and lead.” Will’s background served him well in this regard. His previous job in a highly competitive business was a promoting point for him.

One other factor in the committee’s selection of Will was mentioned by Ben. He believed it was actually the most important factor to the committee as it made its choice: “He looked the least like John of all the candidates. I don’t think that was ever said, but that is the bottom line. We should have stuck with our guns on experience. He looked the least like John.”

There was a genuine degree of assurance most of the committee felt with regard to the job it had done when it eventually recommended that Will be called as pastor. Ron said,

When you look at the background check, the things you are to do, I think we did (them). We got references; there was nothing that came back that would indicate that we were on the wrong track. We wanted someone Reformed - we had that. We wanted someone with good teaching - we had that. We wanted a good communicator - we had that.

The committee also was impressed with what Will had given up in order to pursue vocational ministry. Ron said, “We didn’t think he was in it for the money. He had a

well-paying job that he gave up. So we didn't think we were getting someone who wanted to just come in and not serve, but be served. He gave something up." Thus, there were positive factors regarding Will which encouraged committee members to recommend him for Forest Hills' pastoral position.

Nevertheless, at points along the way the committee felt a degree of pressure from different sources to conclude the search process and recommend Will to the congregation. Shirley commented,

There were a few elders that were not on the committee that really wanted Will, that really liked his preaching style. They began to talk about it within the congregation and they approached us openly saying they really thought he was the one, and asking what we were waiting on. So I wouldn't say "pressure" but it was very obvious and preferences were made known. I think that sped up the process even more so.

Ben *did* feel pressure to make a decision and specifically to recommend Will. He mentioned the pressure he felt from his interactions with

a couple of older congregation members that were very much in favor of Will. Again, I just saw myself as a young guy who wasn't sure enough of myself and my own positions to take my own stand. I was influenced by a fair amount of pressure. I'd say by that time it was a fair amount of pressure to go ahead and get this guy.

The committee also felt a degree of pressure from Will himself. He indicated that another congregation - one of the largest in the PCA - was interested in him for a staff position. He indicated he had interviewed for the position and that he might accept it. Ron said, "He basically issued a threat that he might be getting ready to take a job at this other church, and that he needed an answer." Ben said that while this didn't totally change the committee's process, it did give it "a little push." Will utilized the other position for leverage with Forest Hills, conveying the thought that if a much larger and very well known church wanted him, surely Forest Hills would want him as well. In

reality, according to Ron, Will misled the committee at this point, in that he had not gotten past some phone conversations with the other congregation. Ron said, “He used that name in the PCA to build his prospects up for the job (at Forest Hills).” According to Ben, he also used it simply to speed up the committee’s process.

The pressure the committee felt built a sense of “hurry” into the search process and ended it sooner than some on the committee desired. At this point, the committee was four to five months into its work. Shirley said,

There were some of us on the committee that felt that if he was the one, he would be there, that we had just begun the search. We had actually only interviewed two people, and this was way, way too quick. We felt if he was supposed to be here, the Lord would cause him to wait and not allow him to take another position because it would be the wrong decision for him to take.

Yet, though committee members felt pressure to speed up the selection process, an issue they considered was whether delaying the process would have been beneficial in any way. Ron asked hypothetically,

Were there other candidates right behind (Will)? Did it look like if we waited another four-six months, (anything) would change in the process? If you are praying for something, and looking for something, and it looks like everything matches up and lines up, isn’t this what we asked for? What would waiting another four months do, and would we get someone else who was going to be what we wanted?

His conclusion was that this would not necessarily be the case. Ben said he would have been willing to vote against Will “if I had been convinced that there was something off line about him.” He could not pinpoint any specific thing.

Shirley did not convince enough committee members to delay a decision. According to others on the committee, she could not pinpoint specific objections she had to Will. Ron said, “She didn’t really have anything (about Will) to say other than ‘I just don’t think so.’” Ben also had observed an inability on Shirley’s part to let go of

expectations related to the previous pastor, whom she greatly admired and with whom she and her husband were very close. He said, “As far as Shirley, I think he (Will) wasn’t ‘John-enough,’ as far as personal-wise, etc.”

Art also felt the committee acted too hastily in calling Will, though he recognized the possibility that a search could be completed rather quickly. He said, “You might look at a person, and God may say ‘That’s the one right now.’ And you haven’t been in motion but maybe a month, and that’s the man.” Nevertheless, he felt the Forest Hills committee took far too little time in its search: “As much disagreement as there was on that committee, I felt we went too fast. If you’ve got that much disagreement with a man, I don’t think you should go ahead and proceed.”

Art’s primary reasons for voting against Will related to his theological background and his view of the pastoral office. He said,

I was a member of the committee that asked the Reformed, theologically-based questions. We had him come and be interviewed by this committee in a private setting so he could feel free to say whatever he wanted to say and we could feel free to ask questions. And to hear his answers to those questions, they were correct. I could find nothing wrong. Yet there was his (Baptist) background, his experience, that did not match up to those answers to me.

According to Ron, Art was of the opinion that “Will could never pass Presbytery” (i.e., a Presbytery examination to be a teaching elder in the PCA) because of his background and the theological leanings Art perceived in Will. However, in the end, he did pass the Presbytery exam.

Art’s also seemed to think that Will’s view of the office of teaching elder was influenced by his Baptist background. Art said, “I got the feeling that he still felt as the pastor that he was going to be the key man. In our Reformed way of doing it, he was just another vote on the Session. But I don’t think he ever felt that way.”



After a six-month search process, the committee voted nine to two in favor of recommending that the congregation call Will as its pastor. At a congregational meeting, Art presented a minority report in which he set forth information which showed that some on the committee felt Will should not be called as pastor. This report was defeated and a majority report of the committee, which recommended that Will be called, was approved by a seventy-percent vote.

According to committee members, Will enjoyed a “honeymoon” period, with things generally going well for a few weeks when he began his ministry at Forest Hills. Shirley said, “I think people were willing to give him a chance and were excited about him being here.” In addition, he was able to interact with people on an individual basis and connect them to various ministries in the church, even as his predecessor, John, had done. Shirley particularly appreciated the positive impact Will’s wife made on the programs of the women in the church by virtue of the vitality and ideas she brought. She was “a huge asset to him initially. They were just very program oriented, much more of what you would see in a larger church. Those kinds of things appealed to everybody.” Shirley also felt there was a general appreciation within the congregation simply to have a pastor again. Even members who had voted against Will were willing to accept the fact that he was the new pastor.

Yet, there was a clear contrast between Will and his predecessor. Art compared the two saying,

You can be a preacher and have a beautiful oratory presentation, but as far as being a pastor, you may not have the qualities to do that. And I did not see that in Will, even before we called him. I didn’t see it afterwards either. . . . I compared “Baptist” to what we needed. And the “Baptist” was not what we needed. We needed an experienced Reformed, loving Presbyterian pastor to come in because

the congregation was grieving, and they needed someone with a lot of pastoring, and I didn't see that in Will.

He also observed the differences in personality between Will and John. He said that John "had a dynamic and loving personality. Will did not. Will was standoffish, in other words, and I hate to say it like this, but 'I am the man with the power.' John was meek and mild, and Will was almost 180 degrees different from that."

In a similar way, Shirley described Will as someone with "no humility" - a clear contrast with John. She also focused on other differences between John and Will. In contrast to John, Will "was not a man of prayer. We definitely need (as pastor) a decision maker, someone that can handle conflict, somebody that's relational. . . . But we also need, above all those things, humility, and a man of prayer."

Shirley highlighted some changes that Will made in the overall atmosphere of the public services, with an emphasis on "showmanship." This again was a contrast to the way things had been when John was pastor. She also said that things were much more "business oriented" in terms of the number of church committees and the amount of paperwork which ministry leaders were required to complete. She said, "We were becoming more of a business and more worldly and less service and ministry oriented, and that was seen in all areas." Toward the end of his tenure, Will did not prepare a sermon for Sunday evenings. Instead, he opened the floor for questions on any topics individuals wanted to ask him about. Shirley said "It was very, very much like a talk show. Very much like a one-man show." She attributed this format to the fact that Will wanted to "show his knowledge, but it was also (because) he was not taking the time to prepare."

While in some cases Will provided the congregation a less than positive contrast with its previous pastor, the major problems pertaining to Will during his tenure at Forest Hills were in relation to the Session, not to the congregation as a whole. Ben said “I would say that Will, even through all his time here, his problem wasn’t with his relationship with the congregation. There began to be more and more people who had problems with Will, but his main issues started in the Session. He developed so much friction in the Session.”

One problem which developed with the Session early in Will’s tenure related to the amount of money he was to be paid. He had accepted the call of the congregation with an understanding of what he was to be paid when he began his ministry. However, there was a disagreement as to what the Session promised regarding salary increases. A particular Session member, Tony, had dealt with Will regarding the financial terms of his call. Tony and Will differed as to what had been promised Will regarding future salary. Ron said, “They were on the phone. How do we know (what was said)? *What* do we know? The only thing we know is what we had in writing when we brought the call.” According to Ron, Will said he accepted the call based on an understanding with the Session that the terms of his call would be changed in the future and that he would move toward a higher salary, which an “average” pastor was making. However, there was a difference of opinion between Will and the Session as to what an “average” salary was. Ron said that Will “always felt that he was lied to or deceived” regarding the money he would make.

Another issue which proved problematic fairly early in Will’s tenure related to his leadership style. Several Session members had wanted a “strong” leader, one who would

contrast John's perceived lack of leadership ability. However, in the words of Ben, "They got more than they bargained for!" According to both Ben and Ron, problems inevitably developed between Will and the Session when its members differed with Will's proposals or ideas. Ron said, "They asked for a leader, they got a leader, and then there was the sense that they were not following him. He went about it, 'Either you're on my side, or you're against me.'" Art said, "the idea of being rejected didn't set well with Will. If he had presented something or if something hadn't gone exactly as he thought, it seemed to get to him."

Will sought to gain support from other elders and build coalitions to gain victories, yet turned against those elders if he was unable to accomplish his purpose. Ron related an incident that took place soon after he was ordained as a ruling elder and came on the Session:

He whispered in my ear and said "Now, we're going to do something." I remembered thinking to myself, "Oh my, does he think now that I'm going to be his follower, or (do) what God has told me to do?" It was almost like he wanted to form a group here, and I would be one of his minions to move forward.

According to Ben, Will's tenure was characterized by "the culture of intimidation - it was so much a dramatic shift from John's tenure - intimidation and hurry and 'it's my way or the highway.' From John's no leadership hardly at all, it was like a whiplash."

According to Art, Will's leadership style also impacted his relationship with several members of the church staff. He said,

I guess the best way to describe his managerial process here was a 'taskmaster.' Well, that rubs people the wrong way, and he got some of the staff irritated at him because of this demanding demeanor, and it just got to the point that the staff did not support him. You can't take a pastor and have a staff not support him, and they just sort of, because of his demanding way, just sort of deserted him as far as being cooperative, and the further down the road it went, it actually got hostile between him and some of the staff members.

The hostility of these relationships continued to escalate to the point where Will's motives often were questioned, particularly by the Session, where his primary relationship problems lay.

Ron and Ben said that Will often instituted change in the congregation too quickly. One example of this related to some physical restructuring of the church's building. This change was needed and it was approved by the Session. However, according to Ben, "We sort of turned around and the architect was in there converting it. That just happened a little faster than people were ready for." Ben described how Will approached such changes:

He said that the strategy was like what the Roman army used to do - they landed all their troops on the beach, and then the troops watched the ships burn. It was like "you ain't going home, you gotta go forward." That was his style, to force it. And again, we had sixteen years of a preacher who never pushed anything, and I think that wrinkled some feathers. As much as anybody there were Session members that felt like they were being swept away in a flow of things and he always got the votes that he needed, but there was a fast-paced thing. We were going to "burn the ships" and force issues.

Ben saw the overall situation of Will's tenure as symptomatic of a larger issue:

Will's suitability for the pastorate itself. While this was a problem issue, it also provided another contrast with John, who *was* well-suited for the pastoral role. Ben said,

You've almost got the case more of a guy who's just not cut out for the pastorate. There's a mix of things here. You do have a case study of a guy who followed a man who was here for a very long time, who at least at a heart level held a lot of our hearts. But that's only a part of the story. The big part of the story is that we had a man who is emotionally and by nature not cut out for the pastorate.

He added, "We were looking for a 'non-John.' That was the main thing. And that led to our mistake."

