Case Study of an Evidence-Based Group Tasked to Transition a Beloved Pastor

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Objectives

Discuss the challenges of transitions for long term, longstanding pastors, the church members, and community.

Learn an evidence-based group model for working with church members and community when a long-term, long-standing pastor transitions.
❖ How to replace a staple in the community who is known by all of community, and not lose 30% of membership, as Dollhopf & Scheitle (2013) caution can happen during a transition.

❖ How to welcome a new, unknown new pastor into church and community to continue the great work completed by the former and have a successful transition.
Transition

❖ a movement, development, or evolution from one form, stage, or style to another (dictionary.com)

❖ In our context, a successful transition would involve moving and transitioning from one beloved pastor of church and community to developing and welcoming a new formerly unknown pastor to church and community, without loss of membership, and with the successful welcome and open acceptance into our church and community.
According to Danielson (2001), a successful ministry transition happens when there is no period of absent leadership, or any need of an interim pastor.

In our context, transitioning and newly appointed pastors worked together with ministry board and congregation to use elements of Bowen’s Family Systems Family Theory (BFST) to create a framework to ensure an emotionally healthy and uninterrupted successful transition for congregation (Galindo & Mills (2016)).

BFST can be used with families, groups, and communities. From the components above, the following were used in our context:

❖ Committing to the ongoing work of differentiation of self;
❖ Working on functioning with less anxiety during times of high reactivity;
❖ Staying emotionally connected and present in key relationships; and
❖ Managing anxious relationships by functioning better in triangles.
Current pastor, who began in this community 26 years ago announced in January, 2019, his plan to transition from current position to next phase of ministry in order to be closer to grandchildren.

In discussion with Board of ministry, a transition team of diverse members was tasked with leading in prayerful selection of new younger pastor. The names of those on transition team was shared with congregation and were asked to join in prayer and fasting for this important work.
First tasks of transition included keeping congregation aware of the work of team, who were prayerfully developing a list of criteria that we desired for new pastor. Transparency of process was of utmost importance.

Once approved by congregation, transition team reviewed approximately 25 CV’s that came from many who learned of this position; after much prayer, transition team selected two(2) candidates, who were invited to come to deliver a sermon and meet the congregation.
Middle of Transition Process – Lessons Learned

After visits from first 2 applicants, and offering position to one, then the other, both, after prayerfully considering, turned us down, each saying that he had not been released by God to leave current position.

“Committing to the ongoing work of differentiation of self” What we learned is that a successful transition means not only a “yes” from us, but also a “yes” by candidate.

Transition team shared with membership and asked again for them to join us in prayer, as we contacted the 3rd candidate.
Middle of Transition – Surprises!

What we noticed was that attendance during summer months did not decrease, but instead significantly increased! Also, the one-day mission goal of 70K was significantly higher than ever, at 106K!

What we realized is that the membership felt as though they were very much “in the mix” of what was happening!

When 3rd candidate came, we offered a “yes!”, and he answered a “yes!”
Middle of Transition Process - Challenges

❖ “Working on functioning with less anxiety during times of high reactivity”

❖ Although candidate was not coming from a different church, he came from different state, and has wife and 4 kids; could not move until home in different state sold.

❖ Although this took months, pastors worked with Board to present unified message, be transparent with congregation, continued to ask for fasting and prayers, and work together to “tag team” with Wednesday nights and Sunday messages.
“Middle of Transition Process - Challenges”

- "Staying emotionally connected and present in key relationships"
- It was important for transitioning pastor to be "head cheerleader" for new pastor, introducing him to church member groups, community partners, and from the pulpit;
- "He must increase, and I must decrease" message from transitioning pastor to all groups; this was done by moving from his "lead pastor" office to another, to changes in stationary, etc.
Middle of Transition Process - Challenges

❖ “Managing anxious relationships by functioning better in triangles”

❖ It became important for ministry Board to press pastors for exit date for transitioning pastor, and “completely settled date” for newly appointed pastor and family.

❖ Once “settled date” was established, “whispers” of congregation and community stopped, and excitement and celebration began!
It took 3 months from hire date for newly appointed pastor's home in different state to sell; during this time, he would stay in town for a week, and go home for a week.

Although this was challenging, it was effective for transitioning pastor to introduce him to congregation, community, etc., as unified front, and to serve during interim.

Church membership's care and concern was important, so as not to lose membership during process.
References

