

When a Pastor Leaves the Church: Suggestions for Outgoing and Incoming Pastors

Three Basics:

- Know The Situation
- Know Yourself
- Develop a Working Plan

Gather Information:

Where is the previous pastor? Where does the pastor live? What is the previous pastor doing now? Meet with the Search Committee and get contact information for the pastor and staff with whom he or she worked. Were there boundary issues? What was the pastor's involvement? What is their view of things?

Now you have info, what do you do with it?

Prayerfully consider what should be done with the info. Should you keep it to yourself or get advice from the Pastoral Relations Committee? Consider the differences between your goals for the church and previous pastor's. Will the information help or hinder your relationship with the church? If there was a difficult separation, consider professional intervention so as to remove the "elephant in the room" so healing can happen and growth can thrive.

Situation A: Previous Pastor has left the area:

Is being a spiritual advisor to the previous pastor a possibility? What ways can the previous pastor be a help or a hindrance to the new minister? Validation vs. acceptance of him/her; earn their trust. New pastor should affirm strengths of the previous person and make clear that the new person has much different gifts, and that is a good thing. Clarify boundaries, acknowledge differences and stick up for the previous person.

Situation B: Previous Pastor is still here:

Be upfront and honest so that a healthy relationship develops between new and previous pastor as well as the congregation. Agree on this at the onset. First question from new pastor to the previous should be: "How can I best pastor you and your family?" And/or "How can I serve you?" Let the senior person know how he/she can contribute if they desire. Ask their opinion on what needs to be done but develop ways in which the church can grow in ministry and mission. "Where do you see the needs of the congregation?" but be sure to take into account his/her perception.

Share your vision for the church.

Help the church to see the model of collaboration: If the new pastor is showing respect for the previous pastor, while the previous pastor shows deference to the new pastor, it will help everyone. Lean on the "mutual submission" of Ephesians 5 as the body of Christ.

Covenant with each other:

For clarity, create a written agreement and covenant with each other and the congregation. Keeping the best interests of the congregation and church at the heart would seem to benefit everyone. Most importantly, teach the congregation the process with the expectation that they will follow the leads of both the new and the previous pastor. This should keep everyone "honest."