Tensions between Will and the Session continued to escalate to the point where toward the end of Will's tenure an elder of the church brought ecclesiastical charges against Will. These related to problems that had developed between Will and some staff members. The elder, who was no longer on the Session, had been strongly in favor of Forest Hills calling Will as pastor. However, his opinion of Will had changed and he desired to have Will removed from his position. Instead of bringing charges against Will to the Presbytery where Will held membership, the elder brought the charges to the Session. The Session conducted a "trial" with numerous witnesses against Will. According to Ben, the elder . . . . .

was on a crusade to chase Will off. It turned out he had good ground to stand on. I was turned off by what I saw as a crusade on this man's part. . . . I tried to follow King David's example toward Saul. I saw flaws (in Will) and I saw things that rubbed against my grain, but if he's the elected man and ordained by God, I'm not going to be against him. He's going to have to deny the gospel, the deity of Christ, or be specifically on the wrong side.

The Session concluded that Will did have problems communicating and relating with people and set forth a course of instruction (of reading, classes, and counseling) for him to follow. While the Session was hopeful these measures would improve the relationship between its members and Will, another problem soon arose. Will was discovered to have been utilizing church-funded overseas mission trips to facilitate his travel for work on a graduate degree. While he went on the trips with groups from the church, he was not involved in the day-to-day mission work. Instead, his focus was upon his studies.

Ben challenged Will regarding using missions money to fund his studies and according to Ben,

He got all huffy and whatever. We had been personal friends up to that point. But when I said that, it was like I was on the black list. It wasn't long after that that we got more and more friction from the staff, even in spite of our efforts to see his behavior change. I made the point of the money issue with the rest of the Session, and it finally got to the point where we all said that there are way more negatives here than positives. This had become a distraction. We weren't advancing God's kingdom, we were fighting these battles over and over again. So we . . . never fired him. We just said he needed to be looking elsewhere.

Will soon resigned as the pastor of Forest Hills, ending a tumultuous four-year tenure.

Thus, the congregation would need to begin a pastoral search once again.

The consensus among the search committee members is that the transition after a long-term pastor at Forest Hills could have worked with the right person. In regard to this possibility, Shirley said, "One hundred percent yes. And I don't think he would have had to be a clone of John at all. He would have had to have been a godly man. If it would have been a truly godly, humble man, I think he would probably still be here." Art pointed out the fact that people accepted Will initially and said, "I think it was more just Will" as the one following John that caused the transition to be problematic. He said, "I think that people accepted him initially." Ron felt that someone with more of a balance between teaching ability and interpersonal skills could have had a lasting ministry with the congregation. Ben added, "Someone who was less confrontational but more of a teacher and preacher could probably have done well. . . . But it could have worked out." Thus, committee members did not view the transition as doomed to failure merely because Will followed a long-term pastor.

In assessing the work of the committee, both Shirley and Ben offered some positive assessments. Shirley felt the committee got along well and that its members were able to be open with each other. She characterized all the committee members as "godly," though she felt some were hesitant to voice their opinions. Ben felt the process

the committee followed was generally a good one. He said, “We tried to be methodical, and we tried to take the subjective out of it as much as we could. We listened to what the PCA gave us, we stuck to the package.” He viewed the fact that the committee pursued someone who would have PCA credentials as a positive element of the process.

One mistake which Ben felt the committee made was not weighing heavily enough the factor of a candidate’s pastoral experience. He said that in fact some people on the committee emphasized this factor, but to no avail. However, based on his experience Will now says,

I would never again, I don’t care what other credentials a man had, I would never vote for a guy that had not been in a pastorate, for a senior pastorate position. Let him come in as an assistant or youth leader or whatever, but you need to work your way into a senior pastor position by coming up in the ranks. We too easily overlooked that.

He felt *he* paid too little attention to his own concerns about Will’s “non-pastoral” style.

As noted previously, Shirley felt the committee acted too quickly in coming to its recommendation. She said, “I don’t think you can outwait God; I really don’t. Whether it’s a building committee, or a pulpit committee, I think when there’s not that unity, either it’s not the right decision, or it’s not the right time.” She felt the committee would have been unified had it continued its search prayerfully for a longer period of time.

Based on their experience as search committee members, Shirley and Art offered specific advice regarding the pastoral search process following a long-term pastor. While their advice may apply to pastoral searches in general, they offered their thoughts regarding the transition after a long-term pastor, Shirley said,

The Session should have been more involved, just guiding us, even though there were two members on our committee. I think we should have gotten more feedback from them. I think we should have had to check in with them on a regular basis as to where we were in our process, and even allowing them to hear



some of the things that were going on. Maybe a couple of them should have sat in on our committee occasionally, not to have a vote, but to get the flavor and the feel and (for us to have the) wisdom from the Session in some way.

While she recognized that the committee had been nominated and designated to make certain decisions, she felt a church Session should develop the profiles of the pastor and the congregation. Art said that congregations need “more input from the Session as far as getting the congregation to think about what they are doing.” He also emphasized the value of the counsel of denominational leaders to search committees saying,

That way the committee will have a base to start on, understanding where they are going, as it wasn't in our case. It was just turned over to the committee, and away you go. And you sort of have to paddle water like a puppy in order to get things done. But I think there needs to be more orientation.

The “paddling water” analogy described Art's experience on the committee, even as one who had served many years as an elder in a PCA congregation. Since John had served such a long tenure as pastor, he and the other search committee members were inexperienced in conducting a pastoral search. Shirley summarized her experience by expressing that she and the other committee members were somewhat naïve as to the realities of a transition process under the circumstances they faced. She said, “We were a little blind about thinking about what a bad experience with a pastor could be, because we had not experienced that.” Ben acknowledged that the process wore him down to some extent. He said,

It wore on so long, and voices were coming from the congregation, wondering when we were going to make a decision. We had been meeting at least every month, and I remember many times more often than that. I had a conversation with someone around the time of Will's leaving, or right after he left. I think it was someone on the committee. This person said “Do you think we took so much time coming to this that in the end we were just tired of the whole thing?” And I had to agree.

Ron focused on the newness of the search process and the difficulty of committing so much time to serving on a search committee saying, “It wasn’t like this was our sole job.” He affirmed the difficulty of balancing search committee responsibilities with other church, job, and family commitments.

While the committee members did not manifest a cynical attitude with regard to the work they did, neither did they voice deep satisfaction with it. The negative results of the transition process at Forest Hills made their experience of preparing for and playing a major role in a pastoral transition one they would not be eager to repeat.

### **Northside Presbyterian Church**

Bill Jeffers was the founding pastor of Northside Presbyterian Church (NPC) and served there for nearly forty years. During his tenure the membership of the congregation grew to over two thousand. He led the congregation into the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) when the denomination began in 1973. Under his leadership the congregation completed several building programs, started a Christian school, and also provided human and financial resources to help start other PCA churches in the city. Following his retirement Bill was succeeded by Northside’s current pastor, Clyde Rollins. Clyde has now been at Northside for over six years. The congregation is approximately the same size as it was when Clyde succeeded Bill.

Three individuals who served on the search committee that located Clyde were Richard, Jane, and Harris. Richard and Jane are in their mid-sixties, while Harris is in his early seventies. In addition to serving on the search committee, Richard served on the Session at the time Bill announced he was going to step down as pastor. Harris had served terms on the Session prior to Clyde’s arrival, though he was not on the Session

immediately prior to or during the search process. He returned to the Session after Clyde came to Northside.

Bill enjoyed great popularity with much of his congregation throughout his ministry. Much of this popularity can be attributed to the special relationship he established with people through his own personal evangelism. Jane said,

He has been extremely popular. He started the church and there was no one, and he had a handful at the start, which grew to a church of several thousand members. Most of those probably he led to the Lord himself, and so naturally the congregation had a special relationship with the guy who led them to the Lord, even indirectly. So I don't think there is any question about his popularity.

Richard emphasized the personal humility Bill displayed as a reason for the great esteem others had for him. He said, "I can't remember anybody on the Session ever who did not know and admire Bill. I can't imagine anybody other than the devil himself who would dislike Bill. He was so humble and so unassuming. Everybody almost idolized him." Though a few aspects of Bill's personality were viewed by some in the congregation as an element of weakness in his ministry, for the most part his personality enhanced his ministry through the years.

The *personal* strengths Bill possessed were not only helps to his popularity with the congregation, but they served him as *ministry* strengths as well. In fact, most descriptions of his strengths in ministry were not so much what one would think of as ministerial gifts, but elements of Bill's personal character. It was his God-developed character which appears to be the greatest gift which Bill possessed for effective ministry. Richard said, "His strongest sermon was his life. He was not a great preacher. He led by example. He never put any pressure on anybody to teach a Bible study or give financially. He just quietly led by example."

Harris noted also Bill's concern that the leaders of the congregation be godly men.

He said,

Bill was wise. When I first came on the Session and a number of people were put up for nomination on the Session, Bill would axe them and I wondered why. This guy was a big shot in the church and Bill would axe him. Found out later the guy was having an affair. The Session didn't know that but Bill knew it. He was careful to bring on to the Session, I would say, godly men, at least as best as he knew how.

Bill's care of the church was exhibited in other ways, according to Harris: "He's well read. He reviewed every book in the library and he protected the flock from error in that way." Harris offered this overall assessment of Bill: "He's so smart, he knows everyone, and we just love the guy. We loved his humility. We loved his teaching. He got on well with the Session. The congregation also loved the guy. He could do no wrong." While Jane affirmed the deep love the congregation had for Bill, her assessment provided a more complete picture than that of Harris in that she noted that Bill was not without opposition during his long tenure. She contrasted Bill's approach to ministry with the "easier" road he could have taken - not fighting "battles" within the church. She noted that particularly during the early years of the church, "he always had people that gave him a hard time, and how he ever hung in there . . . ." She described how some pastors don't "hang in there all the time" and "fight the battles. But Bill fought them. So, you know, during those years, people left if they didn't get their way, or weren't able to manipulate him, or whatever." As a result, those who remained in the church "loved him to death."

Bill demonstrated either perceived or genuine weaknesses during his tenure as well. His was not a charismatic or dynamic personality. While this is not necessarily a weakness, it does not necessarily coincide with the expectations of a pastor of a large

congregation. Richard said, "It used to tickle me. People would come to Northside and they expected to see this dynamic preacher" - implying that this is not what they would find and affirming something about Bill's personality and about his lack of great preaching skills. He also was seen as lacking in leadership and organization. Richard said, "To me his biggest weakness was he wasn't a strong enough leader. Sometimes you just have to say, 'This is how we are going to do it.' Bill would never do that. He was always giving in." Regarding Bill's ability to organize the church, particularly during the end of his tenure, Harris noted that Bill "didn't have a whole lot of organization. I think he was showing he was tired and, you know, it's a big, big church. He had an administrator and some help but he needed more help, more organization."

Bill's sought to provide ministries that people wanted, to the best of his ability. Jane noted that Bill acquiesced to the desires of some people that the church begin a contemporary worship service. Bill preached at that service, at the church's traditional service, and also at the initial services of a daughter church which was started by Northside. Jane said,

Someone jokingly said if we wanted a service for those who wanted to wear tutus to church on Sunday, he would have started one of them down in the kitchen. He was trying to please everybody. If that's what they wanted, he would give it to them. He wanted them to come and worship and learn and grow. He was trying to be all things to all people, just like Paul.

The preparation for Bill's departure as pastor began around two years before he retired. Richard served on the Session in the years leading up to the announcement of Bill's retirement, and in the time period in which his departure occurred. He had a close personal friendship with Bill. When Bill was sixty-five, Richard asked him if he had thought about when he was going to retire.

He said, "Well, not really," and we talked about some sort of succession plan through the church and he felt like that if he announced that he was going to step down in three years or something like that, that it could hurt the growth of the church. The people who were thinking about joining the church perhaps would not join. They'd wait and see who the new pastor would be. And so he just felt like the best thing to do was wait until the Lord led him to step down before he announced anything.

However, approximately a year later a group of elders in the church approached Bill about the need for a plan for transition when his retirement occurred. Richard said,

When he was about sixty-six or so, a group of elders decided there needed to be some sort of succession plan in the church and so they formed a sort of a self-appointed ad hoc succession committee that was very secret, to meet with Bill. I don't even know how that committee came about. I was not part of the committee and the interesting thing about Bill is he never mentioned it to me.

According to Richard, the purpose of the committee was not to put pressure on Bill to resign, but

they just wanted to be sure that when he did decide, there was some sort of plan, at least. So they drew up sort of a game plan as to how we would form a search committee, how far ahead Bill would announce, how the search committee would be formed and so on.

