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New Leadership— Old Issues

Keys to Successful Pastoral Transitions

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The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. (Exodus 16:1-2, NRSV)

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Just six weeks after they had left Egypt, the Hebrew people began to grumble about their new leaders, Moses and Aaron. The exodus, which had begun with great drama and fanfare, soon deteriorated into murmurs and complaints. Ministry transitions today aren't much different. No matter how greatly anticipated the change, the question isn't really *if* dissatisfaction and opposition will arise; the question is *when*.

Pastoral transitions are tough; there's no way of escaping that. They are not just tough; they are inevitable. All churches eventually go through pastoral transition. However, as difficult as such transitions are, there are practical principles that can make the pain and complexities of these changes more

manageable. The task for church leaders today is to help the pastor and congregation alike navigate the challenges that arise in the midst of significant changes in leadership style, personality, and vision.

A healthy pastoral transition is 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, material, and people losses during the transition.¹

Perhaps more than any mainline church culture, churches in the African American community are facing massive pastoral transition. As we look at the African American church, what we find is that civil rights–era pastors are retiring, and the next generations are up to lead. Thus, African American churches are doing more than simply moving from one pastor to the next; in these transitions are generational-divide issues like never before. The bridge generation, those who are too young to be considered civil rights and too old to be hip-hop, have been the first to be elevated in the African American pulpit; and right behind them will be the hip-hop generation.

The tension for historic African American churches will be that of calling a pastor who doesn't reflect the elder-leadership ethos of African American culture. Leaders in our older churches probably grew up listening to rhythm and blues, while the new pastor may have grown up listening to P-funk or hip-hop. These music styles speak to a larger cultural divide—a divide where identity tends to be based more on class than race alone, where transparency is valued over piety, where personal history is as important as communal past, and where leaders are expected to be human and flawed, not heroic and held in awe.² This being the case, congregations must be strategic and intentional as we welcome the pastors who will lead our churches in the twenty-first century. Similarly, those pastors will need to recognize the generational

divide and minister to it, while simultaneously building the church of the future. Love, respect, and a commitment to move intentionally in the direction of God’s leading—these must be some of the foundational principles that guide ministries in these times of transition.

A Cautionary Tale of Transition: My Story, Your Story, Our Story

The *Los Angeles Times* announced on November 9, 2004: “New Pastor Named at First AME.” The article went on to observe, “The Rev. John J. Hunter is praised as a strategic thinker and forceful civil rights advocate with a personable and conciliatory nature.” The writer interviewed Bishop John Bryant, who appointed Pastor John to First AME, and said the bishop described Hunter as a “highly creative ‘people person’ who combines strong theological training and pastoral skills with a background in law, business management and community activism.”³

Despite Bishop Bryant’s endorsement of his choice, there was an undertone of skepticism as the article reported on the bishop’s confidence that “Hunter could move from an 1,800-member Seattle congregation with a \$4 million annual budget to the Los Angeles church, with 18,000 members, 15 affiliated nonprofit entities and a total budget of \$15 million.” Asked how Hunter reacted to his selection, Bryant said: “He leapt at the chance. He was excited about the challenge.”⁴

If Pastor Hunter was excited, we might wonder if he was also on guard. After all, he was following a legend, Pastor Chip Murray, who had been beloved pastor and father to the First AME family and a highly regarded civic leader in the Los Angeles community for twenty-seven years. How would the congregation receive Hunter?

The issues of moving from one pastor to the next differ in kind and degree based on the type of pastor one follows, but there is a central issue: The new pastor is not the former pastor.

When a pastor follows a legend like Chip Murray, issues of change, allegiance, and pastoral relationship are amplified. Pastor Hunter not only was unlike Pastor Murray, but the two were polar opposites in many ways. Sometimes churches who call a pastor, and some bishops who appoint pastors think a congregation needs something different from the former pastor. In cases where the differences are polar opposites, it creates an even greater divide.

The early days of a pastorate are about trajectory. There is going to be some tension, but the plane has to get off the ground to get the journey started. Folk have to be strapped in until they reach a comfortable cruising altitude.

