



Forgive for the Future Health of the Church

What one congregation learned when they offered grace to a pastor who hurt them.

Sonrise Church is like many churches in transition: burdened and strained by unreconciled relationships after a pastor resigns.

That's what I stepped into as an Intentional Interim Pastor. Realizing that God's word heals, I preached sermons on the graces of confession, forgiveness, teachability, confrontation, and reconciliation. God moved and church members began seeking forgiveness of each other. By God's grace hard feelings left and joy returned.

But there was an elephant in the room. The congregation was on the "outs" with the departed pastor.

When You're on the Outs with the Departed Pastor

One night I asked our transition team, "How will our experience with Pastor John adversely affect our next season of ministry?" After a pregnant silence, they began to share, one by one, the pain, guilt, and heartache of a broken relationship with their former pastor.

In the days that followed, the group determined to invite Pastor John back to meet with the leaders and core congregational members. They wanted to apply grace to their past.

When they invited Pastor John back, they listed four goals for his visit:

1. Confess that they dishonored him and ask for his forgiveness;

2. Assure him that through grace, the church forgave him for any offenses real or perceived;
3. Bless and thank him for his faithfulness to their church; and
4. Seek his advice on how they can improve their ability to honor and learn from their next pastor.

In a "pre-meeting" with members, we gathered around a cross on the church grounds. There we remembered what Jesus accomplished on the cross and how He had forgiven all of our sins.

We asked ourselves, "In light of all that God has forgiven us, how can we withhold forgiveness from John?"

As a symbol of forgiveness, we, one by one, burned our lists of grievances in a large metal container. In the end, there were ashes in that container, but nothing remained of the words we had written. The ashes reminded us that we had a clean slate through the cross; we wanted to offer that clean slate of forgiveness to Pastor John.

I reminded them that when we met with Pastor John, God would take those ashes, forgive our sins, and remember them no more. In our meeting with the former pastor and his wife, we sat in a circle. Each person shared specific ways they had failed to honor John and then asked for and received his forgiveness. John acknowledged his offenses, and we forgave him.

John and his wife sat in the center of the circle as, one-by-one, each person stood behind them and blessed them. We witnessed amazing exchanges of reconciliation and healing. All sensed we were applying grace to our past and were ready to move forward as God's people.

Unencumbered by the Past

An email from John a week later gave me a glimpse of how God used this moment to infuse life into John. He wrote, "I wish I had the words to thank you for how gracious, kind, affirming, encouraging, helpful, warm, and forgiving you were. You have all been so kind, forgiving, and gracious to me. I feel that I am so much further ahead in allowing God to continue using me."

God used this process to prepare us for "Pastor Next" and encouraged Pastor John to minister, unencumbered by the past, in the new place where God led him. Grace does that! Grace is more prominent than an elephant!

The interim between pastors need not be dead time. It can be a period of increased health and growth as the church prepares for its future.

All journeys need a roadmap. For a roadmap, please read "The First 5 Steps for a Church Facing a Transition". These five steps will help your church intentionally prepare for the next phase of ministry.