According to Richard's recollection, Bill announced in September 1998 that he was going to step down as pastor at the end of 1999. The Northside Session began to deal with the transition, at which point it was made known that the heretofore secret committee already had been working on a succession plan. Richard said "The Session looked at the game plan they had as to how to select a search committee and liked the plan, so we adopted that." Thus, there was no official "transition committee" established by the Session, but the secret committee had functioned in that capacity. However, unlike some transition committees, the committee from Northside ceased to function once its recommendations had been made known to the Session. Jane said that the committee laid the groundwork for the transition. She said,

Those men had already been talking about the transition, and they probably had the demographics of the search committee already laid out a year before. I don't know, but when Bill made his decision that he was at a certain point going to retire, they were ready to step in and see everybody through the transition.

She also indicated her belief that the committee had some idea of which potential candidates it wanted the church to consider.

Bill's humble spirit came into play when he actually announced his resignation.

Richard said,

He was sixty-seven years old, he had seen the church kind of plateau for the last four or five years and he was such a humble man and liked to serve the Lord so I think he began to realize that perhaps the Kingdom would be better served if he stepped down and let a younger, more energetic person come in and try to take it to the next level. So I think that's what led him to do it.

The Session played the primary role in determining the makeup of the search committee and in determining how the committee was to report its recommendations.

The majority of the committee was elected by the congregation. However, Jane said that "the Session had already determined before the committee was ever elected what the demographics would be." The committee was to be made up of fifteen members. Three elders were chosen by the Session and two deacons were chosen by the Diaconate. Ten other members were selected from the congregation at large, but according to Jane, they were from "specific age groups and specific leadership kinds of things. And the Session determined that (makeup) beforehand."

The Session also gave some specific instructions to the committee. Richard said,

It was also explained to us that it was not our job to come back in with two or three nominees. You know, we needed to come back with the nominee; the congregation would vote yes or no. If they voted no, then we'd start over. We obviously didn't think that would happen. But it could.

The Session also had determined beforehand that the search committee would report directly to the congregation, not to the Session. This was its understanding of the process set forth in the PCA's *Book of Church Order (BCO)*. Tom felt this method provided the committee an advantage as it went about its work. He said, "I think the (process) that we followed was much better than taking it to the Session. I've always felt like a small committee can dig in and get the information and debate it a whole lot better." He noted the large size of the Northside Session and the fact that not all of its members would have the extensive information the search committee would have. The smaller size of the committee also made discussion of candidates much more manageable than it would have been had the whole Session been involved. The instruction from the Session to report to the congregation was somewhat surprising to Tom

because in the past the Session pretty well had run things in the church. I would have suspected that we would have come to the Session with probably two or three nominees and they would have debated it and you know, they would have tried to pick the one. It just didn't work that way.

Bill's plan was to remain in town and to be involved in the congregation. This initially created an awkward situation for the pastoral search committee. At one point there was even a question as to whether Bill would actually serve on the committee. Jane counseled him against this. She said that initially

it was obvious that Bill was going to stay in town and that he was going to sit on the pulpit committee. I'm the one who said to him, "I don't think that's a good idea." I honestly think he was surprised because it just seemed like the normal thing (for him) to do. I did suggest to Bill that there was no way that (the committee) could write up a profile of what they were looking for if he was sitting in on the meeting. And he's a smart man. I think he realized that was true.

Bill stopped coming to committee meetings unless he was invited for a particular reason.

He was asked for assistance in sorting out the list of candidates with regard to their



qualifications and according to Jane, “that was very helpful. But he did not stay on as an ever-present member of the committee, which I think was the (initial) plan.”

The committee sought counsel from the denomination’s stated clerk’s office, which provides general suggestions for congregations seeking a new pastor. The committee also sought help from an older pastor in the denomination who was well known to the church and whose opinion the committee valued.

The Session provided the committee a timetable within which it hoped to have a new pastor in place. Richard said,

The Session kind of agreed that Bill was going to step down at the end of ’99 and that it would be a good idea to have somebody in place for three or four months before he stepped down. September the 1<sup>st</sup> is kind of a good time. It’s the start of the school year; it’s just the logical time to do that. And so that was the track we were given to run on. Our goal was to have somebody identified by the first of June of ’99 so the congregation could vote on him, and if he was accepted he would have two or three months to get moved and be in place by the first of September.

Thus, the search committee began meeting in October, 1998.

The profile which the committee formulated for the type of pastor it wanted to pursue had specific areas of emphasis, which the committee was able to agree upon without much difficulty. Jane said that the committee “just didn’t seem to have trouble deciding what the profile would look like.” First, the committee sought a pastor who was consistent with the theology of the PCA and who had specific ministry practices. Second, it wanted a pastor who would be comfortable with Northside’s specific ministry emphases. Third, the committee desired a pastor who would have the personal qualities that would equip him to follow a long-term, popular pastor like Bill.

According to Jane, candidates “had to be Reformed in their doctrine, and all that sort of thing. I mean we would have gone after (a well known Baptist pastor), but he

won't baptize infants, so he was out." Richard mentioned specific areas of ministry in which a candidate needed to be strong:

We wanted someone who had certain characteristics. One, he had to have a personal walk with the Lord. Two, he had to have a real love and knowledge of the Word. We didn't want somebody up there who was a topical preacher, social preacher, seeker-friendly. We wanted somebody to preach the Word. Number three, he had to have a strong interest in and a passion for evangelism, demonstrated by personal evangelism. Not just somebody who says, "Yeah, I'm for evangelism," but doesn't ever lead anybody to the Lord himself.

Jane added that the candidate needed to have a strong interest in foreign missions, consistent with the emphasis of Northside. In addition, he needed to be able to be supportive of the Christian school which is operated under the authority of the Northside Session. Jane said, "You couldn't step into Northside unless you were in favor of all those things, so that kind of narrowed the territory some."

Harris focused upon the qualities the successor pastor would need if he were to be successful in following Bill. He noted that the desire was not to have someone exactly like Bill or exactly opposite him:

I think no one was looking for the opposite of Bill, and no one was looking for a clone. We would like to have had a carbon copy but it isn't out there. Since there's no one like Bill Jeffers we had to come up with someone that we thought could fill the shoes of a godly man. We weren't looking necessarily for a personality fellow; we were looking for the best person.

Finding the best person meant, according to Harris, finding someone with a strong enough personality to weather the challenges of following someone like Bill: "You can't replace Bill - his personality, his humility, and everything, he's unreplaceable. So you've got to find somebody that is strong. A weak person couldn't take it. Clyde Rollins is a strong personality. And consequently he's been successful."

As noted earlier, Bill was not known for his skills related to organizing the church. This primary area of weakness in Bill's ministry impacted the search committee as it sought his replacement. Richard affirmed that one thing the committee saw lacking in Bill that it wanted in his successor was "strong organizational skills. We knew we didn't want a clone. But we wanted something in a little different package." Harris later would question the manner in which Clyde sought to implement more organization in the church, but there was a consensus that it was needed.

The search committee utilized a timeline for its work. The approach of the committee members was to work "backwards" from the time at which they wanted to have a successor pastor in place. Richard said,

One of the first things we did is set a timeline. We wanted somebody in place by September of '99. Then we started working back from there. There are two ways to go in something like this. One is you can start at the beginning and say "Okay, what's the first step, the second step, the third step" and so on to get to where you want to go. My personal feeling is the best place to start is at the end and work your way back. That was my committee assignment, to set a timeline. Okay, we want the person in place September 1<sup>st</sup>, what do we need to do to get him there? The step before that is we've got to present him to the congregation in June. In order to do that the search committee has got to finalize the one that we want by early May. So we just started working back. We were kind of staggered when we looked at that to see how quick we had to move.

The committee was able to narrow down its list of candidates by the first of December and accomplished a desire to have its initial visits with candidates completed by February.

Initially, the committee asked the congregation for nominations for pastoral candidates. Richard said,

It seems to me we got something like sixty or seventy nominations. Some of them were really off the wall, people like Billy Graham, you know. And I don't know if the person was trying to be funny. . . . Bill Gothard, things like that. We quickly narrowed it down to about twenty five. Some of them were still in

seminary so we just kind of tossed those out. We came down to about twenty five we thought were legitimate.

At this point, the committee utilized Bill as a resource. He knew all of the potential candidates and was asked by the committee to call the candidates and ask them if they would be willing to pray about possibly becoming the senior pastor at Northside. As a result of this process, the committee narrowed its list of candidates to ten to twelve men, who were asked to send tapes of three sermons. The sermon tapes then were listened to by committee members. Jane noted that each of these men had preached at Northside over the preceding two years, though no announcement had been made to the congregation that they were pastoral candidates. This was part of the work of the secret transition committee, which had brought in a variety of men to preach over a period of time.

The list then was narrowed to five or six men, whom the committee members went to hear preach. The committee utilized smaller teams of four people to listen to the candidates. Those teams then reported back to the full committee. In some cases, more than one of the smaller committees went at different times to hear the same candidate. One of the candidates whom committees went to hear was Clyde. Though he was known to the Northside congregation from previous interactions and from having preached there, his contact with the committee was not initially planned. Richard and his team had planned to hear another man whom he thought was a candidate and who lived in the same city as Clyde. When Richard made contact with the man, he learned that the man had told Bill that he did not want to be considered for the position at Northside. However, Bill had not communicated this to the committee. Richard and his team already had motel reservations and non-refundable airline tickets for their trip. At the last moment,

Richard contacted Clyde to see if he would mind if his sub-committee came to hear him preach that weekend. Clyde was open to this, though he did not consider himself a candidate for the Northside vacancy. The team's plan was to utilize him as a resource for counsel regarding their pastoral search. Richard said,

The four of us had lunch with him, had a great discussion with him. He was giving us advice. He felt like it was critical that Bill stay on at the church in some capacity, and said "don't get anybody, bring in anybody, that would be intimidated by Bill and want to get him out of there. I just think it's so important to keep Bill there so we want somebody who loves Bill and admires Bill and would want Bill, not somebody who wants to get rid of Bill." So I came back and reported that to the search committee. And they had gone out to see different pastors. And just listening to all the people talk, everybody would agree the strong consensus was Clyde was the guy we really wanted, if we could get him. So, we decided we would send another team there, just to get their view. So another team went. They came back and they were really impressed with Clyde and what he was doing.

After a third group from the committee went to visit Clyde, he was asked to come and meet with the search committee. Richard said, "By this time we're recruiting. After that Clyde did agree that he would come on just a fact-finding trip - said he couldn't imagine leaving this church, but said he wasn't going to presume he wouldn't pray about it, either." Regarding the committee's ability to keep the visit confidential, Richard said, "I'll say to this day the people on the search committee did a good job. To my knowledge it never got out (that Clyde was visiting)."

Clyde and his wife, Laurie, met with all the search committee members at dinner, and he asked them what they were looking for in a pastor. Richard said, "He was interviewing us as much as we were interviewing him." Clyde and Laurie agreed to pray and fast for three days. During this time, the committee met, conducted a straw poll, and unanimously agreed that Clyde was their choice as the new pastor, should he be willing to come. Richard was absent from this meeting but was strongly in favor of having

Clyde as Northside's pastor. A few days later, Clyde telephoned the committee chairman and informed him that he and Laurie believed God would have them come to serve at Northside, if the committee so desired.

Richard said, "We had agreed at the very beginning that we would never take a name to the congregation unless we had at least fourteen (votes). We agreed that we would not have to be unanimous, but we were not going to take 'eight to six' votes to the congregation. We had to be a little bit more of a consensus than that. So when I heard that (unanimity) I said 'That's the Lord's hand.'"

Although Clyde was already known to the Northside congregation, he was officially introduced as the pastoral candidate via a video presentation of him and his wife. The congregation then voted unanimously to call him as its pastor. This completed a search process which took approximately seven months to complete and allowed the committee to have the new pastor in place by the early summer, as it had desired.

All three committee members noted the role of prayer amid their search process. While efforts in prayer were not highly organized, they nevertheless took place. Harris put it simply, saying, "We prayed and prayed and searched and searched and we got a man of God." Jane mentioned once a quarter prayer meetings the church held during the work of the search committee. She also said, "I've heard of churches who prayed for a year before they even took the first step after that. We did not do that, but we did pray a lot." Richard felt there was a connection between the prayers of the committee and the way different elements came together for Clyde to accept the call to Northside. He said,

There was always a strong emphasis on prayer. We always opened our committee meetings with prayer, closed with prayer and committed individually to pray as we went through the process. . . . And I'm convinced that the Lord had His hand in that process with those unusual circumstances the way we got Clyde. I wasn't

supposed to go see Clyde. I was supposed to go see somebody else. That just had to be the Lord's hand, moving in some unusual circumstances. The fact that the committee was unanimous, the fact that Clyde felt led. I mean that was really unusual.

He also noted that Clyde would have been unable make a move at an earlier time because of some circumstances related to Laurie's parents. However, he said "The Lord worked all those things out and I think that was through prayer."