That period of growing together, of interacting with one another, progressively learning from one another, is what I mean by “trajectory of ministry.” The relationship retains a “liveliness” to it. . . . If that building process really happens, the ministry will take off. If it does not happen, in a year or two you won’t see a trajectory with pastor and people growing. Instead you will see a flat line. . . . Often what happens, the relationship deteriorates and pretty soon people start taking potshots at each other and scapegoating one another.⁵

In the case of First AME, the early tension that adversely affected the pastor-congregation relational trajectory began in 2004 and was still present in 2009. A number of factors had affected the transition: the long-term pastor left the church, which almost always calls for some type of interim adjustment period; the appointment of a pastor who was in many ways the opposite of his predecessor; and the early decisions made by the new pastor that changed the identity of the institution in a manner that lingered for five years. The church was struggling to do the work necessary to put the past in perspective. The trajectory of the pastoral relationship had become stunted; the question became, had it flatlined?

Congregations *can* manage the change process of transitions. Congregations that thrive in transitions and ensure that the pastoral trajectory doesn't flatline, we have found, do nine things well.

Nine Traits of Successful Pastoral Transitions⁶

1. Honor, respect, and celebrate the past.
2. Maximize the church's strengths.
3. Complete the past.
4. Articulate the church's vision.
5. Develop a strategic plan.
6. Manage the dark side.
7. Commit to the long haul.
8. Do the work of ministry.
9. Listen to God's voice.

Honor, Respect, and Celebrate the Past

When we study the First AME transition, we can see the tension in the beginning. Let's look at what happened at First AME from the retirement of Pastor Murray to the coming of Pastor Hunter. The *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2004, stated, "The congregation doesn't want him to go. They had hoped the church's quadrennial AME conference in Indianapolis this June would extend the retirement age. Instead, the body reaffirmed it. And after months of saying no, the minister is finally ready to talk to a reporter about the R word."⁷

It didn't matter who was going to be appointed to this church, there were going to be issues. This is the case with every new pastor, but it was aggravated in this situation because of the circumstances, the appearance of a forced retirement, and who Pastor Hunter was following. Not only had the church fought the retirement, but also there was no real

preparation for the transition. They hadn't done the work of closure. The church was in grief, and the grief took many forms. In transitions like this, the emotions must be identified and attended to as a pastor would in any grief situation.

When the new pastor comes, there is an identity crisis a church goes through as they ask who they are and who they will be in the future. In the African American church, the identity of the congregation is heavily linked to that of the pastor. As transitions are made, pastors and congregations must take stock of what these changes mean, how they are respected, and how they are negotiated. Pastors and congregations need to nurture each other through these periods as they are cognizant of this phase of transition and, therefore, intentionally navigate these murky conditions.

Honor the legacy of the church while not being held hostage to the past. As the congregation moves on and develops a relationship with their new pastor, they build on the healthy parts of the church that need to continue to be nurtured while simultaneously honoring and welcoming the new leadership. The new pastor must lead in respecting the legacy of his or her predecessor while being the pastor God has called him or her to be.

Maximize the Church's Strengths

When a congregation and its new pastor quickly identify the healthier parts of the church, they are empowered to strengthen what is already strong. When a new pastor enters the doors of the church, he or she must have a learning agenda. The new pastor must learn the history of the church and the present state of the church. Congregants, and especially leaders in a congregation, must work to educate their new leadership. This education doesn't take the form of "this is the way we have always done it." Instead, this education explains who the church has been and who it is, and says, "now we want to take our past and build on it for our future."

In the process of the transition, churches and pastoral teams have to deal with their strengths and weaknesses as they seek to define this new relationship. As the new pastoral team leads with the church, these relationships are worked out, strengths and weaknesses are discovered, as they focus on doing ministry together.

Complete the Past

A part of the work of transitions is completing the past. How does a congregation close the door on yesterday while opening the door to the future? The answer to this question isn't simple, and it can't be answered quickly, but it must be posed and talked about often. Congregations must place the issues of past, present, and future on the table and talk about them openly. They have to discuss what they want to become in partnership with their new pastor while not dismissing what they were under the former pastor's leadership.

