



Journal of Methodist Counseling and Consultation Services

Pastors in Transition

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CHANGING GEARS

Corinne Secrest Goodwin, Ph.D.

Changing gears can be like forgetting to use the clutch. Noisy and gut-wrenching.

When a family is transferred, each member of the household must emotionally and physically change gears to prepare for their departure and their entry to a new community. When a marriage is struggling to move from crisis to stability, each partner is faced with emotionally and, often, physically, shifting gears from “what was” to “what is” and “what will be.” When an individual must change jobs, change roles, change behaviors, or possibly all of these, there is often no map for how to move forward and enormous pressure as the drive shaft, the most internal, vul-

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nerable part of the person, is challenged to shift gears.

Yet shifting gears is what many of us must do each day. Whether the transitions are major or minor, the nature of being human puts us in positions of change hundreds of times each day. And it is those transitions which so often engage us in a struggle like no other. Our bodies are biologically set to find balance. No one can run at full speed forever. No one can sleep without eventually waking. Our body is pre-set to return to baseline, its own state of balance. Muscles will fatigue and force us to slow. Brain waves will change and force us to wake. Even our most challenging behaviors, such as overeating, cannot continue unchecked or our bodies will begin to reject the food we put in it. So, regardless of our seemingly endless ability to stretch and cope with today's stress, our body will work hard to bring us back to sameness, the familiar baseline that it knows is manageable.

Our minds can try to do the same. Even as we know a change is coming, our brain denies the change, postpones decisions or chores that might ease the process. Even when we know the family must move, we delay getting boxes. Our minds can also go into overdrive when faced with transition. Our thoughts may race or become blurred with the white noise of feeling overwhelmed. This can look like difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, difficulty making decisions, and difficulty communicating well about the simplest issues. We tell ourselves we are in the driver's seat. We tell ourselves we are in the important place of control trying to keep everyone safe. Yet in struggling to transition from one place to the next, we can forget to check the gas tank: our inner reserve.

In the midst of the noisy, grinding sound of change, even looking inside can be threatening. Finding a quiet place of peace and spiritual renewal can feel nearly impossible- yet never more needed. Just as we struggle with what boxes to pack, literally and metaphorically, we can be blindsided with spiritual questions of why and bursts of anger. Not every transition feels as exciting as moving from first base to second. Not every change is based on decisions that feel as straightforward as moving around the bases to the rousing cheers of friends. Too many times, the distractions are noisy fears and angry feelings. The transitions feel forced or at least unwelcome. The change feels scary.

Now is the time to put the clutch fully in, keeping a hand firmly on the steering wheel, and room in the passenger seat. As long as there's room for a trusted copilot, a mentor, a partner, a therapist, or friend, we can concentrate on moving forward knowing that all possible care is being taken. Talking throughout the change can make all the difference in choosing the best route, avoiding possible hazards. Sharing the ride helps us get to the next place with support and the knowledge that we aren't driving alone.

THE DIALECTIC of the APPOINTMENT PROCESS

John Arey, D.Min.

Seasonally, it is the early summer. However, since January in many annual conferences around the United States, clergy have been evaluating whether or not to remain in

their appointment while Pastor Parish or Staff Parish Committees have been engaged in a similar process. As these deliberations are occurring, annual conference cabinets along

with their Episcopal leaders are similarly preparing for the changes that will be precipitated by the deliberations within the churches and the lives of the clergy that comprise the districts of these annual conferences.

As July unfolds, the deliberations of the clergy, committees and cabinet are now over. Decisions made after hours of prayer and deliberation have been actualized and with appointments having been read at the close of each annual conference, clergy who were appointed to new appointments have completed their moves. Each year this process repeats itself in United Methodism, and each year many clergy are left feeling slighted by the appointive system of the judicatory where they hold their membership.

It is a time of transition as goodbyes are followed by hellos. For some, the goodbye is more of a "good riddance" and the hurt, pain, and anger of moving becomes part of the baggage they carry with them to the new appointment if you are a member of the clergy. If you are remaining as members of a congregation, you might find yourself hurt, angry, disappointed and perhaps disillusioned by this appointive process. Clergy are seeking to follow God's call on their lives, but often this calling can be lost in the midst of tension, conflict, and at times the perception that their well has gone dry and they are living in a desert devoid of spirituality.

Ministry and following God's call are difficult tasks vocationally, yet this servant oriented vocation can be most rewarding. The difficulty of serving is not made easier by a system that at times appears to be insensitive to the needs of its constituency, the clergy, who make up the rank and file of workers sent out into the harvest. A growing distrust of the appointive process can be seen and heard in

conversations whenever clergy gather. The hurt, sadness, anxiety and anger felt by clergy impacts their ministry, their morale, and their overall functioning in a profession that has seen a decline in young persons seeking to follow God's call on their lives. Recent studies have shown that over the past 30 years there has been a steady decline in the number of young persons entering ministry. The reasons vary from conflict in churches, unreasonable expectations congregations seem to have of clergy to low compensation as compared to other professions with equal education.