According to Jane, once the committee decided upon Clyde as their choice for the successor pastor, it did so with a high level of confidence that they had located the right candidate. This high level of confidence developed in part because some committee members had been cautious in coming to the decision to recommend Clyde. Jane said,

I think a couple of the guys (on the committee) felt like someone might be pushing Clyde, so they were even more careful and defensive. They were not going to let anyone lay this out ahead of time. They weren't going to rubber stamp someone. They felt like someone, somewhere, was pushing Clyde. I don't know if they knew who, and I don't know if anybody was. They just felt like some people might be setting him up. Therefore they were being extra careful not to rubber stamp someone's previously made choice.

However, once they were convinced Clyde was the right choice, they were willing to recommend him *even if* someone was pushing for him to be the successor pastor.

Clyde appeared to enjoy an initial, though brief, "honeymoon" period with the congregation. Harris said that Clyde "was received initially great. . . . He was received very strong - people loved him, liked him." Attendance increased substantially during Clyde's first three months as pastor. His preaching style contrasted Bill's and this factor, coupled with his newness following a long-term pastor, contributed significantly to the increased attendance. Richard said, "People (were) just curious to hear the new preacher. It was exciting. His preaching style was so different. Bill was kind of quiet, calm, and very soft. Clyde is very energetic. He's all over the place. He brought energy."

However, Harris noted that very soon “dissident groups started to find fault (with Clyde). He didn’t do this, he didn’t do that.” There were significant changes that Clyde initiated that brought dissatisfaction with members of the congregation. One of these related to staff members who had remained after Bill’s tenure was over. Jane said,

The problem is that you walk into any church, especially one this size with the staff, and there are some guys you need to get rid of. And he did. So it was hard. The fans of those people didn’t like that. But there were some things that just had to be done.

Clyde also initiated significant changes in the role of Session members. Jane said,

He had lots of ideas, and they redid the whole structure of the Session. The Session was doing diaconal duties. He said “We’re through with that.” The deacons do the work of the deacons and the elders are shepherds of the congregation. So he took lots of those committees away from the Session and put them under the Diaconate. He went through this step by step and through the proper channels. And there was a big turnover. Some of the guys who were elders realized they should be deacons, and they went back to the Diaconate. It was real exciting to see. These are some of the things I loved about the way he did things. He set up executive committees to handle stuff.

However, the loss of control or power displeased some of the Session members. Jane said,

Some of the guys got upset from the beginning, because they had so much control, and they wanted control. . . . Some of those guys liked making those decisions, so they got their noses out of joint, and there were some letters passed around that should have never been passed around, and it got pretty bad there for a while. So, if the honeymoon period lasted more than a week - I’m not sure there really was one. Some of those elders gave Clyde a really, really hard time. And some left, but there are some that are still here, but we’re hoping they don’t ever get back on the Session again.

While this reorganization was needed, it was Harris’s opinion that Clyde would have been wiser not to emphasize, particularly in his preaching, the aspect of organization to such a great extent during the early months of his ministry at Northside. He said,



The one thing I think Clyde did wrong when he came is that he was so interested in having the church organized, he preached from the pulpit organization too much. People out in the pews, they didn't need to know about organization. The Session could organize it. But he came up with slogans for organization and so forth. And a lot of people thought, "well he's not preaching what I want to hear, he's not talking to my heart, he's talking to my mind about how we are going to get the church organized." And I thought that was an error. But I think what he did was he took the advice of one or two elders who were real interested in organizing the church; smart, young, yet I think they gave him some wrong advice. . . . I would have told him, "Go on and preach to the heart right from the start as a minister to a minister and let the Session do the organization."

Dissatisfaction with Clyde also arose among some members because of his personality and particularly how it impacted his preaching style. His style was much more loud and animated than Bill's, leading to the charge that he was not humble. This, according to Harris, is not correct: "Old Clyde is a 'blunder buster', you know. He's strong and loud. Bill was quiet and sweet. . . . I know Clyde Rollins and I know he's a humble man. He doesn't portray that but he's a humble man. He loves the Lord." Richard added, "There's some people who feel like Clyde's got a big ego. And I tell them they're confusing personality with character. Bill was so quiet, Clyde is flamboyant and an extrovert, and people take that as a big ego." Thus, there is a public persona that, according to the committee members, is misinterpreted and that has led some people to dislike Clyde.

The content of Clyde's preaching differs from that of Bill also. Some persons are simply overwhelmed at the amount of information he provides in one sermon. Jane said, somewhat tongue in cheek, that Bill "would have his three points and a poem. And Clyde would have his seventeen life take-aways after having fourteen points. . . . But that's overwhelming for some people. They would give anything to have three points and a poem. They can take something home." Richard said that after a short time

people got frustrated with Clyde's preaching. He tends to feed you with a fire hose and he's so smart, sometimes hard to follow. You try to take notes and he's all over the place so people got frustrated. I can't put my finger on it. One thing that I have suggested to him is to shorten it down a little bit. He'll preach for forty-five minutes and it just wears you out.

Harris also said that the "dissidents" in the congregation feel Clyde as not as evangelistic in his preaching, compared to Bill. In his sermons, Bill always offered the opportunity for those in the congregation to pray to receive Christ. Harris said that in contrast, Clyde's philosophy is that if Jesus is lifted up in preaching, God will draw people to faith in Him.

Probably the most significant change initiated by Clyde upon his arrival was discontinuing a contemporary worship service that was started a few years earlier while Bill was pastor. Clyde had made it known to the search committee that he wanted to have one worship service with a "blended" style of worship. Richard said,

I would say over the first three years we lost a thousand members. Interesting thing is we also gained a thousand. So we've held right where we were. . . . Now, why did we lose them? The main reason we lost them is we did away with our contemporary service.

The service had attendance of around twelve hundred people, most of whom were new to the congregation. However, according to Richard, Clyde had said, "My personal philosophy is it's not a good idea to have two different kinds of worship services; it splits your congregation." The Session voted almost unanimously to discontinue the contemporary service, but Richard said there

wasn't a strong consensus in the Session to do away with the contemporary worship service and that really caused problems with a lot of people. (People said) "I don't understand, we love that service, my children love to come to church for the first time, my teenagers, you know, they love the worship." That feel good type of thing.

Two other elements - each unrelated to Clyde's personal ministry - led some people to depart the church. There was "weakness," as Richard described it, in the youth program of the church. Some parents felt their high school children were not receiving sufficient teaching from the youth program of the church and went elsewhere. He also noted that "we've had a couple of churches start up (in the community) that are really good - contemporary service, charismatic type services that got a lot of people." While these factors were not caused by Clyde, it is possible that he receives some of the blame for the church losing members because of these factors, since the departures occurred under his leadership.

There has been dissatisfaction with Clyde at different levels, but for the most part it appears that he has weathered the difficult times he faced. Harris said that on the part of the congregation at large,

at first it was exciting - a new pastor! But then people started picking you apart. Some people. I can't even give you a percent. I'd almost say, "Good riddance." I knew a bunch of them and I'm glad they left. . . . So right at first it was total acceptance and then dissidents arose. But they've gone now and in my opinion everything is going well.

Both Harris and Richard noted that there was some strong opposition to Clyde that surfaced on the Session. However, the opposition now appears to be in the past. Harris said, "There were some on the Session who were dissidents, would bring up certain issues. I'm not on the Session now but I'd imagine it's going smooth." Richard echoed these comments about the Session, saying,

We had more controversy on the Session the second and third year Clyde was there than all of the thirty years I'd been on the Session. We had elders that were accusing Clyde of not preaching the word. One in particular we threatened to kick out of the church. He resigned. . . . Fortunately the last year and a half, two years has been really great.

Harris mentioned the dissatisfaction of one search committee member with Clyde's ministry but said, "He needs to repent." This individual apparently held a close relationship to some of the "dissidents" mentioned by Harris and was influenced by them to oppose Clyde's ministry. However, he is the only member of the committee that Harris believes has been in opposition to Clyde.

Thus, part of the congregation, including the three committee members, is well satisfied with Clyde and his ministry. Almost one fourth of the congregation has joined since he came and clearly considers him to be "their" pastor. However, part of the congregation would like him to be different in particular areas of ministry. For the most part, those who have remained but do not have great appreciation for Clyde hold their views in a way that is not contentious. Those who have opposed him in more contentious or public ways have been confronted by the church's leadership. The Session is clearly supportive of Clyde. As Jane said, "Maybe the honeymoon is just now starting."

Clyde also appears to relate well to the church staff members who have been retained. Most of these individuals served during Bill's tenure. Jane said that "Clyde has done everything he can to keep people, and if they're not in the right slot, to find the right slot for them, or make a slot for them." Clyde conducts annual staff and spouse retreats which have been helpful in building relationships among the various staff members.

Search committee members affirmed that Clyde has proven consistent with the assessment they made of him throughout the search process. Jane remembered his being very straightforward about things he liked and didn't like and about what his goals would be for the Northside congregation if he became pastor. She said,

I don't think he ever intended to pull anything over our eyes. Just like the blended worship, he was right up front (saying) "this is how I would do it." And

he did. I think if there were any surprises, it's because we weren't listening or paying attention, or we didn't ask him.

While Clyde has noticeable differences from Bill in personality and ministry, most of what he has sought to implement was laid out to the search committee before he came. Thus, it appears that overall the “match” between Clyde and the Northside congregation has been a good one. This is the case not only between him and newer members of the congregation but between him and more long-time members of the church. Jane said, “The old guard who are still here have stayed because we like him and we’re going to be supportive of him. We’ve chosen to love two pastors - you can do that!” The commitment of the more long-term members of the church as well as that of the members who have joined since Clyde became pastor appear to provide him solid support in his ministry.

The Session did not establish any guidelines or restrictions for Bill with regard to conducting weddings and funerals in the congregation. Richard indicated that Bill has conducted some funerals by himself and some with Clyde, and that Clyde has had no problem with this. Harris credited both men with making this shared responsibility work: “It just takes two men, strong men that can handle having the old pastor around, and the old pastor being humble enough.” It should be remembered that Clyde insisted that Bill remain at the church in some capacity. Thus he would have expected to share some of the key events in the lives of the members of the congregation.

Replacing a pastor was a unique process for the Northside congregation, given Bill's long tenure. However, the lack of experience in a search for a new pastor did not seem to be problematic for the committee. Jane affirmed the high quality of the leadership of the committee (its chairman and others) as a factor in helping the process to

go well. She noted that the business background of many of the men aided them in getting the committee organized and started in its work. Richard said the search “just seemed like one of the things we knew would have to be sooner or later.” He said the committee simply went to work and sought to accomplish its task and that things proceeded without controversy.

The transition at Northside has had mixed results. There has been a loss of many members and some dissatisfaction with Clyde’s style of ministry. Yet, there also has been a large influx of new members and Clyde now has a solid core of support from the leadership and the congregation at large. In the long run, the transition has worked. Richard attributes this to three primary factors: Bill’s personal humility, particularly in his relationship with Clyde; Clyde’s honoring of Bill; and the Session’s steadfast support of Clyde, even amid opposition he faced on the part of some elders.

In regard to Bill’s relationship with Clyde, Richard said, “If somebody came to Bill and complained about the way Clyde was doing something, Bill wouldn’t listen to that. He would not go along with that. He would always defer to Clyde.” Regarding the honor Clyde has paid to Bill, Richard said, Clyde “just went out of his way to honor Bill and never say anything like, ‘We aren’t going to do it that way anymore, that’s the way Bill did it.’” According to Jane, not all candidates the search committee approached would have taken the same approach. She said, “I don’t think there’s any candidate on the list that would have honored Bill the way Clyde has. I talked with one. I think he would have felt very threatened. He said some things that made me think if Bill stayed around here, this guy would have had certain limits to what (Bill could do).”

The Session's support of Clyde was illustrated by a situation Richard shared from a Session meeting:

At one of the Session meetings we were debating about these elders who were causing trouble. I had just read the week before in the first chapter of Joshua that transition. So I got up and read that to the Session. . . . The thing that jumped out at me is that Moses was the first leader of the nation of Israel and he led for forty years. Bill was our first leader and was here forty years. Moses was the most humble man that ever lived. That was Bill. When it came time for a transition . . . Joshua went to the leaders and they said "We will follow you just as we followed Moses and anyone who refuses to follow you will be put to death."

Richard is not alone on the Session in his support of Clyde's leadership. He indicated he was representative of a sizable majority of elders on the Session. Their support helped Clyde endure the opposition against him on the part of some leaders and provided an importance expression of confidence in his long-term leadership of the church.

