

Navigating Pastoral Transitions – A Staff Guide

A Simple Staff Welcome

While individuals welcome the arriving pastor in their personal style, it is helpful for the staff to welcome the new pastor as a team to recognize the beginning of their collegial working relationship.

- Build a welcome blessing ritual. Ask each staff member to bring a small item as a gift for the new pastor. Items should be simple, not costly, and may include household items.
- Share food, for instance at a luncheon, to enhance the welcome.
- Build in time for the pastor's blessing of the staff.

Ten Strategies for Staff during Transitions

1. Maintain open communication that creates a mutual exchange of information.
2. Assume that abundant resources for change and growth are already present in the community.
3. Strengthen relationships through mutual participation, respect, and encouragement. Look for opportunities to have contact with others. Distancing yourself can send signals of abandonment.
4. Empower yourself and make it possible for others in the community to be agents for change when necessary. Find ways that people can contribute.
5. Low energy is a hallmark of transitions. Lowering expectations of yourself and others recognizes the intensity of this work. Listen to your body and honor its need for rest and renewal.
6. Resist the urge to rush out of the middle ground. Look for ways to explore creative opportunities as they emerge. This offers potential for renewal in your ministry.
7. As a staff, model open communication and mutual trust. Parishioners will be watching.
8. Survey, recognize, and name how the pastor transition is affecting individuals and the entire community. Limit your urges to rescue, and give people space and time to make adjustments.
9. At the end of staff meetings, ask the question: Is there anything we didn't talk about today that needs to be discussed?
10. Pray alone and together. While the tasks of the transition can overwhelm you and sap energy, your work in the parish must be deeply rooted in the Church's rich traditions and theology of call and response, hospitality, healing, thanksgiving, and reception.

Five Ways to Be Present to the Parish Community in Transition

1. **Name the change:** Learn to describe the change succinctly and why it is happening. Craft your one-minute story about the change. Make it honest, open, hopeful. Invite parishioners to surface their own questions. Resist the urges either to dismiss anxieties or to rush in and fix emerging issues. Claim and celebrate new learning and discoveries.

(Five Ways to Be Present to the Parish Community in Transition – Continued)

2. **Create ritual:** Take steps to help people respectfully let go of the past and walk into the future. Use symbols that are meaningful to the parish. Rituals can express the vitality and belonging we wish for the community.
3. **Sit with uncertainty:** Recognize that ambiguity is natural during transitions. Create space for experimentation, discoveries, and failures. Model for others a spirituality of walking by faith into the unknown.
4. **Communicate:** Listen and validate parishioners' questions. Be clear and firm when it is premature for answers. Encourage that particular concerns be directly communicated to an appropriate person, council, or committee.
5. **Be:** Take care of your own spirituality and health so that you have energy to be present to others. Parishioners draw assurance from a person whom they perceive as spiritually grounded.

Five Ways to Mess Up a Transition

1. Don't engage the larger community in the transition. Presume they have no need to know what is happening.
2. Assume that your position at the parish is in jeopardy.
3. Compare the new pastor with the previous pastor in conversations with parishioners and at staff meetings.
4. Continue to consult with the pastor once he has left or retired.
5. Establish a defensive stance, stop communicating, hunker down in your "silo" of ministry.

Five Commitments to the "Old" Pastor

1. You will honor his contributions to the parish.
2. You will express gratitude for guidance and learning through your professional working relationship.
3. You will never speak negatively of his ministry or draw comparisons to the good new things the new pastor is doing.
4. You will not share with him parishioners' concerns regarding the new pastor.
5. You will hold him in prayer as he transitions to his next assignment.

Five Commitments to the "New" Pastor

1. You will allow him time to get settled and "arrive" at the parish. Recognize that while the new pastor is physically at the parish, his head and heart may take some time to make the transition.
2. You will communicate openly, inviting his ideas and questions.
3. You will not compare him to other pastors, but encourage him to be himself and to work out of his giftedness.
4. You will support him in taking time for himself and respect his days off.
5. You will hold him in prayer daily and seek his prayer for you.

Ten Personal Reflection Questions for Staff during a Pastor Transition

These ten questions are not presented as a check-off list, nor are they rigidly sequential. Work with them slowly over lengthy periods of time. They are written to provoke other questions.

1. What do I *value*? How is the ministry that I do enabling me to uphold these values?
2. What do I *want to accomplish* in this ministry? Is this happening or can it happen?
3. What do I *hold as true* for myself and for my work? What are my convictions? In whom or what do I believe? What do I believe I can do or be?
4. What *motivates* me? What energizes me in ministry? What lifts my spirit?
5. What am I *good at*? What are my skills?
6. What kind of *work environment* do I need?
7. What is my *body* telling me? Where am I physically with myself and with others? Where are my tension points?
8. Where is my *giftedness*? Where am I transfigured? Where do I light up? What is my "heart" gift?
9. What do I want my family to know?
10. *What do I really want?*

For God is the one who, for his good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work. *(Phil 2:13)*