On the opposite side of the equation consider the bishop and cabinet, who labor year round as well. The ministry of pastor to the pastors, a part of the role of the district superintendent, has been superseded by the administrative role as an officer of the annual conference. District Superintendents are often scapegoated for the shortcomings of various pastors who seem to have trouble of some sort in a series of short term appointments. Because United Methodist polity and discipline "guarantee" an appointment to all ordained elders, clergy who have successfully navigated the ordination process and have received a blessing from the Board of Ordained Ministry have obtained a type of "job security." However, that should not give cause for one called to follow God to then settle into a pattern of ineffectiveness where ministry is concerned. Increasingly, district superintendents are finding themselves between unhappy congregations and unhappy clergy. No matter how things are resolved, someone inevitably winds up feeling as if they "lost."

Somewhere in the appointment system and process resides a God who no doubt, is troubled over the squabbles, dissension and general unhappiness that is present. Are we not called to move out on faith, uncertain of what

the outcome might be, but equally certain that we are not alone? A dearth of spirituality seems to have infected even some clergy. Trust, a key ingredient in relationships, seems to be sorely lacking. Does this lack of trust or even mistrust extend to the almighty as well? There is a dialectical tension that exists as part of the fabric of our appointive process. Perhaps before one jumps to the conclusion that the system is unfair and insensitive, we all might consider offering up prayer for all in-

involved—Cabinet, clergy, and congregations—trusting that a power beyond us yet within us is at work in this process. It would serve all of us well to remember that God loved each of us enough to redeem us, and trusts us enough to use. May we continually be made new by the grace of God as we seek to be about the business of seeking the kingdom of God, which is all around us.

OVERVIEW of “CLERGY EXPERIENCING TRANSITION”
 from **Beginning Ministry Together: The Alban Handbook for Clergy Transitions** by Roy M. Oswald, James M. Heath and Ann W. Heath. Alban Institute. 2003 ISBN: 1-56699-285-0

Mark Larson, D.Min.

All clergy who have been through a move or are planning on one (that is everyone) should buy **Beginning Ministry Together**. I believe it is comprehensive and practical. In a recent Pastor’s Consultation Group, the participants agreed that it was a helpful, even essential book. So, since many of our United Methodist pastoral colleagues are in the process of unpacking their belongings and orienting themselves in a new parish and town, I thought I would outline the third section of the book: “Clergy Experiencing Transition”. Furthermore I will describe two sample chapters: 8 - Power Analysis of a Congregation; 9 - Starting Up as a Redevelopment Pastor. Perhaps these samples will whet your appetite to go out and get a copy for yourself!

The section on “Clergy Experiencing Transition” has 9 chapters: 1)Surviving a Farewell, 2)Coping with the Stress of Transition, 3)Transitions for Clergy Spouses, 4)Form a Pastor/Parish Relations Committee, 5)Discover the Psychological Contracts of Members, 6)The “Honeymoon Period” of a New Pastorate, 7)Preparing to Make Changes, 8)Power Analysis of a Congregation, 9)Starting Up as a Redevelopment Pastor.

Chapter 8 is titled “Power Analysis of a Congregation”. The authors argue first of all that pastors need to differentiate in their congregations and in themselves, between unhealthy selfishness / self-centeredness and healthy self-interest. When pastors confuse these two in themselves, they might turn over the authority of their office and calling, in a misinterpreted quest for humility and servant-hood. In order for pastors to work with the power structure in a new congregation, pastors need to be strategic, objective and analytical (this often requires outside consultation), identifying the actual congregational power processes as well as their own style of using

power. The authors define power as “the ability to get done what you want(136)” and identify 4 forms: “coalitional power” “reputational power” “communication power” and “structural power”. They provide a chart on which a pastor might diagram persons and groups according to their form of power in the congregation, the pastor’s self-credibility assessment and the characteristics of the person or group.

Chapter 9 is titled “Starting Up as a Redevelopment Pastor” but should be required reading for every consultation process between every District Superintendent, incoming pastor and receiving Staff-Parish Relations Committee. It begins with an overview of the “Life-Cycle of a Congregation”. Every congregation can be identified as occupying a place on the life-cycle. It is crucially important that a congregation’s lay leadership, its pastor(s) and District Superintendent honestly and accurately face and discuss the congregation’s placement on the life-cycle. There are three overall places along the redevelopment continuum in a congregational life-cycle and each requires a different response in pastoral leadership: 1)stability requires ongoing renewal 2)moderate decline requires revitalization and 3)severe decline requires redevelopment. Each of these places and leadership responses is clearly defined. I fear that all too often, congregations, pastors and District Superintendents do not assess accurately a congregation’s place on the life-cycle. This results in conflicting expectations and destructive outcomes for the pastor, his/her family and the congregation. The final part of this chapter contains helpful suggestions for the successful negotiation of roles and expectations, in a call or appointment to a congregation needing redevelopment. This type of negotiation would require the initiative and structure of a judicatory official like a District Superintendent in United Methodism. It would require the additional resources and oversight that only a judicatory could provide. What a happy difference it might make if these matters were negotiated openly on the front-end of a pastoral appointment!