The committee members' evaluation of the committee itself was very positive. Richard felt the diversity of the committee was very good and believed the fact that its members were elected by the congregation and not simply appointed by the Session was an asset. This separated the process from the Session (though there were Session members on the committee) and helped streamline the process. He also thought it was wise for the committee to utilize teams of four people to listen to prospective pastors in their home churches. This helped make the process less cumbersome. In terms of the overall search process, Richard said, "I can't think of a single thing I'd change to do all over again. . . . The key thing to me was what the Lord did, not what we did. He just took the structure that we set in place and then maneuvered us into what He wanted us to do."

Each committee member offered a very positive evaluation of his or her own personal experience on the committee. Harris particularly praised the chairman of the

committee, saying, "I can't give you the exact facts of how the leader led but he was a good leader. I know everybody was pleased. He was wise. I think that's a pretty important role." Harris also emphasized the importance of having mature, unselfish, church-focused Christians to serve on a search committee. He also highlighted the blessing of the harmony the committee enjoyed throughout its work, as well as its fun, more light-hearted times together. Richard referred to his participation on the committee as "an exhilarating experience, an interesting experience" which he would participate in again if needed. Jane echoed this sentiment saying, "I would do it again. I don't think I'll have the opportunity to do it again. I hope I don't. I hope Clyde will be here to bury me. I enjoyed it. I loved being in on what was going on." Even though the results of the committee's work were somewhat mixed, there is a sense of satisfaction with the job that was done and a confidence that God superintended the committee in the various phases of its work.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study focused on the process of the transition of pastors in PCA churches in which the previous pastor had served for ten or more years. The problem addressed was the lack of research regarding the experience of congregations that have been through these transitions. The study was composed of interviews of elders and pastoral search committee members from three PCA congregations. Research questions dealt with:

1. How elders prepared for transition prior to the long-term pastor's leaving.
2. What elders and pastoral search committees did once the long-term pastor left the congregation.
3. What insights elders and search committees offer regarding the ministry of the new pastor.
4. The evaluation elders and search committees offer in light of their experience.

In some congregations, the transition from a long-term pastor to his successor goes well. In some churches it goes poorly, while in others, the outcome is mixed. I investigated congregations that reflected this variety of transition experience. In my study of Immanuel, I gathered information that could be interpreted to mean that the transition did not go well. Yet, I believe the best overall assessment is that the transition at this church was successful. At IPC, a close relationship developed between the departing and successor pastors that continues today. In addition, though there was some turnover in membership after the new pastor arrived, much of it was consistent with the historic pattern of the church resulting from its location. The Session and the church as a

whole have accepted the new pastor. The initial difficulties he faced did not mean the transition was ineffective.

Clearly the transition went poorly for Forest Hills Presbyterian Church. In contrast, the transition at Northside Presbyterian Church (NPC) had mixed results. Though both Immanuel and Northside had to adjust to different personalities and preaching styles, a far greater adjustment was required at Northside. Also, there was greater loss of membership directly attributable to the new pastor at Northside than at Immanuel.

In two of the congregations a close relationship developed between the former and successor pastors. Their relationship greatly enhanced the pastoral transition. Each man displayed a spirit of humility. Both were willing to honor one another. The successor was not intimidated by the church's memory of the predecessor or by his ongoing relationship to the congregation. In addition, the predecessor was willing to relinquish control in the congregation and to allow his successor to lead.

The pastoral changes in the congregations studied worked best when there was a specific transition plan or committee in place well before the long-term pastor resigned. Communication and prayer among the departing pastor and his elders and congregation also made the transitions more effective. In the most problematic succession of pastors, no transition plan was in place. No preparation occurred other than asking the long-term pastor to begin seeking another place of ministry.

### **Conclusions and Discussion of Findings**

I first will offer some general conclusions which apply to the three congregations looked at as a group. Then I will offer some specific conclusions related to each

congregation. Following the conclusions, I will set forth recommendations which relate to individuals or groups involved in the transition following a long-term pastor.

### General Conclusions from the Study

The case studies that were the focus of this dissertation lead to several general conclusions. The first conclusion is the need to embrace the basic reality that these types of transitions are difficult. They *can* go well, but they will not go perfectly. The successor pastor inevitably will face opposition, possibly from among his elders, and most certainly from the congregation at large. As seen in all three congregations from this study, a church will likely lose members. These losses may occur because members were loyal to the former pastor and cannot function in the church without his presence. They may occur because members have strong disagreements with the views or leadership direction of the new pastor. Or they may take place because he simply does not meet their preferences regarding personality or style. In such losses, the problem is not *necessarily* with the successor pastor. In addition, such attrition sometimes will occur in the “waves” that were mentioned by the elders from Immanuel Presbyterian Church.

A second conclusion regarding transitions after a long-term pastor is though they are difficult, they are not necessarily doomed to failure. The ultimate results of these changes can be quite positive. Conventional wisdom may affirm that the successor to a long-term pastor is inevitably a “sacrificial lamb.” But this does not have to be the case. In the Immanuel and Northside congregations this phenomenon did not occur, even though successors followed beloved predecessors.

It is quite possible that the congregation will gain new members under the leadership of the successor pastor. These persons might not have joined under the

predecessor. Northside Presbyterian Church experienced this type of growth. The successor can lead the church in fresh directions for ministry. In addition, he can work toward developing his relationships with the long-time members of the church and can solidify his position as *their* pastor.

The third conclusion about transitions following a long-term pastor is that initial difficulties for the new pastor do not mean that the process is a failure. At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Tom Evans endured initial opposition, yet now has a stable situation. The opposition he faced was not due to a faulty transition process. At Northside Presbyterian Church, Clyde Rollins did not face opposition immediately, but it came fairly early in his ministry as he led specific changes in the congregation. However, today he continues to have a solid base of support among his officers and congregation. Though the results of this transition are mixed, they certainly cannot be termed a failure.

#### Specific Conclusions Regarding Each of the Three Congregations

Each congregation worked with a unique set of dynamics that was composed of various elements. These elements included the personal qualities and ministries of the long-term pastor, who was on the Session at the time of the pastoral search, and who was on the search committee. The results of each transition were different and the processes each congregation went through in arriving at those results were different.

#### *Immanuel Presbyterian Church*

This congregation survived a difficult search process to secure a pastor who appears to be on his way toward a long tenure. Glenn Mabry, in conjunction with the Session, did a good job of preparing the congregation for the transition through

communication and prayer. He made it known very early to the administrative committee of his Session that he was considering another ministry. He requested that these elders pray for him. These were solid initial steps in preparation for his departure. Communicating his consideration of a change to the entire Session took out any surprise element in relation to the other elders. And it allowed the Session to begin psychologically preparing for him to leave. The same phenomenon occurred when the congregation was informed that Glenn was considering another position and asked to pray about it. This brought the members of the congregation into the process instead of keeping them uninformed as to what was happening. It also began to prepare them psychologically for the pastoral transition.

Regarding the work of the pastoral search committee at Immanuel, the size of the committee may have been too large for it to function well. Yet, the size of the search committee at Northside Presbyterian Church was even larger, and it was able to function in a manageable way. As was noted by Nolan, the matter of logistics in a meeting room was a problem for Immanuel's committee. This may have been insurmountable given the physical space available to the committee.

The greater problem for Immanuel's committee was the widely diverse views which existed among groups of its members. Those views impacted perspectives of the members regarding desired characteristics for the successor pastor and for the philosophical direction of the church. The majority of the committee functioned well in holding its ground against the minority. This was a key in keeping the church from going in a radically different direction than it had gone for thirty years. Change in a church is inevitable, but the change that the minority desired would have been destructive and

unwarranted. The minority did not pursue the peace or the purity of the church. The majority are to be commended for not yielding on key theological and philosophical issues, even amid a long, tedious search process.

The only way anyone could have prevented the minority from attempting to advance its agenda would have been for the Session to have appointed the search committee. However, the Session did not appear to have been sensitive to its congregation and the agendas people were ready to pursue. They also were not aware of the leadership vacuum that existed in the congregation that some people were ready to fill once the long-term pastor left the congregation. The Session could have also taken stronger action against those who were antagonistic against Tom Evans early in his ministry. However, individual elders are to be commended for the support they provided to Tom as he faced great opposition from a minority during his early days of ministry at IPC.

#### *Forest Hills Presbyterian Church*

Of the three congregations studied, Forest Hills had the least successful transition after a long-term pastor. The conclusions regarding this congregation highlight mistakes to avoid in the transition following a pastor of long tenure.

At Forest Hills the entire process suffered from a severe lack of preparation. Even though the Session allowed the long-term pastor, John, to find another place of ministry before he left, there was no indication anything was being done by the elders to prepare for the transition. When John eventually announced his resignation, it was a total surprise to most people in the church. On the whole, the Session seemed to have little understanding of the impact of long-term pastor on a congregation. Their desire for

someone opposite the long-term pastor showed a lack of awareness of the congregation's need for someone who could "connect" with them as the previous pastor had done. Art, a ruling elder, showed sensitivity to the grieving process the congregation was facing. However, he indicated that the Session as a whole was not particularly sensitive to this phenomenon.

The Forest Hills Session also interfered with the work of the pastoral search committee when it pushed its members to recommend a particular candidate. It placed a great amount of unnecessary pressure on the committee to reach a decision before some members were ready to do so. The Session would have served the committee members more effectively had it allowed them to do what they were charged to do, even if they took a long time. At the same time, both the search committee and the Session were somewhat naïve regarding the amount of time a quality search might take.

The committee's sentiment, reflected by Ben, is that it had been through a marathon-type search. He agreed with someone who said, "Do you think we took so much time coming to this that in the end we were just tired of the whole thing?" In reality, the committee had only been at work for six months. It may have been a hard, busy, pressure-filled six months. However, searches can take longer. The search committee at Immanuel Presbyterian Church was in existence for one and a half years. The belief that the Forest Hills committee had been through a "marathon" search showed a lack of experience on its part. It also showed an unrealistic view of the search process. Its members and Session members struggled with impatience.

Both the Session and the search committee at Forest Hills failed to take into account the impact of the difference in the personalities of the former and successor

pastors. Both groups also suffered greatly from a reaction to some of the weaknesses of the long-term pastor. They clearly sought a person with opposite characteristics from the previous pastor. They achieved this, to the detriment of the pastoral transition and the congregation.

Art was the only one on the search committee concerned for Reformed theology. It does not appear he was justified in voting against Will on the grounds of his theology. Will passed his Presbytery examination and even his answers to Art's theological questions were satisfactory to Art in terms of their content. However, Art likely was justified in voting against Will on the grounds of his view of the pastorate, which was very autocratic in nature.

Ben was quite astute regarding his assessments of Will and of a key mistake made by the committee. First, Ben felt Will was not well-suited for the pastorate. Second, in its recommendation of Will, the committee violated one of its key requirements for the person whom they would call: pastoral experience. While the committee may not have been able to discern Will's suitability for pastoral ministry, it clearly knew his experience level. Calling an experienced pastor would not have guaranteed a successful transition at Forest Hills. However, calling an inexperienced pastor with this mix of gifts and personality, in this set of circumstances, almost guaranteed the transition would not work.

The Forest Hills committee seemed to work well together and with a good spirit, even in their disagreements. Each member attempted to work with the situation that existed once Will was called, even if he or she had voted against his call. In addition, those who voted against his call did not seem to have an "I told you so" attitude after



things did not work out. Their attitude was one of sadness that the transition was not successful.

I believe the transition at Forest Hills could have worked if a more humble, gentle, pastor-teacher had been selected to succeed John Rutledge. The transition would have faced normal challenges. However, a long-term ministry could have been established had a more careful process been followed.

#### *Northside Presbyterian Church*

The management quality of the pastoral transition at Northside Presbyterian was somewhat mixed, as were the results of the transition. Some aspects of the transition were handled with great skill, while others were not. Clyde Rollins now has a solid base of support, and God has brought a large number of new members to the congregation. However, as was noted in the findings, at times the process entailed significant conflict resulting from changes instituted by the successor pastor. Conflict also arose because of some basic personal differences between him and his predecessor.

The Session of Northside was well prepared in advance of Bill Jeffers' resignation. The succession plan the secret committee developed, which was later adopted by the Session, took into consideration the details of the transition. Their secrecy, however, ran the risk of alienating elders who were not involved on the committee. Yet, Richard did not indicate that this alienation occurred.

To the best of my knowledge, the Session of Northside allowed the search committee to do its work without interference. While there were elders on the search committee, they functioned wholly as search committee members and not as Session members seeking to manipulate the work of the committee.

The Session could have helped the search committee early in its process by providing clarity as to whether Bill was going to serve on the search committee. This would have alleviated some awkwardness between Jane and Bill as she advised him that the wise course would be that he not serve on the committee.