The reality is that congregations, especially in the African American church, see the life of their church in the shadow of the tenure of a pastor. As transitions are made, pastors and congregations must take stock of what these markers mean, how they are respected, and how they are negotiated. Pastors and congregations need to nurture each other through these periods as they are cognizant of this phase of transition and, therefore, intentionally navigate these murky conditions.

In the case of First AME, Pastor John walked into a very delicate situation. When a pastor walks into such a powder keg of emotions during a transition, the decisions made in the early days are crucial. The new pastor has to focus on developing relationships and dealing with the grief the church is going through. The new pastor must realize that the congregation's grief doesn't necessarily mean they don't want the new pastor, but they are grieving the loss of the relationship that they had with the former pastor.

Articulate the Church's Vision

After bringing closure to the past, the church moves toward the future with a clear picture of what it is becoming. The new pastor has to lead in vision casting. As the new pastor leads, the leaders and the church have to run with and inform that vision. Informing the vision is best done by working hard to welcome the new pastoral team, to work with them, to talk with them, to build a healthy relationship with them, and to dream together. Vision isn't a top-down thing that God zaps preachers with. Vision comes from God to God's people. Many times it is spoken through the pastor, and the people or the congregation are also a part of this conversation. The reason vision is so essential is that, as a church moves on, they have to know where they are going. When a church does not have clear vision of the future, they will not complete the work of the past. Where there is no vision, a church gets lost in the wilderness.

Develop a Strategic Plan

The pastor will lead the strategic planning process, which in turn equips the church to realize God's vision. This is the work of capacity building, of equipping the church for its future. Without a plan, the vision is empty. As a church articulates vision, they then must structure, restructure, and equip the church to accomplish the vision. This may mean getting rid of some things, stopping some things, starting new things, and doing more of what the church already has been doing. This is where real change comes in to play. For a church to become something new, it is going to have to change. A church and new pastor who are clear about the essential changes they have to make do well in transitions because they understand what those changes are, why they have to make them, and how those changes will bring them in line with God's vision for their church.

In the case of First AME, Pastor Hunter came in and made some staffing changes that he obviously felt were necessary, but they upset some in the congregation. This is normal in transitions, and new pastors have to be wise about making major decisions early on in their tenure. There can be a grace period extended to new pastors when major decisions can be made with congregational support. If such a period is extended, one has to be strategic and wise in how one uses that capital. If major decisions are made early, without sufficient information or sensitivity to history and relationships, these decisions could extend the transition period or be the cause for a failed or intensified transition. When in a transition, one must do the right thing and make the right decisions, but this cannot be done without a sense of godly wisdom and timing. Pastors have to make decisions about staffing and the direction of the church, but it's important to be clear about whether a decision must be made immediately and when a decision can wait.

Manage the Dark Side

Pastors must define their own strengths and weaknesses, building on their strengths and managing their weaknesses. They must also do this for the church. A part of leadership's responsibility is to define reality. We have to name what we really are and announce if the emperor doesn't have on any clothes.

For example, the role of the pastor's spouse is a central issue in the African American church. Gender roles play a big part in the life of the African American church, and in many cases shades of sexism inform these role expectations. Pastor Hunter brought his highly competent wife in as leader of First AME Renaissance, the church's economic development arm, thus giving Mrs. Denise Hunter a leadership role, a contrast with Pastor Murray's wife, whose role had been stereotypical. This decision increased tensions, criticism, and distance

in the relationship that Mrs. Hunter would have with some of the leaders of the church. She would not be the stereotypical missionary leader. Mrs. Hunter was a young professional woman with two grown daughters and a six-year-old daughter at home. She brought a different swagger to the position of church leader and pastor's wife.

The role that the spouse played prior to the new pastor and the way roles will be defined in a tenure change are also a key concern for the African American church. As first families come into the life of a church, they must be mindful of what they are following, aware of the definition and expectations of the role of first family. If they are going to have a radically different role from what the church has had and therefore expects, they must intentionally lay the groundwork that redefines that role. They are changing the first-family norms, and this can't be done without respect for what those norms were in the past.

