



The First 5 Steps for a Church Facing a Transition

Be intentional. Find strength for what's next.

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. Below is a roadmap for churches in the interim. These five steps will help your church intentionally prepare for the next phase of ministry.

1. Pray for the Transition

Prayer is paramount during the transition. A pastor once said, “You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”

As your church enters a transition period, your church will want to encourage increased and focused prayer for the changes and challenges ahead. Pray for the committees, teams, and groups involved in the transition. If the church is in upheaval, pray that God will raise up peacemakers to unify the congregation. Pray for the workers to stay motivated and that the paid and volunteer staff stay fully engaged, so the church continues good momentum. Your pastoral search team needs prayer. They have the heavy responsibility to find the next pastor. Yes, the leaders and congregation will need to concur with their choice, but the work of finding and vetting a pastor who will be a good fit rests on the shoulders of the search team.

Churches might also consider scheduling special prayer times. These prayer experiences could be weekly or on Sundays after church. Another good prayer strategy is a 24-

hour prayer vigil with congregants signing up to pray for 15 minutes. Encourage smaller prayer gatherings where people can pray together or on their own. One such prayer program is called “40 days of prayer”: Four or five people meet over the 40 days to intercede for the church. Or you might consider a prayer walk around the church. Ask congregants to meet in front of the church and stroll around the church, praying privately and publicly.

Our spiritual enemy is alert for a chance to trouble a church and upset its testimony. The time between pastors increases a church's vulnerability to attacks. Prayer is our weapon of choice and the most potent weapon we have to thwart the enemy and invite the presence and power of the Lord.

2. Get Help

Though it is tempting, it is not beneficial to immediately begin a pastoral search. Instead, if your church belongs to a denomination or association, contact your regional church leadership. They can help train your search committee and introduce the pastoral candidate.

It's typical for churches whose pastors have recently left to assume they can handle the transition by themselves or feel like they are all alone – even abandoned – as they face an unknown future. The truth is, there are ministry leaders who have worked with any number of churches that have gone through a similar transition. These ministers are ready and willing to help.

If you are a denominational church, call your regional office and ask for their assistance. A second call you can make is to Interim Pastor Ministries (IPM) 800-501-7117. IPM will work with your regional and local church leadership to provide you an intentional interim pastor who will love and lead your church through the interim period.

3. Plan a Brief Period of Pulpit Supply

After your pastor has left, it may take a little while to find an interim pastor. It's a good idea to plan for some pulpit supply until the interim pastor arrives.

4. Communicate Regularly with the Congregation

Lack of information can make people feel excluded, breed mistrust, and fuel suspicion. The more information a congregation has, the more included they feel and the better they can pray.

Set up a plan for regularly communicating with the congregation. Good communication includes (without violating confidences or appropriate protocol) regular communication about general church plans, identifying who is in charge, and providing updates from the pastoral search committee.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the previous pastor's departure, the church leadership needs to acknowledge the pastor's departure. Plan a farewell for the pastor and family to express gratitude and well wishes. In more difficult exits, where a farewell is not possible, the congregation needs to know that leadership responded in a Christ-like way to the situation.

5. Read a Book about Church Transitions

It is helpful for church leaders to read and discuss a book addressing transitional issues and giving guidance. While this will not make them experts in the subject, it will help them understand what might be ahead and learn from other churches' experiences and lessons in transition.

We recommend the following: *Soaring Between Pastors*, by Dr. Tom Harris, the President of IPM. Two other good books are: *Help! We Just Lost Our Pastor* by Dr. Ken Moberg and *The Changeover Zone* by Jim Ozier and Jim Griffith. Books like these will assist the church leadership in learning the transitional stages of a successful season between pastors and the transitional issues every church faces.