Of the three search committees studied, the Northside committee functioned most effectively as a group. They demonstrated general harmony regarding the procedures they were to use and the particular candidate who eventually was called as pastor. Their use of smaller teams for visiting pastoral candidates was efficient. This method would be less overwhelming to a congregation receiving a visit from a pastoral search committee than if the entire committee arrived on a Sunday morning.

The committee's timetable was very clear and was followed consistently. They had the advantage of having a pastor still in place while they conducted their work. This alleviated some of the pressure of having to hurry to find someone to fill the pulpit week to week. Yet, I question what the committee members would have done if they had not secured a new pastor as quickly as they did. Would they have continued their search, or would they have settled for a second choice who might have become an "unintentional interim pastor?" Thankfully, they did not have to deal with this issue.

The pastoral search committee did not seem to adequately weigh the potential impact on the congregation caused by the difference in the personalities of Bill Jeffers and Clyde Rollins. The committee was not seeking a "clone" of Bill and did not mind these differences. They knew the differences well and still unanimously recommended Clyde to the congregation. However, the committee may have underestimated the difficulty some members of the congregation would have in accepting Clyde's

personality, which was in great contrast to Bill's, and led to the accusation that Clyde was not humble.

Also, from the interviews conducted, it appears the Northside Session did not adequately measure what the reaction would be to dropping the congregation's contemporary worship service. The impact of this decision was likely discussed at the sessional level. However, the Session knew when Clyde came that he wanted to discontinue the service, and the Session quickly approved this action. The heavy numerical losses seemed to overwhelm the Session and congregation.

The transition in this congregation provides an excellent model in terms of how a long-term pastor and his successor pastor should relate to each other. Clyde wanted Bill to stay involved in the congregation. On the other hand, Bill would not allow others to speak with him about Clyde in a critical way. Though the men had different personalities and somewhat different approaches to ministry, they approached each other with mutual humility. Through this they ministered to each other and to the congregation and helped the effectiveness of the pastoral transition.

### **Recommendations**

There are several recommendations regarding the pastoral transition process that can be made in light of the experiences of the churches studied. I first will provide general recommendations regarding transitions after a long-term pastor. Then I will set forth some specific recommendations to particular individuals or groups involved in these transitions.

## General Recommendations

One general recommendation pertains to whether particular duties are assigned to Sessions or to pastoral search committees. In each of the congregations studied, the search committee formulated the pastoral profile which was provided by the PCA's denominational offices. In addition, the committee also formulated the congregational profile if one was utilized. However, one search committee had some of its greatest difficulty formulating the pastoral profile. Another search committee found the profile itself helpful, but it spent a vast amount of time determining what type of pastor it should seek. The determination of the specific pastoral qualities needed by the church was a source of much division among these two committees.

The work of search committees would be more efficient if Sessions would formulate the pastoral profile before committees begin their searches. Search committees then could *begin* with their actual searches and pursue candidates who fit within the general parameters of the profile established by the Session. This practice also retains the Session in the primary leadership role in the congregation.

While the congregational profile was not a particular matter of controversy for the search committees in the congregations studied, this profile also is best left in the hands of the Session. Normally a congregational profile should not be used to determine the future philosophical direction of the ministry. Rather, it should be used to clarify the existing philosophical bent of the ministry. If for some reason this tool is to be used to determine a new direction in ministry philosophy, this is the responsibility of the Session, not a pastoral search committee.

One issue that arose in each of the churches studied related to the body to which the search committee should make its recommendation. Should it make its recommendation to the Session or to the congregation? The committees at Northside and Immanuel reported directly to the congregation (though Tom Evans had met with the Session of Immanuel). The Session of Forest Hills first gave at least some form of approval to the pastoral candidate before his name was presented to the congregation. However, having the search committee report directly to the congregation is clearly the practice affirmed by the PCA's *Book of Church Order (BCO)*. It states, "The pulpit committee shall, after consultation and deliberation, recommend *to the congregation* a pastoral candidate who, in its judgment, fulfills the Constitutional requirements of that office and is most suited to be profitable to the spiritual interests of the congregation."<sup>216</sup> This alleviates having the Session become a search committee of its own.

Certainly a candidate should meet with the Session as he begins to have interaction with the congregation. The Session and candidate need a level of comfort with each other before the candidate comes to serve as the church's pastor. However, the recommendation of the committee should be made to the congregation in order to be consistent with the PCA's form of government.

An additional recommendation regards the makeup of the pastoral search committee. At the Forest Hills congregation, Shirley could not recall anyone on the search committee who had served in that capacity before. To my knowledge, no one on the Immanuel or Northside committees had been involved in a search for a senior pastor. When a long-term pastor leaves, a church will not have searched for a new pastor for a

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<sup>216</sup> *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 6th ed. (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2003), chapter 20-2, emphasis mine.

considerable length of time. Many, if not most people in the congregation, will have no experience in a pastoral search. However, it is possible that some members will have served on a search committee in previous congregations. While these individuals may be less known to the congregation, their previous experience could be of great benefit to the search committee as it seeks to replace a long-term pastor. Consideration should be given to nominating them to serve on the committee or to appointing them to the committee if the Session is allowed to do so. Another option would be to have these persons serve in a consulting role to the committee, even if they are not voting members.

A final general recommendation relates to the unanimity with which a pastoral search committee should recommend a candidate to the congregation. At Immanuel and Northside, where results of pastoral transition were good or mixed, the search committee's recommendation was unanimous. At Forest Hills, where the pastoral exchange went poorly, the committee's vote was divided. It is possible that an unanimous committee vote does not reflect true unanimity on the part of its members. This was the case with the Immanuel committee. Also, an unanimous committee recommendation is not a guarantee that the ministry of the next pastor will be successful. However, I believe it is always best for the committee to be unanimous. If such a vote can be taken at face value, it allows the congregation to have a high measure of confidence in the man being recommended. It also allows the new pastor to have the knowledge that those who came to know him best in the search process were firm in their recommendation of him. In addition, committee members are prevented from being able to look back and say, "I knew it would not work" if the transition proves problematic.

### Specific Recommendations

Since there are several individuals or groups involved in the process of a transition after a long-term pastor, there are recommendations appropriate for those parties. The recommendations below are related to those who were the focus of this study. However, they are expanded beyond elders and pastoral search committees to others who are involved in some way in the transition process in PCA congregations.

#### *Recommendations for Departing Pastors*

The long-term pastor can enhance the transition process both before and after he departs his congregation. Before he leaves, he can benefit his church by helping it prepare adequately for his departure. This involves leading his Session to develop a transition or succession plan (the details of such a plan will be listed below). In the case of Northside Presbyterian Church, a group of men in the church initiated the formulation of a transition plan as they realized their pastor was nearing the age of retirement. However, in most congregations - especially if things are proceeding well - it is unlikely that such proactive thinking will exist. This is especially the case when a pastor is not near the age of retirement, or if he has not been at a church for long period of time. The focus will be upon present ministries and issues. Yet, if the pastor has led his elders to prepare a transition plan, it will be in place at that inevitable time when he is led of God to move from his current congregation. The Session and congregation then can proceed in a more orderly manner into the process of pastoral transition. While they may be inexperienced in seeking a pastor, they will have help available because they have been prepared for the process.

It is also the responsibility of the departing pastor to prepare the members of his congregation for the process that awaits them. Literature was referenced earlier in which Ronald Taylor set forth a leader's preparation of his followers for his departure as a principle of effective leadership.<sup>217</sup> He also noted how Jesus prepared His disciples for His departure, affirming this as a model for pastors to follow as they prepare their congregations when they anticipate leaving.<sup>218</sup>

If a pastor is to follow Jesus' model and to provide leadership through preparation for transition, this can be accomplished to some extent through personal interaction. It also can be accomplished through public vehicles of written communication, such as letters and church publications, and through oral communication via sermons or other exhortations. The departing pastor should remind the congregation that it faces a search process that may be lengthy and that needs to be approached prayerfully. He should urge members to embrace the incoming pastor in love, with prayer, and without a critical spirit. This is part of the process of equipping the congregation to move beyond mere change to genuine transition. The more he can involve his members in the process of his departure, the greater the likelihood that an internal adjustment to his leaving eventually will take place.

The departing pastor also must be willing to humbly accept the congregation's actually doing what he encourages its members to do in terms of welcoming and supporting the new pastor. He must not be threatened by the love that is shown to the successor pastor. He should rejoice in the ministry successes of the new pastor. Glenn Mabry at Northside provided an excellent model of how a departing pastor should

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<sup>217</sup> Taylor, "Models for Church Transition," 17.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 6.



respond to the congregation having a new shepherd. His willingness to preach at Tom's installation service demonstrated his willingness to relinquish the mantle of leadership to Tom. He was not threatened by having the focus on Tom rather than upon himself. He served as a colleague in ministry, rather than a competitor, and thus he was a quality example to his former church.

As the long-term pastor prepares to leave his congregation, he also has the responsibility to remind his Session of the possibility of the "waves" of people who will leave after his departure. Both Ken and Brian spoke regarding the exodus of people that occurred at various times in the Immanuel congregation. A similar phenomenon occurred at Northside, with members leaving the church after Clyde's arrival. These departures can be expected. By reminding the Session of this, the pastor equips his elders for changes that commonly occur when a long-term pastor leaves a congregation.

Finally, the long-term pastor has a key responsibility after he leaves his congregation. While he will maintain friendships with members of his congregation, it is vital that he allow the church to function without any interference whatsoever from him. Glenn Mabry at Immanuel and Bill Jeffers at Northside both continued to live in the same city as their successors, and Bill remained involved in the church. However, they did not hinder the ministry of the new pastors. Both men were able to distinguish their new role as *former pastors*.

The former pastor should involve himself in the activities of the congregation only with the approval of the successor pastor (or the Session, if it so requires). He should not discuss the successor pastor with members of the congregation if the purpose is to criticize him. Bill Jeffers provided a fine model in this regard. Even if he disagrees

with the practices or ministry philosophy of the successor pastor, the former pastor should not express his opinions. Just as the congregation needs time to disengage from its former pastor, the former pastor needs time to disengage from the congregation. If a pastor cannot do this, it would be best for him to physically remove himself from the community and to limit his contact with members of the congregation for a period of several months, and perhaps for one year.

### *Recommendations for Successor Pastors*

The successor pastor is in a difficult position in transitions following a long-term pastor. His longevity in his new place of ministry can be impacted positively or negatively by the actions of many other groups or individuals. These include his Session, his congregation (and segments within it), and the departing pastor. Yet, there are specific ways he can contribute toward the success of the transition. In the Immanuel and Northside churches, where the results of transitions were good or at least mixed, successor pastors possessed personal humility. In the Forest Hills congregation, where the transition went poorly, humility was identified as something lacking in the successor pastor. A humble willingness to honor one's predecessor and a humble spirit in relation to the Session and the congregation will help to provide the pastor a good beginning in his new place of ministry. Demonstration of a spirit of dependence on God and His grace for ministry will endear a pastor to his congregation. Members will not agree with him on every issue or appreciate everything about him. Yet often they will tolerate much they do not like because of the character he demonstrates. His character will allow him to build up "relational capital" with his church's members and potentially attain a degree of longevity in the congregation.

In addition to practicing humility in ministry, the pastor succeeding a long-term pastor must be willing to persevere in ministry to be successful. Tom Evans provided an example of such perseverance by withstanding the personal attacks that came upon him early in his tenure. The results of that perseverance were quite positive, as he now enjoys a stable ministry situation. The successor pastor should expect people to leave the congregation at different points after his arrival. Some of these will have been on the “fringe,” while some will have been much more active in membership. He should not expect to be appreciated by everyone in the church. However, if he is willing to faithfully carry out the duties God has assigned him, he can expect to solidify his bond with the members of his congregation who remain. This bonding will occur as he ministers to them and grows in his relationships with them. He also can expect new members to come to the congregation who have an appreciation for the distinctives of his ministry.

The successor pastor inevitably will seek to implement changes with his Session and congregation. Changes will need to be made and should be made. However, he should pursue them purposefully and strategically. The material of several authors referenced earlier supports such an approach. Bridges’ distinction between change and transition was noted earlier: “Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal.”<sup>219</sup> He focused on the psychological aspect of transition and the importance of helping people to let go of an old situation to which they have become accustomed. Kotter’s emphasis on helping people through the psychological elements involved in a change was also noted. The work of Heifetz and Linsky was referenced in which they said “people do not resist

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<sup>219</sup> Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 3.

change per se. People resist loss.”<sup>220</sup> These authors provide wisdom to the successor pastor regarding the manner in which he seeks changes in his church. The new pastor should lead the Session and congregation beyond mere change to genuine heart transition. In order for this to occur, he must convey the Scriptural rationale for doing things in a different way. Also, he normally should not quickly thrust something new upon his elders and congregation if he desires it to be inwardly, psychologically accepted. Otherwise, he has made a change in an element of the congregation’s life without a true transition to that element.