CLERGY GRIEF: THE PATH TO WOUNDED HEALERS

Jonathan Golden, Ph.D.

Pastors are caregivers; pastors are shepherds; pastors are the ones who minister to others as they pass through their unique valley of the shadow.

Yet when it comes to caretaking themselves, ministering to their own emotional needs, many clergy do a pretty poor job.

This is captured in that oft-repeated question that goes something like this: *Parishioners go to their pastor when they're hurting or need comfort, but who does the pastor go to?* The answer, quite often, is: *Well, no one.* Pastors

often find themselves practicing the pseudo-self-care technique of denial.

One area where this is particularly true is in dealing with grief.

In times of death or transition, the pastor is usually seen as the stable foundation, the one person who is in control of his or her emotions while being attentive to the emotional roller-coaster that others experience. Being care-giver rather than care-receiver is part of the pastor’s role. It’s part of the persona, and most clergy do a fairly good job of living into that persona.

Yet grief can be just as real and just as potent for clergy as it is for anyone else—perhaps more so, if they would allow themselves to acknowledge it. Anyone whose vocation involves getting close to another, caring for another, building connections and sharing the joys and hurts of another cannot help but experience grief when that other is lost, for whatever reason. We don't usually grieve what we don't love; conversely, to love deeply (as we are called to do) means to grieve deeply.

One particular time when issues of grief come into play for clergy occurs when the pastor either retires or moves to another parish. Within the United Methodist system, for instance, that can be a yearly process, occurring in late June and early July. Both retirement and a pastoral move involve leaving behind individuals and families that one has grown close to over the years. Friendships and relationships are ended, goodbyes are said, and there is often the unspoken expectation that personal ties with former parishioners are to be cut completely.

How can one so totally end relationships without experiencing some degree of grief at the parting?

Quite often pastors will respond to this kind of loss by diving headlong into their jobs, quickly replacing old friendships lost with new relationships in their new parish. Distracting oneself with work is a fairly common method of dealing (or more accurately, not dealing) with

grief. The problem, however, is that we never have the opportunity to adequately work through the grieving-healing process.

Yet another method of avoiding grief that some clergy might take involves not getting too close to parishioners. It's possible to maintain a professional distance, to dwell behind the persona-mask of Pastor and in doing so keep all one's relationships with church members purely professional, albeit emotionally distant. Again, if we don't love too deeply we don't hurt so much when the relationship ends. This may be an effective method for avoiding grief, but it hardly makes for the kind of pastor that church members want to know.

Giving oneself permission to experience the full range of emotions that arise with grief is not always easy. Indeed, it can be frightening at times. Fully experiencing grief can be especially difficult for pastors, those who understand and intend themselves to be the givers of care rather than the receivers of it. The pastoral role doesn't always allow opportunities for showing one's emotions, especially if those emotions are painful.

Finding time and ways to grieve fully, however, is vital if true healing is to happen. It is in working through their own pain, as devotional writer Henri Nouwen wrote, that pastors can themselves become "wounded healers" of others.

WELLNESS PSYCHOLOGY

Marilyn Cirulis, M.Div., M.A., Ed.S

Wellness psychology has its roots in Gestalt theory, especially the Gestalt emphases on holism and field theory contextualism. Holism asserts that humans are inherently self-regulating and growth oriented. Contextualism says that nothing, not even people can be fully understood apart from the environment(s) in which they exist. Pathological symptoms emerge when we are cut off from parts of ourselves that make us human as well as when try function as an entity separate

from its context or environment. The following illustration offers some idea of what it is like for clergy to try to function effectively when they are cut off from essential parts of themselves, as well as what it might be like for clergy when parishioners or the church seek to define the role of their clergy without taking into consideration the pastor's environment.