Commit to the Long Haul

Transitions are difficult, painful, and time-consuming. People have to give a pastor permission to pastor them. New pastors must realize that, while they have the title, they have to establish the relationship. Pastors who succeed are committed to the relationship. They work at it; they nurture it. They intentionally love the people, and the people will love them back. Churches that succeed in transitions learn to love their new pastor, while not disparaging their former pastor. They buy into the fact that building a new relationship takes hard work and long hours. They can't quit when the going gets tough. As churches and pastors fight through together, their shared experience strengthens the relationship.

What I have found in my research is that the key to successful transitions in pastoral leadership is accepting that the church is in a period of transition and that there is no choice but to move forward. Moving forward can mean many things,

but the fact is that a church can't go back to yesterday. This statement sounds simple, but it is profound in its simplicity. Successful transitions are like going on a journey: You have to get started; and, when you get started, there comes a point of no return.

The process and time it takes to move from what was to what is and what will be is just that—a process. Transitions take time. Pastors and congregations have to be committed to this process for the long haul. The transition process doesn't happen overnight. It is commonly accepted that it takes seven years at a minimum for the transition from one pastoral team to another pastoral team truly becoming pastor.

Do the Work of Ministry

The work of ministry is the common bond between the new pastor and the church. As they labor together in love, in the work of kingdom building, the labor brings them together. Churches that do well in transition focus on doing ministry. They focus primarily on the five things the church does: worship, fellowship, spiritual care and nurture, education, and outreach and service. During times of transition, a church must be intentionally mission focused. While they have to minister to the transition and the pain of inevitable loss, they must still focus on the essentials of being the church of Jesus Christ. This focus will grow the congregation as a spiritually mature people who will hear from God and follow God and God's plan for their future.

In the midst of transition, issues can arise that can take the church's eyes off of ministry, and they can become distracted by side issues, personality conflicts, congregational splits, and fights. What focuses churches is a compelling vision, with leadership that leads them in doing the work of the ministry for the glory of God. This may sound a bit trite and idealistic, but I will argue that if a church isn't about ministry, it is about mess. When churches are about mess in the midst of

a transition, the messier the transition becomes. The messier the transition, the greater the opportunity for the transition and the ministry to be derailed altogether.

Listen to God's Voice

God's call and confirmation of that call speaks louder than the minority of critics and naysayers. Churches and church leaders who hear the voice of God in the midst of the transition are the ones that succeed. This means the church spends time in prayer and studying God's Word. They come to church not *inspecting* but *expecting*. They know that they—pastor and congregation—are poised to hear from God.

When the focus is the doing ministry and listening to God's voice about where God wants to take the congregation, the congregation and the new pastoral team have less time for mess. To focus the transition, the church has to lift up ministry by focusing on worship, fellowship, nurturing, education, outreach and service. The church has to wrestle with how they can be faithful to serving God by witnessing within and outside the four walls of the church. Some of their questions should focus them to think about the norms of behavior. How do we handle ourselves in the transition? How do we have civil conversations about change? How do we embrace and respect where we are going versus where we have been? What private conversations are to be kept within the congregation, and what subjects do we talk about outside the church?

Every church will go through pastoral transitions. The question is how will each church manage the transition?

Reflection Questions

1. How will we move on from where we are to where God wants us to be?
2. What is our dark side?
3. What are our strengths?

4. What are the major issues that a new pastor would have to deal with in our church?
5. How do we know we are ready to move on to what God has for us in the future?

NOTES

1. Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 41.

2. I explore this cultural divide extensively in *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Judson Press, 2008), a book I coauthored with Jason A. Barr Jr., Jamal-Harrison Bryant, William H. Curtis, and Otis Moss III.

3. Teresa Watanabe, “New Pastor Named at First AME; The Rev. John J. Hunter is praised as a strategic thinker and forceful civil rights advocate with a personable and conciliatory nature,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2004.

4. Ibid.

5. Loren B. Mead, *A Change of Pastors . . . and How it Affects Change in the Congregation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), 13–14.

6. Adapted from Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant in the Boardroom*, 15–27. These nine points are extrapolated from their six principles.

7. Gayle Pollard-Terry, “A Lion in Winter,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2004.