Heifetz’s and Linsky’s distinction between a mere technical change in a procedure and a change which is internalized is applicable here. It relates to the way in which a successor pastor seeks to implement changes in his congregation. Particularly with his Session, a new pastor should present a concept gradually. If a change is thrust upon a Session or congregation too quickly, they may resist such changes because they feel a part of the church’s life is being taken away.

However, if a change can be explained to elders and if they are then given time to reflect upon it, there is a greater possibility they will internalize and accept it. A new strategy, philosophy, or ministry structure can be presented informally at first with a few elders to ascertain whether it might meet with approval. Then the concept can be presented to the whole Session for their consideration without discussion or vote. After the elders have had an opportunity to digest the concept, it can be discussed more formally. This gradual process allows a change to be internalized by the elders rather than imposed on them by the new pastor. The pastor leads them to transition rather than forcing them to change. The new concept can then be presented to the congregation via

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<sup>220</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 11.

various vehicles of communication if needed. If it is a change in ministry practice, it may be wise to implement it on a gradual basis. Circumstances will determine how quickly to implement a change in order for genuine psychological transition to take place.

### *Recommendations for Church Sessions*

The recommendations for church Sessions can be divided into two basic categories. First, they relate to how Sessions should expect their congregations to react following the departure of a long-term pastor and how Sessions should respond to these dynamics. Second, they relate to some of the more formal, practical responsibilities Sessions should fulfill to facilitate an effective transition following a long-term pastor.

Sessions should understand that congregations experience a sense of loss and grieve when a long-term pastor leaves. The literature reviewed in this study reflected a tension among authors as to how much attention churches should give to the aspect of grief when a pastor departs his congregation. As was noted, many authors see the grief process as an integral part of a pastoral transition. They compare the experience of churches to the process patients go through when dealing with a terminal illness.

Danielson is representative of those who hold this view when he states, "A congregation and pastor can go through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, resignation, and acceptance just as a person facing death."<sup>221</sup> His viewpoint is particularly applicable to the focus of this study as he states: "The depth and length of grief is likely to be proportional to the length of that (former) pastor's tenure."<sup>222</sup> However, Weese and

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<sup>221</sup> Danielson, "Beating The Odds," 26.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

Crabtree view the focus on grief as an “illness-based” approach which is ineffective and unbiblical.<sup>223</sup>

What is needed in this area is a balance. Grief in congregations *is* a reality following the departure of a beloved long-term pastor. The grief process impacted each of the congregations in this study. In each church, there was an attachment to the departing pastor and a difficulty in “letting go” when he left. Even Weese and Crabtree acknowledge the need to “tend to wounds” that result from the pastor’s leaving.<sup>224</sup> As referenced earlier, Scott and Jaffe affirm, “People are not weak . . . if they experience loss caused by change. This is a normal part of transition.”<sup>225</sup> What Weese and Crabtree desire is that transitions go well. They do not want churches to believe they must inevitably become unstable and ineffective in ministry when a pastor leaves. Yet their desires for good transitions are consistent with acknowledging and experiencing congregational grief. In fact, as pointed out in the work by Oswald, Heath, and Heath, the acknowledgement by congregations of the loss they feel when their pastor departs can help solidify the bond with their new pastor.<sup>226</sup> Going through the grief process gets them ready to embrace the next pastor.

The Immanuel congregation experienced grief at the departure of Glenn Mabry, but their ministries remained strong. Session members sought to ensure the ongoing functioning of the church. There was no dismantling of the ministry structure of the church. In addition, a strong bond eventually developed with Tom Evans. Thus, a

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<sup>223</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, 19-20.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>225</sup> Scott and Jaffe, *Managing Change at Work*, 29.

<sup>226</sup> Oswald, Heath, and Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together*, 76.

congregation can be understood and nurtured amid its grief and yet still be challenged toward spiritual growth, service, and stability.

The grief process of congregations also should impact Sessions as they relate to search committees. When responsible Sessions come to terms with the grief their congregations are facing, they will be less prone to urge search committees to secure a pastor who is a stark contrast to the long-term pastor. The Forest Hills Session violated this principle, to the detriment of the pastoral transition. Some in the congregation had tired of the ministry of John Rutledge and were ready for him to move on. Yet according to Art, many members were grieving upon John's departure, and the Session failed to minister to them. Shirley felt the majority of the congregation would have been happy with a pastor who had characteristics similar to John's along with a few changes in various areas. Instead, amid a time of grief on the part of many in the congregation, the Session ignored the traits of a beloved long-term pastor. They urged the committee to pursue a pastor who contrasted John's personality and ministry. The grieving church then faced a radical adjustment to their new pastor. A more wise course of action is for a Session to encourage the search committee to seek a pastor who is not drastically different from the long-term pastor, but who does possess some of the gifts the congregation needs which the predecessor lacked.

Also, as they understand the grief process congregations are facing, Sessions acting with wisdom will not rush search committees into a quick recommendation. To do so is to not only hinder their work, but to hinder the relationship of the successor pastor with the congregation. Harbin's work cited earlier noted some of the problems of calling a pastor too early. Members may not be able to make an abrupt shift of their primary

affections to a new pastor. In addition, the new pastor may become the victim of the hostile feelings members may still possess as a result of losing their former pastor.<sup>227</sup>

Danielson's study found that churches who had "properly grieved the loss of a beloved pastor seemed more ready to start the process of building trust (with the new pastor)."<sup>228</sup> Following a long-tenured pastor, the congregation needs some time to grieve. An extended period of vacancy may be just what it needs to prepare emotionally for its new pastor.

We should not expect someone to quickly "move on" following the death of a close family member. In the same way, elders should not expect members of their congregations to quickly "move on" following the departure of one to whom they have had a very close spiritual relationship for many years. In his work referenced earlier, Mead affirmed that "when a pastor leaves, many members of the congregation feel as if a member of the family is leaving."<sup>229</sup> Brian related a story of an older woman at Northside who compared the loss of her pastor, Glenn Mabry, with the death of her own husband. It was so difficult for her to deal with that she chose not to attend worship services with the congregation. Ken indicated the congregation went through "all the classic symptoms" of the grieving process when Glenn left. Some members will have deeper and longer experiences of grief than others. Nevertheless, grief is an emotion which Sessions should expect their members to exhibit when their long-term pastor leaves.

As elders seek to assist with the grief process and to facilitate the psychological process of "letting go" during the time of pastoral transition, there are several practical

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<sup>227</sup> Harbin, *After the Pastor Leaves*, 7.

<sup>228</sup> Danielson, "Beating The Odds," 94.

<sup>229</sup> Mead, *Critical Moment of Ministry*, 39.



steps they can take. One step is to involve the congregation in the transition process as early as possible through prayer. The congregation at Immanuel was brought into the process when it was asked to pray for Glenn Mabry as he considered a new ministry position. Not every situation could be discussed with the congregation as openly as this one was. However, when the congregation is involved in praying for the departing pastor at any point in the transition process, it is taken from a position as an outsider and moved into the process.

Another practical step for Sessions to take in responding to their congregations is to acknowledge what members feel at this point in their lives. This can be facilitated by allowing them to express their thoughts through an appropriate venue such as an informal meeting together with the elders. Session members also need to maintain regular times of prayer with the congregation during the interim time. They especially need to involve the church in praying for the search committee throughout its work. This gives the membership a sense of ownership in the process, even though not every person is involved in the active search. The goal of these practical steps is to bring about an inward, psychological embracing of the new pastor when he is found. In this way elders help facilitate the transition's psychological aspect, which is highlighted by Bridges when he distinguishes change and transition. As referenced earlier, he places great importance on helping people let go of a situation to which they have become accustomed. Bridges focuses on guiding people through three phases of transition:

1. Letting go of the old ways.
2. Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational.
3. Coming out of the transition and making a new beginning.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 4-5.

As the Session involves the church in the sequence of events from the departure of the long-term pastor to the arrival of his successor, it leads members through these transition phases. This involvement of membership can move this sequence from a mere change to a true heart transition that is accepted by members of the congregation.

Sessions also need to be alert and prepared for other types of difficulties and negative fallout resulting from a transition after a long-term pastor. Elders should anticipate that some individuals or groups within the church will seek to advance personal agendas when this pastor leaves. As in the case of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, they may pursue opportunities to grasp formal power within the church.

In addition, elders should anticipate that people will leave the church over time after the long-term pastor leaves. This likely will occur both before and after the successor pastor is called. All three congregations studied witnessed some degree of attrition as a result of the change in pastors. A congregation can survive these losses. However, some of them may be painful if they involve people who have been actively involved in ministries of the church. The losses also can be difficult if they involve people who have had close relationships with other members of the congregation.

There are also practical responsibilities which Sessions can carry out to make the transition after a long-term pastor more effective. First of all, as stated above, a transition or succession plan needs to be in place before a pastor departs. In Forest Hills Presbyterian Church, where the transition went very poorly, no transition plan was in place, and apparently nothing regarding the transition had been thought out by the Session. In the congregations where the transitions went well or had mixed results,

careful succession planning had taken place. Since every pastor will leave his congregation someday, Sessions need to prepare for that day.

A sessional transition plan for a church with a long-term pastor could include the following:

- Designation within the Session of a group which the pastor will inform when he is considering another ministry position or contemplating resigning or retiring.
- Commitment on the part of the smaller group and at some later point, on the part of the entire Session, to pray with the pastor regarding a different place of ministry, resignation, or retirement.
- A timetable for communicating the pastor's plans to the congregation should he decide to step down.
- A timetable for the pastor's departure.
- Determination by the Session if it desires to pursue an interim pastor.
- Determination of responsibilities for pulpit supply during the pastoral vacancy.
- Determination regarding restrictions on the departing pastor's ministry with the congregation once he leaves and determination as to whether these decisions will be left up to the successor pastor or whether the Session will set policies ahead of time.
- Development of pastoral and congregational profiles by the Session.
- Designation of the size of the pastoral search committee and its categories for membership (elders, deacons, women in the church, congregation at large, etc.).
- Establishment of how the search committee will report its recommendation.
- Election of the search committee by the congregation.
- Scheduling of an informal meeting to update the congregation on where the church is in its life, to allow the congregation to express any grief it may feel at the loss of its pastor, and to pray.
- Scheduling of ongoing updates of the congregation from the pastoral search committee.

- Scheduling of regular times for prayer for the church, the Session, and the pastoral search committee during the pastoral vacancy.

A plan might not include all of these elements. In addition, some of the elements of this plan could be formulated at various points throughout the transition, rather than before it occurs. However, some of the elements should be in place before a pastor even considers leaving his present congregation. The goal of this plan is not simply to prepare for a change of pastors, but for a transition in the life of the congregation.

An additional responsibility of the Session is to stand with the successor pastor against unjust opposition, such as that faced by pastor Tom Evans at Immanuel. This does not mean that elders must agree with the pastor on every issue. Rather, they must be willing to resist mean-spirited attacks and the pursuit of personal agendas. Tom benefited from elders who were willing to stand firm against ungodly behavior from an opposition group. While a Session is not required to promise their agreement with the successor pastor on every idea or goal he has for the church, they should be willing to come to his defense against spiritual misconduct. Elders should be ready to resist these efforts and take appropriate action and even exercise church discipline if it is warranted.

One of the greatest keys to an effective transition after a long-term pastor relates to the leadership of the Session. There is a tremendous need for mature leadership to exist on the part of a church's elder leadership. In Forest Hills Presbyterian Church, where the transition went most poorly, mature leadership was lacking. This was apparent from the push for a quick decision from the search committee, the disregard for the previous pastor's positive qualities, and the equivocation of "leadership" with a certain type of personality. At Immanuel Presbyterian Church and Northside Presbyterian Church, there were mature leaders on the Sessions. This was evidenced by their making

plans for an eventual pastoral change, allowing search committees to do their work, and supporting pastors when they faced opposition. While the successor pastors persevered, elders on their Sessions persevered with them as well.

Thus, if transitions after long-term pastors are to succeed, it is vital that pastors and other elders work together to develop mature leaders who will continue ministry after the long-term pastor leaves. This type of leadership was lacking at Forest Hills. The Session appeared overly dependent on a pastor to enable the church to function. This led them to rush the search committee to finish their work. Also, Ben twice used the term “casting about” to describe the elders of the congregation. He noted how they were “looking for one trick or another to get the church to grow” and needing a “good spark to set the thing off.” This demonstrated a lack of leadership ability on the part of the elders and a lack of previous leadership development on the part of the long-term pastor. It led the Session to seek a type of pastor who was not suited for the congregation.

