



50 Ways to Improve Pastoral Transitions

From the Lewis Center for Church Leadership
of Wesley Theological Seminary



CONCLUDING MINISTRY IN ONE SETTING

Maintain good successor relations

- 1. Work with the congregation to prepare the way for your successor.
- 2. Work with your successor to provide good information about the congregation.
- 3. Spend significant time with your successor with an agreed-upon agenda.
- 4. Talk about your successor only in positive terms.
- 5. Avoid making comparisons between yourself and your successor.

Approach the move with a generous and graceful spirit

- 6. Share ownership for the move, and avoid blaming others.
- 7. Avoid making inappropriate use of closure to address unresolved problems.
- 8. Be gracious to everyone, especially those with whom you have had difficulty.

Provide good records and administrative wrap-up

- 9. Prepare essential lists for your successor, and be sure important files are up to date.
- 10. Make sure church bills are paid through the month you leave.
- 11. Ensure that denominational giving is up to date.
- 12. Never leave any unpaid personal bills in the community.
- 13. Do not take church records with you.

Plan for appropriate goodbyes, grief, and closure rituals

- 14. Provide adequate rituals to mark your leaving and the coming of your successor.

- 15. Find appropriate ways to say goodbye and grieve with the congregation.
- 16. Encourage loved ones to grieve the transition, and grieve with them.
- 17. Grant and ask for forgiveness where needed, and tell the people you love them.
- 18. Arrange personal visits and write personal notes where appropriate.

Clarify your new relationship with the church

- 19. Clarify in spoken and written communication your new relationship with the people.
- 20. Be clear that you will not be returning for pastoral roles.
- 21. Take time to teach the congregation about closure and boundaries.
- 22. Affirm love and friendship while releasing persons from pastoral relationships.

Keep working

- 23. Continue vital ministry, avoid emotional withdrawal, and do not initiate major new programs in the closing months.
- 24. Settle as many hanging difficulties as possible, including (and especially) staff difficulties.
- 25. Leave the parsonage and office clean and in order.

BEGINNING MINISTRY IN A NEW SETTING

Learn about the new church and community

- 26. Allow 6–18 months to get to know the people and community.
- 27. Demonstrate willingness, and make the effort, to learn the history of the congregation.

- 28. Learn the mission and vision of the congregation and their place in the life of the people.
- 29. Study data (worship and financial statistics, community demographics, etc.) to understand the church and community.
- 30. Make careful assessments of strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities.

Spend time with people and build relationships

- 31. Make building relationships your highest priority, visiting as many people as you can.
- 32. Visit people with pastoral needs and also those with key leadership responsibilities.
- 33. Ask everyone you visit to suggest others with whom you should be talking.
- 34. Meet with the pastoral relations/personnel committee early and regularly.
- 35. Pay particular attention to pastoral care and preaching.
- 36. Meet community leaders including other clergy. Be visible in the community.
- 37. Develop a plan to get to know the people, communicate that plan, and stay faithful to it.

Be cautious about making immediate changes

- 38. Do not change things at first, especially worship.
- 39. Listen and observe with an open mind to discover strengths and needs.
- 40. Earn the right to change things before initiating changes.

Build trust

- 41. Express joy in being in your new ministry setting.
- 42. Be authentic, honest, and genuine.
- 43. Let people get to know you, and allow the congregation time to learn to trust you.

- 44. Focus on the congregation and its future, not your agenda.
- 45. If you introduce yourself in writing, have others read what you write to make sure you are not communicating unintended signals.

Honor your predecessor's ministry

- 46. Do not criticize the former pastor, even if criticism is warranted.
- 47. Honor the progress and achievements accomplished before you arrived.
- 48. Assure people it is all right to grieve the loss of their former pastor.
- 49. Honor traditions long enough to understand the positive motivation behind them.
- 50. Throughout it all, keep in mind: Avoid talking about your previous congregation. Do not complain, criticize, or make excessive demands. And be patient.

Learn More with the *The Right Start* Video Tool Kit



The Right Start is a training resource for clergy preparing to begin ministry in a new setting. It includes video instructional segments, planning aids, and supplementary materials, including updated information on the relational aspect of transition — such as how to handle social media and issues of concern to single clergy and associate pastors. *The Right Start* is available in both Pastor's and Group Training Versions.

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