

# THE RIGHT START

## BEGINNING MINISTRY IN A NEW SETTING

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### Results of a Survey of United Methodist District Superintendents in the United States

- *Best Practices for Concluding Ministry in One Setting*
- *Best Practices for Beginning Ministry in a New Setting*
- *Key Challenges in Pastoral Transitions*



Wesley  
Theological  
Seminary

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## ***Best Practices for Concluding Ministry in One Setting***

### **1. Maintain good successor relations (20% of responses)**

- Prepare the way for the successor with the congregation
- Prepare the way for the congregation with the successor
- Spend quality time with your successor with an agreed upon agenda
- Talk about your successor only in positive terms
- Do not make comparison between yourself and your successor

### **2. Share ownership and responsibility for the move (18%)**

- Affirm (or at least acknowledge itinerancy) and your ownership of the process
- Do not blame others for the move
- Do not use closure to get back at others
- Be gracious to everyone

### **3. Provide good records and administrative wrap-up (18%)**

- Prepare essential lists for your successor and make sure important files are up to date
- Make sure church bills are paid through the month you leave
- Make sure apportionments are paid through the month you leave
- Never leave any unpaid personal bills
- Do not take church records with you

### **4. Adequate goodbyes, grief, and closure rituals (15%)**

- Provide adequate rituals for the going and coming
- Find appropriate ways to say goodbye and grieve with congregation and family
- Grant and ask for forgiveness
- Tell the people you love them
- Have personal visits and write personal notes where appropriate

### **5. Clarify your new relationship with the church (13%)**

- Clarify in spoken and written communication your new relationship with the people
- Do not promise to come back
- Take time to teach the congregation about closure and boundaries
- Affirm love and friendship while releasing persons from pastoral relationships

### **6. Leave the parsonage and office clean and in order. (9%)**

### **7. Keep working. (7%)**

- Continue vital ministry and avoid emotional withdrawal
  - Settle as many hanging difficulties as possible
  - Do not initiate major new programs in the closing months
  - Handle hanging staffing difficulties rather than pass them on
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## ***Best Practices for Beginning Ministry in a New Ministry Setting***

### **1. Learn about the new church and community. (18% of responses)**

- Take 6-18 months to get to know the people and community
- Demonstrate a willingness to learn the history of the congregation
- Develop your skill in “reading” the congregation.
- Learn the mission and vision of the congregation.
- Consider using data gathering methods to understand the church and community.
- Do careful assessment of strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities

### **2. Spend time with people and build relationships (18%)**

- Visit
- Meet with the Staff Parish Relations Committee early and regularly
- Pay particular attention to pastoral care and preaching
- Make building relationships your highest priority
- Meet community leaders, be visible in the community, and meet clergy colleagues
- Visit members with key leadership roles
- Visit people who have pastoral needs
- Develop a strategy to get to know the people, communicate that plan, and stay with it.
- Ask everyone you visit to suggest others with whom you should be talking.

### **3. Don't change things at first, especially worship. (16%)**

### **4. Listen and observe with an open mind to discover strengths and needs. (11%)**

### **5. Build trust. (10%)**

- Express joy in being there
- Be authentic, honest, and genuine
- Let people get to know you and allow the congregation time to learn to trust you
- Focus on the congregation and their future, not your agenda
- Earn the right to change things before initiating changes
- If you write a letter of introduction to the church, have several others read it to make sure you are not communicating unintended signals

### **6. Honor your predecessor's ministry. (10%)**

- Do not criticize the former pastor, even if criticism is warranted.
- Honor the progress and achievements accomplished before you arrived.
- Let people know it is OK to grieve the loss of their former pastor.
- Honor traditions long enough to understand the positive motivation behind them.

### **7. Don't talk about your previous parish. (7%)**

### **8. Don't complain, criticize, or make excessive demands. (6%)**

### **9. Be patient. (4%)**

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## ***Key Challenges in Pastoral Transitions***

### **The Personal Challenge**

#### **Dealing with Emotional and Family Issues (32% of responses)**

Family adjustment, spouse employment, and issues related to children are paramount. There is a need to find appropriate ways for the pastor, family, and congregation to express their feelings, including the grief that inevitably is present. This includes a letting go of important relationships. For some, it also includes letting go of past hurts. Just as these emotional strains are so real, there are the pressures of adjusting to a new community, congregation, schools, doctors, and people. Adequate rest, spiritual renewal, and support can prove essential.

### **The Professional Challenge**

#### **Enabling a Smooth and Positive Transition (31%)**

The pastor leaving will set the tone for how the new pastor is received. Differences of personality or theology by the new pastor should not interfere with the manner in which the departing pastor helps prepare the way for the new pastor. The same is true for dealing with one's predecessor at the new congregation. Congregations, specifically the Staff Parish Relations Committee, can be helped to prepare for a new pastor. A pastor's feeling of grief in leaving or loneliness in the new setting should not cloud dealings with successor and predecessor. Everything possible should be done to pave the way for a successful transition in the church being left and for the continuation of ongoing ministries in the new congregation.

### **The Leadership Challenge**

#### **Understanding a New Church and Community (19%)**

Things taken for granted after years of interaction in one church and community must now be relearned in a new setting. Learning to "read" the history, traditions, and culture of a new context is the primary challenge in the first year or so in a new church. This also gives the new congregation a chance to learn the new pastor. In both cases, imperfections will be spotted quickly; discovering each other's strengths will take much longer. Your "job" as pastor may be similar from church to church, but the leadership assignment in a new congregation, in all likelihood, will be very different given the new circumstances. Merely doing what one has always done is normally inadequate when any leader changes from one context to another.

### **The Local Church Challenge**

#### **Closure and Saying Goodbye (15%)**

Saying goodbye to the pastor leaving and hello to the new pastor should not be left to chance. This is a time of major transition in the lives of many people. As such, it needs to be handled with care, sensitivity, and sufficient spiritual depth and ritual. Lack of proper closure can hamper ministry for a long time. A pastor's ability to express genuine love for a congregation and, at the same time, make clear the new relationship of former pastor will do a great service to self and congregation. A congregation's ability to express profound appreciation for the years of service by a pastor and, at the same time, release that pastor for new ministry and welcome their new pastor with open arms will make effective ministry more likely for all involved.