

The Four Stages of a Pastoral Transition

A time of transition for a pastor can be both exciting and terrifying. The possibility of a new start with its challenges and opportunities brings anticipation. Yet leaving the known for the unknown also brings anxiety. Such transition is more complex than may be immediately apparent. As pastors are dealing with both personal and professional transitions, there are also congregations going through their own transitions.

What we know about clergy moving from one setting to another is that all pastors have the best of intentions, but many do not give adequate thought to those best practices for leaving and beginning that can help ensure a good transition for everyone involved. In planning for a transition, it is helpful to think of the Stages of a Pastoral Move and what is needed for each stage to go well to advance the mission of all churches involved.

1. **Leaving** begins when a pastor learns that he or she will be moving to a new ministry and continues through the day of the actual relocation.
2. **Entry** begins on the day the pastor arrives at the new location and usually continues for about six months. Keep in mind that transition begins before the move and continues after the move. The change of formal position can be marked by a date — but transition is a more internal and emotional process for everyone involved.
3. **The Start Up Period** usually extends from about six to eighteen months as the pastor builds credibility and comes to understand more of God's calling for the congregation's next faithful step.
4. **The First Chapter** is a multi-year period of pastoral ministry coming out of pastoral and congregational discernment in which the current challenges and opportunities are addressed, thus providing the foundation on which other chapters can be built.

The Lewis Center for Church Leadership has provided training and resources for pastoral transitions for a number of years. Drawing on these years of research and training, the Lewis Center has just released two new resources:

- *The Right Start: Beginning Ministry in a New Setting* is a video learning resource for pastors preparing to move — with both [individual](#) and [group training](#) versions.
- [50 Ways to Welcome a New Pastor](#) is a free resource with suggestions for congregations receiving a new pastor.

It is our prayer that these resources (see details below) will contribute to an excellent transition for pastors and congregations alike. We hope pastors can celebrate and offer thanks for a ministry that is ending, in order to begin in a new setting with both confidence and humility, always remembering that this move involves the pastor — but is not primarily about the pastor. It is about how the pastor and the congregation together can fulfill God's purpose through the church. May God bless all of you who are changing churches or pastors in these important days.

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