The Discipline of the United Methodist Church states that the pastor is both the spiritual and temporal leader of the congregation, and therefore is responsible for the general oversight of the church. Unfortunately, what this has meant for many pastor-parish relations committees is that the pastor is expected to be proficient and knowledgeable in carrying out all the tasks related to the congregation's spiritual and temporal affairs. Such an unrealistic expectation of the pastor has too often resulted in "job descriptions" that look like this:

Job Description

Senior Minister, First Church, Whoville, USA

- Preach well-researched, biblically sound, interesting and entertaining sermons fifty Sundays in the church year
- Work with both the choir and the worship committee to make worship a meaningful experience for everyone
- Work with the youth of the church to develop a strong youth program which will attract other youth from the community and make them want to be a part of our congregation
- Develop a Christian Education program that will lead our children to Christ
- Visit all shut-ins at least once a week
- Visit all members who are hospitalized daily while in the hospital and throughout their recovery period at home
- Attend all church meetings so that no area of church life is neglected
- Teach a Bible Study each week for at least 9 months during the year
- Teach a weekly class for newcomers and potential members
- Teach a confirmation class once each quarter
- Visit each Sunday School class once a week
- Select the literature which Sunday School teachers will use
- Become a visible and recognized presence in the community
- Be available whenever needed for family crises and emergencies, spiritual direction and family counseling
- Be knowledgeable of church finances and be able to develop and implement a financial program that will meet all the financial needs of the church
- Preside at all baptisms, weddings and funerals
- Be actively involved in the missions and ministry of the men's and women's groups
- Visit with all inactive members and get them to come back to church
- Be a role model for family life by parenting in such a way that his or her children do not do anything to embarrass the church

- Be a role model for married life by attending adequately to the needs of his or her spouse so that their marriage is a happy one, uncluttered by strife or conflict
- Take vacations and days off in close enough proximity to the church that he or she will be able to return immediately for any emergency
- Carry a mobile phone and keep it turned on at all times in case anyone needs anything
- Be able to answer any theological question posed by any church member or prospective church member to the satisfaction of that member
- Never miss an appointment, meeting or worship service due to illness, sadness, depression, grief, tiredness or death of a family member
- Other duties not on this list which might be assigned at any time by any church member

Well, you get the idea. Pastors are too often expected to be all things to all people, and when we are not, people are disappointed. Unfortunately, many who preceded us in these congregations tried very hard to be just that, and the result is congregations which do not know how to be Church and who expect their pastors to be superhuman. Some denominational officials have allowed congregations to harbor these unrealistic expectations for so long that churches honestly believe that one day the “right” pastor will actually come along and fulfill all their expectations. When they are disappointed, as they inevitably will be, they “act out” by complaining incessantly to denominational leaders, threatening to get rid of the pastor, getting rid of pastor after pastor, and refusing to do the work of the congregational body, which they deem to be “the pastor’s job.” It is little wonder, then, that clergy burnout, physical illness, early death, poor self-care habits and depression result in clergy leaving parish ministry after an average of seven years.

Recent research indicates that wellness measures are highly positively correlated with general psychological well-being. Studies in neuropsychology have found that:

- In depression and deep sadness, brain imaging reveals that positive areas are less active
- Happiness involves physical pleasure, the absence of negative emotions, and positive meanings attached to life, work, and purpose
- Positive thoughts and actions can help override fear, anger and sadness
- Acquiring skills for generating positive thoughts strengthens an individual psychologically and emotionally.

What inevitably happens in burnout situations is that individuals become so overwhelmed with the seeming impossibility of meeting job demands in work environments where they have no sense of control for their lives, that the work itself loses its meaning. In such situations, persons can become unduly stressed, anxious, depressed, and angry but often find it difficult if not impossible to express these emotions. This is particularly true of clergy in the parish, whose negative emotions are interpreted as having lost one’s zeal for the work of the Lord.

Contrast these unrealistic expectations and efforts to “be all things to all people” while ignoring your own needs with the current wellness model of functioning, which invites us to assess ourselves on five wellness dimensions:

1. The Essential Self (includes spirituality, gender identity, cultural identity and self-care)
2. The Social Self (includes friendship--the ability to nurture healthy long-term relationships with friends and love—caring for those we love and developing healthy levels of intimacy, trust and mutual caring)
3. The Coping Self (includes taking time for regular leisure activities, stress management, a healthy sense of self-worth, realistic beliefs and expectations about oneself and others)
4. The Creative Self (includes thinking skills such as problem-solving and adjusting to change; the ability and permission to experience a full range of positive and negative emotions; feeling in control of one’s “space” and direction in life, doing meaningful and enjoyable work, and having a sense of positive humor)
5. The Physical Self (includes a regular exercise program and healthy nutritional practices, reflected in healthy blood pressure levels, body weight and cholesterol levels)

Assessment is not enough, though. We need to be intentional about wellness, which entails developing a personal plan for a healthier lifestyle. Yet even this is not enough. We also need to be intentional about educating congregations and denominational leadership about the importance of empowering their clergy to adopt a psychology of wellness. We also must insist that churches recognize and accept the human limitations of their pastors and begin to set priorities in terms of the use of the pastor’s time, as well as to share more fully in the ministry of the Body of Christ rather than expect that the pastor can do it all. Pastors, their families, congregations and the larger Church will benefit from adopting such a model.

Resources

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