Leadership development could be accomplished in a variety of ways. These include officer training classes, one-on-one discipleship and interaction between pastor and officers, and mentoring relationships between pastor or elders and other men in the church. Mature leadership among church Sessions will then be able to carry on significant ministries of congregations even in the absence of a pastor. That leadership also will be able to say to pastoral search committees: “We will support you and wait for you to complete your work. We want to help you without rushing you. We are a resource to you - not to do your work for you - but to assist you as you need help and guidance.”

In the Northside congregation, Tom benefited from the support of elders such as Sam, Brian, and Ken when he faced very strong opposition. Sam urged him to be himself instead of yielding to pressure to please a vocal minority of the congregation. These elders demonstrated maturity in leadership amid the crisis Tom was facing early in his ministry. My research did not indicate whether the previous pastor had been instrumental in developing these leaders. Nevertheless, their spiritual maturity was of great benefit to the congregation in the initial part of Tom's tenure. Mature elders will help the transition process greatly.

In addition, the elders should seek to develop a mature congregation as a help toward an effective transition process. Some of those who remained at the Immanuel or Northside congregations were willing to live with things they disliked. In doing so they have yielded their own personal preferences for the good of the body of Christ. At Northside they have "chosen to love two pastors," as Jane said. Even at Forest Hills, there was some maturity which allowed the church to move on past a very difficult transition time. It allowed its search committee members to reflect disappointment, but not bitterness. Thus, if a Session wishes to facilitate a positive transition process when a long-term pastor leaves, it should strive to develop its congregation toward greater levels of spiritual maturity. This maturity could be developed through the faithfulness of the pastor and other elders. This faithfulness will be demonstrated through teaching, prayer with and for the congregation, modeling godliness before the congregation, and setting forth the resources of the gospel of the grace of Christ which equip His people to grow into His likeness.

*Recommendations for Pastoral Search Committees*

The pastoral search committee receives much of the attention in the pastoral transition process. It will get much of the credit if the transition goes well and much of the blame if the transition goes poorly. It bears tremendous responsibility to conduct its search carefully. The care it takes should be reflected in its evaluation of pastoral candidates, in the avenues it utilizes to provide a good foundation for its search, and in patience and prayerful dependence upon the Lord as it goes about its work.

Regarding the type of pastor the committee seeks, it is a major mistake for the committee to pursue a successor pastor who is thought to be an opposite of his predecessor. One of the greatest mistakes made by the majority of the Forest Hills search committee was seeking someone who was opposite their former pastor in several personal and ministry areas. They found that person, and the transition failed miserably. What they did not realize was that the successor pastor was lacking in several of the areas in which the long-term pastor was gifted.

At Immanuel Presbyterian Church and Northside Presbyterian Church, the successors were different in their personalities from their predecessors. They were from different areas of the country than their predecessors. Each successor underwent struggles in the early years of his ministry in his new congregation. Yet, each man also had ministry emphases similar to those of the long-term pastor, and each was able to operate within the ministry philosophy and emphases that drove the church. In addition, each man possessed significant humility, as did his predecessor. Thus, the effectiveness of the transition was enhanced greatly.

The successor of a long-term pastor need not be an exact copy of his predecessor. As Harris reflected on the search of the Northside committee, he recognized that there was no “carbon copy” of Bill Jeffers. Richard agreed that the committee didn’t want a “clone” of Bill, but someone with a “little different package” of characteristics. They sought someone who could fit within the ministry philosophy of Northside.

To seek an exact copy of the previous pastor would be a mistake for a search committee. Such a man does not exist. To pursue such a man would be fruitless and would keep the congregation focused on the past instead of moving toward the future. However, the successor pastor should possess the ministry strengths of the predecessor which have helped define the ministerial character and philosophy of the congregation. The congregation may benefit from a new pastor who possesses ministerial gifts which the long-term pastor did not have. This occurred both at Northside and at Immanuel. However, if there are areas in which he appears to have gifts which the long-term pastor did not possess (such as leadership or organization, for example), the committee should investigate whether he exercises those gifts in humility, in submission to his fellow elders, and in pursuit of the edification of the body of Christ. There was apparently no such investigation at Forest Hills. Though certain gifts were possessed by the successor pastor, they were not exercised in a manner which helped the transition.

There are some practical vehicles a search committee can use to provide a sound foundation on which to build its search. One vehicle is the study of biblical examples of leadership transition. None of the search committees in this study indicated that they studied such examples.<sup>231</sup> The biblical examples of leadership transition provide insight

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<sup>231</sup> During a Session meeting, Richard, an elder at Northside and a member of its search committee, did bring up the example of Joshua’s succession of Moses as leader of the Israelites.



as to the impact of transitions on people and their importance to God's people corporately. Search committees should not ignore these models from Scripture, some examples of which are referenced in the literature review of this study.

A second foundational element for a committee's search process is prayer. Other than some organized efforts of prayer at Northside Presbyterian Church, I was somewhat surprised how infrequently concerted times of prayer seemed to enter into the work of the search committees studied. Members at Northside did attribute some of their successes to the fact that they had prayed. Also, committee members at the three churches affirmed that their committees "prayed a lot," that they prayed at each meeting, or that there were quarterly times of prayer in their congregation. In addition, it is possible that now, several years later, they do not recall the specific amounts of time or specific venues for prayer. Nevertheless, I expected them to recall more organized times of prayer during their search process.

As a search committee goes about its pastoral search, its efforts in prayer do not have to be formal or organized. The most important thing is that those efforts take place. However, the committee can grow in unity through regular times of prayer together as a group. The committee also can grow in unity of purpose with the Session and the congregation by enlisting those bodies for regular (perhaps weekly or bi-weekly) prayer for the committee. This also allows the entire church body to acknowledge its dependence upon the resources of God as it pursues His will for its next pastor.

One final recommendation to search committees relates to a quality its members need throughout the entirety of their process. They should seek God's provision of patience. This quality was lacking on the part of some members of the Forest Hills

committee. They felt pressure from elders, members of the congregation, and from Will Kessling. They allowed this to build a sense of “hurry” into their search process, and it ended sooner than some committee members desired.

It is possible that the search process will be finished quickly and the right man will be called to replace the long-term pastor. Yet it is also possible that the process will take a considerable length of time and that the committee will encounter various problems along the way. The failure to locate a candidate to recommend within a short time period is not an indication that the committee is failing to do its job. As Ken, an elder at Immanuel Presbyterian Church pointed out, an “extended period of vacancy is the Lord’s gift.” The committee should not fear that extended period but recognize its benefit if the Lord provides it. As the committee patiently and faithfully does its work, it will find the man of God’s choosing whom it can recommend with confidence to succeed the long-term pastor.

#### *Recommendations for Congregations*

The recommendations for the congregation as it deals with the transition following its long-term pastor pertain to its mindset upon the pastor’s departure, its relationship to the pastoral search committee, and its expectations of the new pastor. Each of the three congregations studied dealt with some degree of grief when their long-term pastor left. Grief is a reality in pastoral transitions following a pastor of long tenure. A congregation should expect this emotion to occur. While the attachment of some members to the former pastor may be frustrating, it needs to be understood as normal. It can become problematic if the former pastor becomes an idol to members of the congregation and if they refuse to recognize the legitimate position of the new pastor.

However, the mere presence of grief is not harmful and can be part of a healthy transition process.

The congregation can serve the committee by waiting patiently for them to complete their work rather than rushing them. Ben indicated that he was pressured by members of the Forest Hills church to come to a decision and specifically to recommend Will Kessling. This hurried process contributed to a poor transition. As the congregation exercises patience in relation to the search committee, there is a much stronger probability that the committee will come to a recommendation with which the congregation is satisfied. Quality of pastor rather than speed of the search process should be the desire of the church. As members pursue this desire, regular times of corporate prayer are an important means of grace for them to utilize as they seek the Lord's strength and patience amid the pastoral search.

Regarding its expectations of the new pastor, the congregation should examine itself as to whether it is being realistic. The new pastor should not be expected to know his members' names when he begins his ministry. Yet, this type of unrealistic expectation occurs at times, as was seen in the Immanuel congregation. In addition, the congregation should have the basic expectation that the new pastor will be different from the former pastor in his temperament, in his mix of spiritual gifts, and in his ministry emphases. The congregation will find that this will be a benefit in some cases and a detriment in others. If members will allow the new pastor an opportunity to minister and if they seek to minister to him and with him, it is quite possible that his ministry will be one of long duration.

### **Recommendations Drawn From Personal Reflection**

Two recommendations come from personal reflection and are not drawn from specific literature or from the interviews which were part of this study. One pertains to the duty of the Session to keep good records during the transition process. This is particularly important when congregations are blessed with long-term pastors, since the process occurs so infrequently. This could provide future elders and pastoral search committees help as they investigate how the transition process has been approached in the past. Most likely they will not have experience in replacing a long-term pastor. While such detailed records will not provide an exact model to follow, they could provide some general guidelines which may prove beneficial to these elders and search committees in their work.

An additional recommendation relates to the congregation's attitude toward the pastoral search committee. In its relationship to the committee, members of the church need to exercise respect. Some people in the congregation will wish they had been elected to the committee. This may be because they had glamorized a position on that body or because they had particular agendas they wished to pursue. Perhaps they genuinely desired to serve the church. In any case, once the committee has been selected, it is vital that the congregation trust the providence of God and honor the process that has occurred in the committee's selection.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Two particular areas related to transitions after a long-term term pastor were beyond the scope of this study but would be worthy of further investigation. One area is the perspective of the successor pastor amid these transitions. He could provide useful

insight and a beneficial evaluation with regard to the transition process. His own experience of the process of transition could identify strengths and weaknesses of specific approaches churches have used as they have replaced a pastor who has served for ten years or longer.

Another area of study which could prove valuable, especially in the Presbyterian Church in America, would be one which focuses on transitions after a long-term pastor in smaller churches. I believe the conclusions of this study may apply to smaller congregations. However, there could be elements of the experience of smaller congregations that make their experience of the transition process unique in comparison with larger congregations. Since, as has been noted earlier, the majority of PCA congregations have less than 125 members, such a study would be applicable to a significant portion of the denomination.

### **Final Words**

The congregations which were the focus of this study demonstrate the challenge of pastoral transitions after a long-term pastor. However, the study shows that such transitions can work and that the difficulties of these processes are not insurmountable. It is my hope the application of the conclusions and recommendations drawn from this study will benefit the congregations of the Presbyterian Church in America and Christ's church beyond this particular denomination. May He grant grace to those elders and pastoral search committees whose labors are so vital to the spiritual health and vitality of His church amid the transition of their long-term pastors.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Questions For Elders**

How long was the tenure of your former pastor?

What was/were his reason(s) for leaving?

When did you know the former pastor was going to leave?

Describe the quality of relationship between the former pastor and the congregation, and between the former pastor and your fellow elders.

How long did the elders purposefully prepare for transition once they knew the pastor would be leaving?

What specific steps did the elders take to prepare for transition once they knew the pastor would be leaving?

In what ways did your former pastor prepare you for or assist you with the transition?

Were there additional things related to the transition in which the elders were involved after the pastor left?

What instructions or advice (if any) did elders give to the search committee?

Looking back, what do you wish you had done differently to prepare for the transition process?

Describe the quality of relationship between the successor pastor and the congregation, and the successor pastor and your fellow elders.

Do you believe the right successor pastor was called? How has your view changed over time since he was called?

**Questions for Search Committee Members**

Describe the popularity of your former pastor with your congregation.

How was the search committee selected and what was its makeup?

Did you get counsel from others regarding the transition process? From whom?

Describe the mechanics of your search process.

How long did the search process take?

How did you determine the qualities you wanted in your new pastor?

Did you look for someone similar to your previous pastor - or did you purposefully look for someone different?

Describe the process of presenting the candidate to the congregation.

What was the percentage of vote the candidate received from the congregation?

Describe the level of confidence you had that you had found the right candidate to be the successor pastor.

Describe how the new pastor was received initially. Did he have a "honeymoon" period with the congregation?

Why do you think he has been (or was) received well or poorly?

Did things change over time in the congregation's evaluation of him? If so, were there particular events or issues that triggered the change?

How similar or different has the successor pastor proven to be in comparison with your former pastor?

How did/does he relate to the rest of the church staff (if applicable)?

How long did he stay (if he is no longer the pastor)?

Did the successor pastor prove to be consistent with the assessment you made of him during the search process?

Describe the “match” between pastor and congregation.

Looking back, what do you wish you had done differently in the search process?



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