

7 Leadership Priorities for Churches in Pastoral Transition

Among my responsibilities as associate national representative of the GABC is working with churches that are in pastoral transition. Much of that work focuses on helping pulpit committees establish a careful search process for calling their next pastor, but it also includes helping leaders understand their ministry priorities in pastoral transition. In churches that are led by only senior pastors, a considerable amount of responsibility falls on the shoulders of non-pastoral leaders when the pastor leaves.

Even when an associate pastor remains, others often take on additional interim responsibilities. What ministry priorities should leaders focus on—other than searching for a pastor—in transition? Consider these seven.

Leading the church in prayer

Effective leaders emphasize personal prayer as they seek God's guidance in their own areas of responsibility, but they also recognize the importance of leading the congregation as a whole in making prayer a priority. Schedule special prayer events regularly to seek God's blessing and provision for the church at this crucial time in ministry.

Building trust with the congregation

Unfortunately, some leaders have been known to take advantage of transition times between pastors to exert their own authority and personal agendas. Such power plays create conflict and can damage trust in leaders. Godly leaders are careful to respect Biblical leadership roles and humbly serve the church family in times of transition. These leaders are marked by compassion and integrity and are approachable and teachable. They help provide healing to hurting people during a difficult transition and lay a good foundation for a future pastor to build upon.

Reaffirming the church's mission

Every church needs to know why it exists and what its ministry direction is. Although pastors usually establish and communicate these, it is the church family that ought to own the vision. I'm impressed with churches that continue to pursue their direction after a pastor leaves. After all, accomplishing a church's mission is not primarily a pastoral concern; it is a congregational one. Wise leaders reaffirm the church's mission, values, and vision regularly to maintain the church's commitment to its stated purposes.

Communicating with the church family

Never underestimate the importance of open

communication! In congregational churches, leaders ought to respect the body of believers enough to keep them informed and engaged in the ministries of the church—especially during crucial transition times, when many people seem to disappear. The church family needs to know what their leaders are working on and how ministries are progressing. Informed church members pray more faithfully, become more involved, and are often better prepared to welcome new pastoral leadership.

Managing necessary change with wisdom

I don't recommend significant ministry change during pastoral transition; however, as transition time lengthens, changes often need to be made to keep the ministry fresh and adapted to congregational needs. When such change is required, leaders move ahead with carefulness and wisdom. They keep everyone informed regarding the need for change and how it will be administered. They are open to input from the people who will be most affected by the change, and they take time to secure leadership consensus and congregational support.

Dealing with problems

Conflicts often develop during pastoral transition. Without a shepherd's loving leadership and protection, the sheep sometimes act independently and selfishly. Godly leaders do not wait for the future pastor to address problems; they approach issues that need attention with courage and grace. They are willing to confront discordant actions in a Biblical way, and they demonstrate gracious leadership in conflict. I've known of churches that have had to practice Biblical church discipline in a pastor's absence—as challenging as it is—and they have experienced God's guidance and blessing through difficult circumstances.

Modeling patience

It often takes many months to carefully and prayerfully complete a pastoral search process. The process seems to take longer today due to the diversity in ministry styles and programs. Some churches are in pastoral transition for two or three years!

Unfortunately, as the time lengthens between pastors, it's easy for congregations to become impatient and question the work of leaders. Wise leaders understand this. They remain patient in their work and faithful to their responsibilities while encouraging the congregation to do likewise.

