

# STEP 4 | PLAN FOR TRANSITIONAL LEADERSHIP

There are many reasons why a rapidly hired replacement pastor could be disastrous. Take a moment to consider what is actually happening in a pastoral transition. When a pastor leaves a congregation, an array of changes are set in motion.

These changes are outside of the ordinary awareness of congregational leaders. While the powerful implications of the changes are often obvious to an outside observer, such as a Transitional Pastor, most participants in the congregation commonly miss them.

That is why the observations of a Transitional Pastor are vital at this time. In fact, the most vital job of a transitional leader may be, beyond providing basic essential pastoral service, to identify strengths and weaknesses of a local congregation's structures and leadership.

## What typically happens when a pastor leaves:

### 1 A LEADERSHIP VACUUM DEVELOPS

Whenever a pastor leaves, a significant leadership vacuum emerges. In some ways this is good because all organizations can potentially benefit from the reconsideration of decision-making processes. The vitality of lay leadership on display at the beginning of a transition can be impressive. A certain kind of energy is initially present as church leaders respond to the challenge.

However, the leadership vacuum soon gives way to chaos. It may be a creative chaos, but chaos is never comfortable. The potential for great damage looms large. Churches unconsciously form themselves around the leadership style of their pastor. If they don't see this in themselves, they won't understand why things are different after that pastor has left.

## 2 THE PEOPLE OF THE CONGREGATION ARE GRIEVING THE LOSS OF THEIR PASTOR

This grief is similar to all grief that comes from loss, and yet the unique nature of a pastoral relationship makes this grief different in some ways. People don't always recognize their emotions as grief, and they tend to start looking for something, or someone, to blame for that unnamed sadness inside. That blame often lands on someone else in the system who is also grieving. A Transitional Pastor can make a difference in how grief is managed and worked through by individuals and the congregation as a whole.

When people are experiencing grief from the loss of a pastor, several things can happen that are difficult to address:

- Misplaced anger
- Irrational fear
- Avoidance body language
- Impatience
- Attempts to fill the empty space
- Emotional regression/irrationally high standards for staff and others
- Stirred-up controversy
- Impulsive lunges toward nostalgic events or programs

## PLANNING FOR TRANSITIONAL LEADERSHIP

Congregations need pastoral leaders who are willing and able to take on the vocation of leading a congregation through all of this transition, loss, and change. In the past, this has sometimes been envisioned as a Transitional Pastor who "fills in" while the church is looking for a new pastor. This vision is far too passive and naïve about the emotional dynamics lurking under the surface of a congregation in flux.

The ability to effectively navigate the waters of a pastoral transition may be the single best indication of a congregation's long-term health. The loss of a pastor is a test of faith regardless of the circumstances of that pastor's departure. If the pastor leaves after a golden age of growth and dynamic ministry, then the test is to believe that all of those blessings were a gift from God rather than the result of his or her personality. If the pastor is leaving under duress because things weren't going very well, then the transition time is best navigated as a time of faithful soul-searching. Patience is required to avoid making a leap toward new leadership that might deaden the pain of the past but leave the underlying problems in place beneath the surface.



This season of change in the life of a church requires wisdom and Spirit-given insight. It is a strategic time to assess the health and direction of a congregation. The necessary work must go beyond the efforts of the staff. A more robust, shared effort from the congregation at large is essential. In short, everything needed for a new era of growth and faithful ministry is also needed for a healthy navigation of pastoral transition. How the congregation is led through this one major transition may affect how they cope with every other challenge thrust upon them down the road.

We hope that we have made a clear case for hiring a well-trained [Transitional Pastor](#). If you decide to go that much-preferred route, then the following matters are important to consider:

### COMPENSATION FOR A TRANSITIONAL PASTOR

- Finances are usually tight for churches in transition. The temptation is to try to conserve resources either by underpaying the Transitional Pastor or by making the position less than full-time. However, a Transitional Pastor is a skilled professional with a specific specialty. A good general rule for Transitional Pastor compensation is to match the salary and benefits package of the departed pastor.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Did your previous pastor run the day-to-day operations of the church in a conventional way so that any pastor could step in?
- Does the congregation know and understand its true feelings about the previous pastor?
- What problems did the previous pastor leave behind?

In light of these questions, what are you looking for in a Transitional Pastor? We recommend hiring someone with spiritual and emotional maturity who is skilled in:

- Theological understanding
- Social psychology and group dynamics
- Leading organizations to identify their mission
- Adaptive leadership
- Helping people who experience loss
- Dealing with conflict and/or peacemaking and christian conciliation



ECO has Certified Transitional Pastors (CTPs) who are specially trained to help churches during periods of transition. You can find more information on these individuals and the process of hiring them at [ecotransitionalpastors.org](http://ecotransitionalpastors.org).